



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

B'HA-ALO-T'CHA

Backwards NUNs

A section of this week's sidra is made up of the 85 letters of the passages recited when the Ark is opened - VAYHI BIN'SO'A HA'ARON - and when it is closed - UVNUCHO YOMAR (Bamidbar 10:35-36).

There is a backwards letter NUN before this section and one after it, as if it were enclosed in brackets.

Rabbinic commentary regarded these two letters as enshrining a Divine message (Shabbat 116a).

One view is that NUN is the first letter of NER, a light. But there are two lights that it could symbolise, the light of the Lord and the light of man. Probably both are meant, one at the beginning and one at the end.

When the world is enclosed and protected by Divine and human light, creation is safe. But if we allow the light of the Almighty to be dimmed and the light of humanity to be compromised, the future of civilisation is in jeopardy.

A Pregnant Father?

Life was tough for Moshe. He had constant difficulties with the people and it is a miracle that he didn't turn on them more often.

In this week's reading he cannot help himself, and he complains to God: "Did I conceive this people? Did I bring them to birth?" (Bamidbar 11:12).

Note the verbs he uses, HARITI, "be pregnant with", YELAD'TIHU, "bear them". Feminine verbs, and the feminine imagery continues to the end of the verse.

No-one pretends that Moshe was an exception to the normal rule that it is women who get pregnant and bear the babies, but the notion is that Moshe asks God how he is expected to love, nurse and nourish the people when they make it so hard for him.

Interestingly, the Targum Onkelos changes the text in the interests of Moshe's dignity, rendering the words in Aramaic, "Am I the father of this entire people?"

The revised wording does not tear at the reader's heartstrings so much, but it does indicate that fathers as well as mothers are expected to have warm, loving feelings for their children. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH