

## Message from the Haftara

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# The Frozen Vision

## B'HA-ALO-T'CHA

Parshat B'HA-ALO-T'CHA contains one of the Torah's most unusual textual interruptions: two backwards letters – NUN – that bracket a brief, self-contained passage describing the Ark's journey:

“When the Ark set out, Moshe would say: ‘Arise, Lord; let Your enemies be scattered, and Your enemies flee before You.’ And when it rested, he said, ‘Return, Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Yisrael’” (Bamidbar 10:35,36).

The Talmud (Shabbat 116a) regards these two verses as an independent book in their own right, which means the backwards NUNs divide the book of Bamidbar into three distinct literary units.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik understood these verses as capturing the Jewish people in motion – a divinely charged march toward the Land of Israel. At this point in the narrative, however, that march came to a halt. The verses are bracketed, enclosed, as if frozen in time. They represent a trajectory toward destiny that was

interrupted, precisely because the Jewish people lost focus on the values and vision that should have animated their journey. What follows in the Torah – beginning with chapter 11 of Bamidbar – is a chronicle of that loss of direction: a spiraling series of failures that culminated in the catastrophic rejection of the Land itself, which we read about in next week's parsha.

Parshat B'ha-alo-t'cha opens with God's command to Aharon regarding the lighting of the Mishkan's Menorah. Similarly, the haftara – Zechariya's prophetic vision – features a glorious golden menorah flanked by olive trees. The visual parallel is unmistakable, but Zechariya's vision pushes us beyond the visual parallel to the deeper question of spiritual orientation.

At the center of Zechariya's vision stands Yehoshua the Kohen Gadol, clothed in filthy garments. An angel commands that the soiled robes be removed and replaced with new, splendid clothing. This is not only a reflection of Yehoshua's personal spiritual state. The Kohen Gadol is the spiritual representative of the entire nation; his clothing embodies the people's collective orientation before God. Dirty clothing signals not failure alone, but misalignment – a loss of clarity about what truly matters. And the remedy the haftara

prescribes is captured in one of the most resonant verses in the prophetic canon: “Not with valor and not with strength, but with My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts” (4:6).

This is where the haftara’s deepest resonance with the parasha comes into view. The failures recorded after the backwards NUNs are not primarily military or political; they are spiritual failures of leadership and orientation. The episodes that follow – from the debacle of the people’s craving for quail – a hunger for materialism, to the breakdown of leadership around Moshe as illustrated in the stories of Eldad and Medad and the troubling words spoken by Miriam and Aharon against Moshe – reveal a people and a leadership struggling to align material desire with spiritual calling. When those entrusted with guiding the nation toward its destiny are wearing soiled garments – when their priorities are misaligned and their faculties misdirected – the march is frozen. The Ark stands still.

Such a trajectory cannot reverse itself on its own. Zechariya’s prophecy insists that renewal is possible, but only through the spirit of God, not through the force of human ambition or the momentum of circumstance. This is a demanding standard. It calls on leaders to continuously examine their garments,

to ask honestly whether their vision is clean or compromised, whether they are pointing their communities toward God or toward something lesser. And it calls on communities to hold their leaders – and themselves – to that standard.

For us, reading this parasha as it falls this Shabbat, the challenge is immediate. The march of the Jewish people toward its destiny in the Land of Israel – a march that pulses through the declaration recited when the Ark is opened, “Arise, Lord” – is not simply a past event. It is an ongoing project. Every generation must ask whether it is moving the Ark forward or is stuck in place. Every generation must look honestly at the spiritual clothing it wears. The backwards NUNs still jump off the page to us – not as a symbol of defeat, but as a call. When we choose to lead with spirit rather than force, when we return to the higher vision encoded in those two bracketed verses, we do our part to shatter their enclosure, allowing the spiritual light of our collective menorah to burst forth. And the march, at last, resumes. 