Spiritual Courage: Thoughts for Parashat Beha'aloteha

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Angel for Shabbat: Parashat Beha’aloteha

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When I was a student at Franklin High School in Seattle, we were required to bring a note from our parents if we missed a day of classes. We were then marked as having an “excused absence” rather than having been truant. I ran into problems on several occasions when I brought a note from home requesting that I be excused for missing several days due to the Jewish holidays—Succoth and Shavuoth. The school official denied the request saying that “all the Jewish students were in school so it couldn’t have been a Jewish holiday.” I had to ask my rabbi to intervene. He explained to the school official that indeed Succoth and Shavuoth are Jewish holidays that necessitated my absences from school. Jewish children who attended classes on those days were not observing their own religious festivals. My absences were then listed as “excused.”

There were a few Jewish students at Franklin, like me, who observed the religious holy days. But for most of the others, attending class was more important than attending synagogue. I suppose those Jewish students learned a lot from the classes they attended. But those of us who missed classes probably learned a good deal more. We learned the importance of standing alone, of being faithful to one’s beliefs even if others believe and observe differently.

Bravo to Jews who forgo days at school or at work in observance of Shabbat and holy days. Even if they lose class time or take financial losses, they demonstrate the courage and commitment to maintain their religious values.

In this week’s Torah portion, we find a singular textual occurrence. Two verses are enclosed by upside down or backward Hebrew letters “Nun”. In his new book on Bemidbar, Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo suggests that the “Nun (the letters framing the passage) is also the Aramaic word for fish. Reversed, it suggests a fish swimming against the current—non-conformist, counter-cultural, audacious…” He goes on to note that “to be a Jew is to swim against the current; not merely to be different but to defy the very idea that the world as it is should define who you are. The upside-down nuns are not a footnote—they are a theological manifesto” (*Cardozo on the Parashah: The Book of Numbers,* Kasva Press, 2026, p. 64).

This “theological manifesto” is not only vital for religious observance; it is vital for life in general. If we have high values and principles, we need the courage to stand for them. We prioritize them and don’t surrender them in the face of external challenges or risk of losses.

It is very common for individuals to forgo their values and traditions in order to blend in with others or in order to gain financially or socially. Conforming to prevailing ideas and fashions is the norm for a great many people.

Missing school or work on Jewish holy days is not only a lesson in religion but a lesson in life. We gain much more than we lose.