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Bar Mitzva
Devar Torah on Parashat BeHa`alotekha
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Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel

Shabbat Shalom.

Let's start off with a **quiz question**: How many books are there in the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the *Humash* – which derives from the word *Hamesh* – or five? Show me on your fingers, please. (Look around.) O.K.. Most of said five. Well, not so fast! But we'll get back to that later.

A passage in Talmud B. Masekhet Shabbat, Chapter 16, talks about which sacred writings we must save from a fire, on Shabbat, outside of an *eruv* [i.e., a Sabbath boundary]. Being inside of an *eruv* would allow us to rescue the Writing. The Mishna says:

כל כתבי הקדש מצילין אותן מפני הדליקה בין שקורין בהן ובין שאין קורין
בהן אף על פי שכתובים בכל לשון טעונים גניזה

All sacred writings must be saved from a fire, whether we read them or not; and even if they are written in any language, they must be hidden.

In this case, “hidden” means to bury or store it in a *geniza*.

This scenario brings up several dilemmas. Since we are outside of an *eruv* we normally

are not allowed to carry anything from the house back outside. But this is a Holy Writing, so it has a higher priority than other things we might carry. In other words, we might not run inside to save a normal book, but we might run inside to save this Holy Book. But still, running into a burning building is definitely dangerous, so should we risk our lives to save only a book? So we have three conflicts here: breaking Shabbat [i.e., violating the prohibition of transporting an object across a boundary], leaving a Holy Writing in a burning building, and risking our lives. As you can probably guess, there is a long discussion about this in the Talmud.

The discussion begins with two rabbis: Rav Ḥuna and Rav Ḥisda. Rav Ḥuna says that we must not save a Holy Writing in this scenario, and Rav Ḥisda says that we must save it, but they agree that if we read it publicly then it must be saved. If it is not normally read publicly, for example, a book of Ketuvim (Writings), Rav Ḥuna says that we must not save it because we don't read it, and Rav Ḥisda says that we must save it so as not to disgrace a Holy Writing by letting it burn as if it were worthless. But the Mishna says that all Writings must be saved, and it doesn't matter what language it is written in. This seems to refute Rav Ḥuna. He answers by saying that if this Writing is important enough to be saved from a fire on Shabbat outside of an Eruv, why should it be buried [that is, treated with dignity after it is no longer usable]? Rav Ḥisda restates the Mishna, which says that "All sacred writings must be saved from a fire... even if they are written in any language." The discussion then goes on to whether benedictions and amulets must be saved - the answer given is no, as it is taught: "They who write down Benedictions are as though they burnt a Torah." The Rabbis ask what to do if the burning Writings are written in different paints or inks. The Resh Galuta, the Head of the Jewish Exile, says that they must be saved, and Rav Ḥamnuna says that if it was taught thus, then he is wrong. In other words, if the Resh Galuta said that, then Ḥamnuna is wrong. But where was it taught? R. Ashi said that it was taught that the only difference between a book of the Bible and a Megilla, such as the Book of Esther, is that a book of the Bible may be written in any language, while a Megilla must be written in Assyrian, on a Scroll, in ink.

Rav Ḥuna bar Ḥaluv then asks Rav Naḥman whether a Scroll in which there are less than 85 letters must be saved from a fire.

Wait a minute. Why 85 letters? This seems random.

There are many numbers in the Torah: 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai, seven days of creation, ten commandments, etc. But 85? What does 85 have to do with anything? So now we have a mystery: why, of all numbers, does Rav Ḥuna bar Ḥaluv ask about 85 letters, as opposed to ten letters, or 40? Let's come back to that.

This *parasha*, BeHa`alotekha [Numbers 8:1–12:16], is packed with action: Instructions for the Menora, the different types of trumpet calls, God claiming the Levites as His own and giving instructions for their duties in the Tabernacle, seventy elders, and Miriam getting leprosy for bad-mouthing Moses' wife. But slipped in there, at the beginning of the sixth aliya, we have a phrase that we recognize from our Torah Service.

וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעַת הָאָרֶץ, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה:
 קוּמָה ה', וַיִּפְצוּ אִיבֵיךָ, וַיִּנְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֲיֶךָ, מִפְּנֵיךָ.
 וּבִגְחָה יֹאמֶר: שׁוּבָה ה', רַבְבוֹת אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

So it was, whenever the ark set out, Moses would say: “Arise, Adonai, may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from You.” And when it came to rest he would say: Return, Adonai, among the many thousands of Israel.

Immediately before and after these verses are two inverted nuns, *nunim hafukhim* -- ל .
 Nehama Leibowitz z”l, the noted Bible scholar and commentator, says that these nuns

are *inverted* so as not to be read aloud during the Torah Readings in which they appear. But why are they there in the first place?

The Rabbis taught that the inverted nuns before and after indicate that these verses are not in their place. Rav Shimon ben Gamliel says, “This section is destined to be removed from here and written in its right place. And why is it written here? In order to provide a break between the first account of punishment and the second account of punishment,” so as to break the gloomy effect that would otherwise be provided. The first “account of punishment” is when the people “moved away from the mount of God,” which is possibly a metaphor for turning away from God. The second “account of punishment” is in the sixth aliya [Num. 10:35–11:29] when the people complained about the quality of their food and how they preferred the food they enjoyed while enslaved in Egypt. Rav Ḥama bar Rav Ḥanina says that these verses’ rightful place is in the chapter on the arrangement of the Israelites and the tribes’ banners, and when all evil has ceased, these verses will be moved back there.

Proverbs 9:1 says, “...She has hewn her seven pillars.” In this case, *pillars* is interpreted to refer to the books of the Torah. But *seven*? Aren’t there only *five* books of the Torah, as most of you said¹? Well, Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, the compiler of the Mishna, says that these two verses actually constitute a whole book! This is indicated by the two inverted nuns. These two verses would divide BaMidbar [Numbers] into *three* books, and adding this to the other four books of the Torah makes seven books. Another way to reach seven would be to count BeMidbar as one book, these two verses as one book, the other four books of the Torah making six, plus Joshua, the “seventh.”

Of course, both the rabbis and Rabbi Yehuda haNasi could be correct, and this could be another Book inserted here, making six Books of the Torah, but this theory is not discussed in the Talmud passage.

¹ While the Five Books are now written on one scroll, they were originally written on five separate scrolls, until the time of Ezra the Scribe, when it was decided to join them in a single piece. [Ed.]

Let's step back for a moment. The Talmud passage I was talking about says that a book must contain 85 letters to qualify as a Sacred Book to be saved from a fire. But why? Well, I have already given you the answer. If you count the letters in the separate book "וַיְהִי בְנֻסַּע הָאָרוֹן" *VaYehi binsoa haAron...* you will count 85! There are 85 letters in this book, and it is the smallest Book in the Torah. So there it is.

Now, for the big summary. We started off with a quiz question about how many Sacred Books there are in the Torah. Then we analyzed the discussion in Chapter 16 of Talmud Masekhet Shabbat, until we stumbled upon the seemingly random question of Rav Huna bar Haluv about whether we must save a book with less than 85 letters. Then we skipped over all of the actual content of the parasha and focused on a seemingly trivial, two-verse passage about what Moses said when the Ark moved. Then we talked about why these two verses are there and what the inverted *nuns* mean.

Now, I am sure that some of you in the congregation want a take-away message. Sometimes things that seem completely unrelated, like two verses about what Moshe said when the Holy Ark traveled and three pages of Talmud about saving Holy Books from a fire, may actually tie in together. This is not to say that everything is related. For example, a 19th century economist attempted to find a correlation between sunspots and business cycles. Since then, studies have shown that this correlation does not exist. However, my recent studies to find a correlation between sunspots and the firmness of tofu have been successful. But also, this reveals one of the major aspects of Judaism: using passages from our fundamental document to inform decisions about a seemingly unrelated topic. Also, this information is relevant to my life today; now that I know the minimum amount of letters for a Book, I am ready to publish this Devar Torah.

Now, I'd like to thank some people. First, thank you to all those who came from far away, and especially those who came on airplanes – enduring those lines -- from Minnesota and Wisconsin, California and Texas, Illinois and Tennessee, Florida and

Georgia, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, northern Connecticut and elsewhere. Also, thank you to everyone who came from not so far away. I would also like to thank my school friends, camp Ramah friends, other friends, teachers, and the entire BEKI community, and specifically Cantor Shoshana Lash. I don't think I've missed anyone. Oh wait. Family. Right. Thank you to my sister Gilah for helping me review the services, my sister Tova for helping me with my Devar Torah, thank you Tsvi for protecting us from all of the robots, and thank you me for not messing Noam up too much. Ok. Now that's everyone. Oh wait. Parents. Ughhh. Thank you Mom for bringing us together on this day and for doing most of the work. Dad. Thank you for being a thought-provoking and inspiring father and Rabbi (and for getting out of the way today). It is my pleasure and privilege to be your son.

Shabbat Shalom