

Potomac Torah Study Center
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NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.

Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at www.PotomacTorah.org. Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.

May Hashem protect Israel and Jews everywhere. May Hashem's protection shine on all of Israel, the IDF, and Jews throughout the world. We mourn those of our people who have perished since attacks have resumed. May the IDF and the U.S. soon force Iran to seek peace, and may a new era bring security and rebuilding for both Israel and all others who genuinely seek peace.

A person reading the Devrei Torah below would come away with the impression that Naso focuses almost exclusively on three subjects: Sotah (a woman whose husband accuses her of infidelity), Nazir (a person who voluntarily accepts a temporary period of restrictions of a Kohen Gadol, to live a holy life for a period), and the blessings of the Kohanim. Indeed, I remember when my son's fourth grade Rebbe sent his class home with the assignment to consider and suggest what theme ties these three subjects together. (In the legal sections of the Torah, topics presented adjacent to each other are related thematically.) Almost every Devar Torah below focuses on one or more of these topics. However, these three topics all occur in the fourth of the seven aliyahs that we read on Shabbat Naso. Why do the commentaries almost all ignore the rest of the parsha and focus only on these three subjects?

I prefer to take a broad view of the Torah. Rather than focus on one aliyah, how does Naso fit into the broader picture of the Torah? B'Nai Yisrael depart from Egypt on 15 Nisan 2448, shortly after midnight, after the tenth plague when Hashem kills the first born of the Egyptians. The people arrive at the base of Har Sinai on 1 Sivan 2448, receive the Revelation on 6 Sivan, and remain at the base of Har Sinai for ten days short of a year. Hashem's cloud rises from the top of the Aron in the Mishkan on 20 Iyar 2449, and that is when B'Nai Yisrael resume their journey to the land that God had promised to our ancestors. (Source: *Torah Anthology*, vol. 13, p. 269) The source in the Torah is 10:11 (Behaalotecha, which we read next week).

Sefer Bemidbar opens with great anticipation. Hashem directs Moshe to take a very detailed census by tribe and by family within each tribe (Bemidbar and Naso). Moshe and the people are very excited. Yitro comes, and Moshe invites his father-in-law to join B'Nai Yisrael and come with them to Israel. (Yitro decides to return to Midian.) The people depart with great excitement, marching in precise formation according to God's instructions in the Torah. Almost immediately, some people start mumbling and complaining (ch. 11). From this point forward, the great unity of B'Nai Yisrael collapses, and Sefer Bemidbar turns from great optimism to evil and collapse.

Behaalotecha concludes with Miriam and Aharon speaking Lashon Harah against Moshe because of his wife Tziporah (ch. 12). God is furious and strikes Miriam with tzaraat (12:4-10). Moshe prays to Hashem to cure Miriam, and she must stay outside the camp for a week to perform teshuvah and be cured.

The Torah then reports the episode of the meraglim, twelve leaders, one from each tribe, sent to investigate the promised land and report back to the people. The representatives tour the land for forty days and return on 9 Av 2449. Ten of the meraglim report that the land is great but that the people are giants and too powerful for B'Nai Yisrael to defeat. Two of the

meraglim, Caleb and Yehoshua, however, argue strongly that with Hashem's help, we could certainly conquer the people and take the land. God is furious and decrees that all the adults of the generation of the Exodus will die over forty years, except Caleb and Yehoshua – and it will be the next generation who will enter and take the land.

Meanwhile, Moshe's cousin Korach and leaders of Reuven challenge Moshe and Aharon as leaders – Moshe as political leader and Aharon as religious leader (Kohen Gadol). Moshe provides a challenge for them, and everyone who sides with Korach and his group dies.

The key to these three episodes is that they all take place the same week, as the *Torah Anthology* proves (vol. 13, pp. 333-34). Miriam's tzaraat occurs while B'Nai Yisrael are still in Chatzeroth, on 22 Sivan 2449. The meraklim return on 9 Av 2449 after a journey of forty days, so counting back, they must have departed on 29 Sivan from the Paran desert, after the people depart from Chatzeroth. Meanwhile, during the week between 22 and 29 Sivan, Korach and B'Nai Reuven initiate their rebellion and die. The three disasters in such a short period of time reinforce the despair of the last half of Bemidbar. The Torah then presents Chukat – the procedure for becoming tahor (ritually pure) after contact with a dead body (chapter 19). Following this chapter, necessary information because of all the deaths in one horrible week, the Torah speaks no more of the generation of the Exodus. The Torah resumes in chapter 20 with incidents from the 40th year, starting with the deaths of Miriam and then Aharon.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, loved finding and explaining links across various parts of the Torah and Tanach. Insights such as the timing of the sins of Miriam and Aharon, the meraklim, and Korach and his gang all taking place within a single week are prime examples of the insights that Rabbi Cahan loved to discover and share. Rabbi Cahan made Torah exciting for me starting when I was a graduate student and continuing until his untimely death a few years ago. Our second oldest grandson will observe his Bar Mitzvah next year on parshat Naso. Hopefully he will find the parsha as exciting as I do.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah & Alan

Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at www.alephbeta.org. Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.

Please daven for a Refuah Shleimah for Velvel David ben Sarah Rachel; Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Daniel Yitzchak Meir HaLevy ben Ruth; Avram David ben Zeezi Esther; Ariah Ben Sarah, Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Miriam Bat Leah; Rena Michal bat Sara, Yehudit Leah bas Hannah Feiga; Miriam bat Esha, Chana bat Sarah; Raizel bat Rut; Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.

Parshat Naso: Sotah and The Question I Wished I asked Rav Soloveitchik

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander * (5784)
President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

Rabbi Brander dedicates his Dvar Haftorah this week to the heroic soldiers, security forces and first responders of the IDF, defenders of the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and the United States Armed Forces, defenders of liberty and justice for all. May Hashem protect them and bring them all home speedily and safely.

[ed. note: The parsha in Israel this Shabbat is Behaalotecha. Last week, Rabbi Brander's Dvar Haftorah was for Shavuot, not for Naso. I am therefore using his Dvar Torah from 5784 to provide a Dvar from him for Naso, which we read outside Israel this week.]

As we read Parshat Naso, which presents the rules governing the Sotah ritual, I am brought back to my time in Rav Soloveitchik's shiur at YU, where we studied Masechet Sotah in depth. The Rav's virtuosic approach to Talmud study was a hallmark of his teaching, and it was especially apparent over the course of our study of this tractate. But there's one more question I wish I could ask Rav Soloveitchik.

The Sotah ritual relates to a woman who had already been warned to discontinue intimate seclusion with a man other than her husband, and was found to nonetheless continue such behavior and is thus suspected of infidelity. She would be made to drink a 'potion' in the Beit Hamikdash which would either leave her unharmed, showing her innocence and rewarded with the birth of a child as well as renewed trust in the marriage. Or cause severe symptoms and possibly death if she was guilty, resulting in a supernatural punishment which Rav Soloveitchik revisited again and again.

Why does the Sotah ritual so greatly diverge from the norms that generally govern the Torah's jurisprudence? Not only is the ordeal unusual – including the erasure of the divine name in water to be drunk by the accused – but, as a Talmudic scholar of the Rav's caliber could appreciate at a glance, the entire process contradicts key tenets of halakhic judicial proceeding.

First, unlike in a traditional court proceedings, where attendance by the relevant parties is an obligation incumbent upon them, the suspected Sotah reserves the right to decline to participate in the ritual. In such a case, the woman may accept a resolution wherein the marriage is dissolved and she loses her entitlement to payments stipulated in the Ketubah. (Mishna Sotah 4:2)

This is especially striking in light of the fact that, were she to be found liable of infidelity in a beit din, she would, in theory, be subject to execution – yet she is able to circumvent a judicial investigation if she so chooses.

What's more, it is unusual to see God get directly involved in the adjudication of a personal case. As Ramban (Bamidbar 5:20) notes, the Sotah ritual is the only mitzva in the Torah whose resolution, in a situation of guilt, is predicated on the occurrence of a miracle. Upon drinking the accursed waters, the woman, if she were guilty, would have her "stomach swell" – seemingly a reference to supernatural death.

Yet throughout the Torah, there is a clear protocol that the responsibility to rule on cases between individuals is not assigned to God, but to God's appointed agents, namely the judges of the rabbinic court. (Devarim 17:11) Why, then, would God take part in settling this one particular type of case?

All this considered, **Rav Soloveitchik brilliantly suggests that, on a close reading of Masechet Sotah, we can see that the ritual is not intended to serve as a means of adjudication, helping us to determine the facts on the ground regarding the supposed infidelity. Rather, the entire ritual had another function – to restore the bond between husband and wife.** [emphasis added]

The Sotah ritual is an elaborate and sophisticated psychodrama, meant to create an opportunity to restore the marriage now held in the balance, the Rav explained. If the woman is guilty, she is offered a low-stakes option to opt out of the ordeal, and to dissolve the marriage in which trust has been lost.

And if, on the other hand, she is innocent, the ordeal offers her the opportunity to demonstrate, in the face of the high stakes punishment, her confidence that she has been loyal to the marriage. The ritual does not follow the general rules because its goals are not judicial in character, (which explains why the man involved in the alleged extra-marital affair is not dealt with in the text) but restorative, providing the framework in which the marriage can be either dissolved or rehabilitated.

Yet for all of Rav Soloveitchik's insight at the theoretical level of Talmud study, I still find myself with an unanswered question. The Mishna (Sotah 9:9) states that, at a certain point in time, the Sotah ritual ceased, due to the changing needs and realities of the Jewish people.

A similar fate has been assigned to Yibum, levirate marriage, which was once an accepted practice in cases of premature death of a childless married man. It has now been supplanted entirely by the ritual of Chalitza, which exempts the widow from having to marry the deceased husband's brother.

In each of these cases, the fundamental commitment the Torah has to maintaining respect for individuals and domestic well-being has led to changes in halakhic practice. We see through these examples how to accommodate the application of the Torah's deeply held values in an ever-changing world.

Why, then, I would so much like to ask Rav Soloveitchik, have we not done the same for agunot? How can it be that, with all the Talmudic thinking and creativity held by the great scholars in each generation, we still live in a world in which women can be chained to broken marriages, with little or no halakhic recourse? [emphasis added]

Deep down, I am confident of the answer he would provide. Rav Soloveitchik would insist that the Torah today is no less open to creativity and ingenuity than it has been in the past. That just as he had, in his time, marshaled the breadth and depth of his halakhic knowledge to protect, defend, and include the disadvantaged, **it is on us, the rabbis of our generation, to do everything in our power to end the agunah crisis, and to work within the religious system to reconsider the traditions of how we view the halacha and its application in regard to get-abuse.** [emphasis added]

While the laws in our tradition are valuable and holy and not to be taken lightly or changed at the whims of society, we do need to carefully examine those that are causing harm and hurt among our people.

There is certainly no guarantee of success, but if God in the sotah ordeal was willing to have His name erased in order to promote harmony in this world, we must certainly do our part to bring justice to wrongdoers and harmony into our homes. May our attempts be blessed with success, so the name of God will be complete, and our society enhanced.

* A similar development of the Sotah ordeal is seen in the article by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman (1988): "The Case of the Sotah in Jewish Law: Ordeal or Psychodrama?," *National Jewish Law Review*, (III), 49-64.

Shabbat Shalom

* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org or 212-935-8672. **Donations to 49 West 45th Street #701, New York, NY 10036.**

<https://ots.org.il/naso-the-question-i-wished-i-asked-rav-soloveitchik/>

'Blood on their hands': Top Modern Orthodox rabbi says haredim must serve in IDF

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander (May 24, 2026)

Days after burying yet another graduate killed in Lebanon, Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander sat down with the Jerusalem Post's senior field reporter, Sam Halpern, to discuss leading one of Israel's largest Modern Orthodox educational networks during its most painful chapter in a generation.

As president and rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone, Brander carries a staggering ledger: 26 students killed since October 7th, plus 39 first-degree relatives. His own son has logged over 400 days of reserve duty. A vice provost spends half his week at the office and half in Lebanon. The numbers shape every position Brander takes, and he does not soften any of them.

The rabbi argues bluntly that the Haredi refusal to serve violates clear halacha (Jewish law) and leaves "blood on the hands" of those who opt out while grandfathers fight in their place. He defends the rise of women in combat units as a moral consequence of that failure, condemns the soldiers who smashed a Jesus statue in Lebanon, and explains why his flagship schools reroute their Jerusalem Day march away from the Muslim

Quarter.

"We're not going to allow our ability to be sovereigns to make us bullies," he tells Halpern. "It tarnishes the souls of my students."

What lifts the interview above standard commentary is Brander's willingness to defend his community fiercely and criticize it honestly in the same breath. He unpacks the dangerous misuse of "Amalek" by politicians and extremists, recounts the murder of one of his own students, and walks through the interfaith work taking him from Jerusalem to the UAE to Indonesia, alongside the mental health infrastructure his network built to catch the teachers, spouses, and emissaries falling outside the government's safety net.

Note: The interview with Rabbi Brander seems only to be available in full as a podcast. You may find the podcast at: <https://www.jpost.com/podcast/article-897146>. The podcast is also available on Youtube.

Parshat Naso: The Priestly Blessing – The Connecting Thread

By Tamar Herbst * (June 3, 2025)

In our community, we often host soldiers from the Nativ program who are in the process of conversion. One recent Shabbat, after the prayer service, one of the female soldiers approached me and asked, "Why do we lower our eyes when the Kohanim ascend to bless the congregation?"

The questions of those who do not take traditions for granted can often catch us off guard. I had never asked myself that question. I told her it was an interesting one — and that I didn't know the answer. Later, at home, I decided to look into it.

The Kohanim bless the people of Israel and channel abundance from the heavenly realms into our world. But what is the true meaning of this blessing that we receive through the mouths of the Kohanim? What role do they play in the relationship between us and the Almighty?

In this week's Torah portion, Aharon and the Kohanim are commanded to bless the people of Israel. I opened *Matnat Chelko*, the book written by my grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Halevi Filber, may he live and be well, on Parashat Naso, where he writes the following:

The ideal state for a person is to live by [the verses]: "I have set the Lord always before me" and "In all your ways know Him" — which means, to be directly connected to God, without intermediaries. As the prophet Yirmiyahu describes, "[...] for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." This will be the reality in the end of days. But until that time, a person cannot elevate himself solely by his own strength — he must rely on those greater than he is. That was the role of the Kohanim. [...]

If so, does this mean a person needs a Kohen in order to connect to the Creator of the world? That on one's own, one cannot reach a level close to God?

My grandfather continues:

At the same time, Rav Kook explains in his book Orot [p. 54] that the Kehuna should not be seen as a form of mediation — an intermediary between man and God. Rather, the Kehuna is "like a fitting clasp," the thread that connects two pieces of fabric together and ensures that the connection between them remains intact. The Kohanim help the members of the nation of Israel to stay connected to their Father in Heaven.

Rav Kook further explains that the need to draw closer to God through an external force arises because “when a person draws near to God, it is not through his baser inclinations or his lower tendencies, but through the highest part of himself — and it is this higher aspect that pulls the rest of his being toward the radiant, Divine life.” [...]

The Kehuna does not exist to replace man or stand in his place, but to assist him in drawing closer to God through his own strengths and abilities.

In the end of days, a person will no longer need any form of mediation in order to be connected to God, as the prophet Yirmiyahu foretells. But until then, the role of the Kohanim is to serve as a link — not a channel, not a conduit. The connection between the simple Jew and God is direct. Despite all his flaws, a person is connected to God at every moment, in every place, and at every stage. Even in our most straightforward blessings, we address God in the second person — Baruch Atah — as one who speaks to another face-to-face.

The role of the Kohanim is to be that connecting thread which ensures that the two edges of the fabric remain in contact. To guard and sustain the bond.

Ashreinu — how fortunate we are. May we merit to see the light of God and the complete redemption, especially in these days — a redemption for the entire people of Israel, in wholeness and in unity.

* A graduate of Ulpanat Katz Oriya, Tamar Herbst lives in Akko and teaches at Ulpanat Bnei Akiva Segula in Kiryat Motzkin, where she serves as the homeroom teacher of an Emotional Support Classroom. Married to a reservist, Tamar is a champion multitasker who was on maternity leave when she wrote this Dvar.

[Ed. note: from OTS: Among this year’s overseas students at Midreshet Lindenbaum’s Maria and Joel Finkle Overseas Program, 16 young women - 27% of the cohort - have chosen to remain in Israel next year to serve the country, whether in the IDF or some other form of National Service.]

<https://ots.org.il/tamar-herbst-on-parshat-naso/>

Dvar Torah: Naso: ...So We Are Blessed! (5766)

by Rabbi Label Lam

So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them, “May HASHEM bless you and protect you. May HASHEM shine His face toward you and be gracious to you. May HASHEM lift His face to you and grant you peace. (Bamidbar 6:23-26)

May HASHEM bless you: That your possessions should be blessed! (Rashi)

And protect you: So bandits should not attack you to take your money. (Rashi)

The Torah heralds this as the optimal blessing. “So shall you bless the Children of Israel...” As if to say, “This is how you do it!” Every day in Eretz Yisrael and on holidays here Kohanim stretch out their arms and rain upon the People of Israel these very words. Many parents on Friday Nights place their hands upon the heads of their children individually, and repeat the text of this self same blessing. Maybe the question can be asked, “This is how we should bless the Children of Israel?” According to Rashi it seems like a blessing for material well-being. In just a few short lines could we not have remained focused on loftier ideals?

The Mesilas Yesharim sets the existential stage thusly; “In truth man finds himself placed in the midst of a raging battle. All matters of this world, whether good or bad, are tests for him – poverty on one side and wealth on the other...” Poverty is a test! Wealth is a test! Which is a more difficult? It has been said that the test of wealth is even greater than the test of poverty, although, over the millennium so many have cried out in prayer, “Test me!”

The Chovos HaLevavos lists three reasons HASHEM may visit wealth upon a person. He offers three accompanying

symptoms to indicate which of the three is active in a given situation.

1) Sometimes a person is made wealthy as a test. What are the symptoms this is so? “This person is more consumed with worries about how he is going to protect or increase his wealth and he is more fearful about whatever in the world might affect his financial portfolio for the worse than he is occupied with seeking ways to fulfill his obligations to his Creator. Therefore he has little real benefit or pleasure from the wealth.” This poor fellow is paralyzed with continuous anxiety, riding the waves of varying economic prognostications.

2) A person is sometimes granted wealth for his benefit. The signal that this is the case is – that the recipient feels ever more grateful to his Creator and therefore his wealth is the catalyst for him to execute more and more Mitzvos. Perhaps he can afford to hire a manger and do more personal learning. He has more time for his family and resources for the community!

3) The sign that wealth has been given as a punishment is that he is so busy indulging himself with pleasures he forgets about the gratitude he owes the Creator for his good fortune. Like the guy who won the lottery and started giving stock advice, his mind is muddled with delusions of grandeur and increasing appetites. His apparent success is ever more the reason for his unhappiness than anything else. The story of his life begins to feel like a longer version of the suicide note written by the Be-Knighted Brian Epstein – manager of the Beatles, “I have everything! I have nothing!”

Let’s briefly examine the three parts of that ubiquitous Priestly Blessing:

1) The first part showers us with the wish for both wealth and a sense of security to counter the stultifying symptoms discussed in the first scenario.

2) The second part calls out for a face to face (penimios) relationship with HASHEM lending all the benefits of a reliable moral compass to be ever connected to the true source of good fortune – aligning with #2.

3) Correspondingly the third part seeks to install a mind of peace. If only the mass quantities from without do not destabilize the quality of harmony to be found within ... **so we are blessed!**

Good Shabbos!

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5766-naso/>

Bamidbar/Shavuot (& Naso): Setting Up to Move Out by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2015

Prepared for publication from remarks made at the 2015 YCT Annual Tribute Dinner in honor of Sharon and Steven Lieberman.

Many people today would be happy to set up camp at the foot of Har Sinai permanently. Just think about what it was like: We had received all the mitzvot; the Mishkan was built; the sacrifices were being offered on a regular basis; and the camp’s boundaries had been delineated, and it was protected. We had all that we needed. Everything was perfect.

Why did God have to come along and ruin everything? We spent half of Shemot and the entirety of Vayikra setting it all up, and then what does God do? God tells us that we are going to have to break down the Mishkan and march forward, disrupting our familiar structures and our stability. Who needs this? Who wants this?

For one, God does: *al pi yachanu v'al pi Hashem yisau*. The God who tells you to stay put is the God who tells you that you

must move forward. The God who gave you all the Torah and the mitzvot, the kedusha, the korbanot, the kohanim, and the Mishkan also tells you that if you stay put, then all these things will have no meaning. Yes, you will be worshipping God at the foot of Har Sinai, but the Torah was not given to remain at Har Sinai. The Torah was given to be brought forward, to enter into the land. By remaining, you will be worshipping God in a vacuum.

I recently saw a biography of the Lubavitcher Rebbe titled, *Turning Judaism Outwards*. I saw that title and I said, “Yes. Exactly.” That is exactly what Chabad has done and we – the Modern Orthodox community – have so often failed to do. It is true that we are not cloistered. We do not reject the modern world, but what is the nature of our engagement with it? It is one of *Torah u'madda*, Torah and secular knowledge, and it might be expressed in statements like, “It is a good thing to study secular subjects,” or “One can find value in going to the opera.” In other words, it is a relationship based on determining what one can take from the broader world. This is often reflective of, and can foster, a self-serving, self-oriented ethos. It is about religious growth for the sole purpose of bettering oneself. It is about building religious institutions only to serve the needs of one’s own community.

Yes, we must invest in our own growth. Like Bnei Yisrael, we must spend many months, years even – a third of the Torah – encamped at the foot of Har Sinai, but we cannot let this become an end in itself. If our Torah has no meaning to anyone but ourselves, then we have failed. If our Torah cannot be brought from the base of Har Sinai to the larger world, then we have failed.

We tend to think that the biggest concern during the time in the Wilderness was that the people would say, “Let us make a leader and return to Egypt.” But it was not that. No, the biggest fear was that people would say, “Let us stay put. Let us remain here at Har Sinai.” If people who are moving want to retreat to a place of familiar security, how much more will a people living in security and stability want to preserve their way of life? When we have invested all our effort, all our time and energy, in making everything the way it is and to maintaining that, will we be able to move forward when God commands us?

Moving forward is hard. It requires leaving one’s comfort zone and allowing for the possibility of change. It requires that one embrace creative disruption rather than run from it. To move forward requires knowing *al pi Hashem yisau*, that it is God’s command that we move forward. It takes knowing that God’s Torah is meant to be brought forth – *vayehi binsoa haAron vayomer Moshe* – and that when it travels forth, it can truly change the world.

We must be on guard, however, not to embrace change for its own sake. We must know when to remain encamped, fortify our position, and strengthen our inner reserves so that we will be able to move forward when the time comes. “*Al pi yisau*” must be preceded by “*al pi yachanu*.” If we observe this carefully, then even when the Mishkan has been dismantled, it will retain its integrity. It will still be the Mishkan, but it will be movable so that it may be rebuilt in a new location, transplanted to spread its kedusha throughout the world.

All of you who support YCT do so because you believe that our future rabbinic leaders need to fully immerse themselves in Torah and mitzvot at the foot of Har Sinai. You believe that they must learn not only Torah and halakha, not only hashkafa and kedusha, but – like the detailed laws for the kohanim – the full wealth of skills needed to properly serve Klal Yisrael. And they know that when the time comes, just as God has told them to encamp God will tell them to travel forth. God will tell them to bring their Torah into the world, to lead our community in building and growing its Torah and its institutions, and to spread its Torah through the world. They will lead us to sustain our religion inwards so that we may succeed in turning our religion outwards. *Al pi Hashem yachanu v'al pi Hashem yisau*.

Living the Paradox of Shavuot

The holiday of Shavuot commemorates the Giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. The Rabbis paint two opposing pictures in their descriptions of this event. One is of God holding the mountain over the people’s heads and declaring, “Accept this Torah or here will be your burial place.” The other is of Moshe asking the people if they will accept the Torah and the people responding eagerly and freely, “We will do and we will hear.”

While the Torah does not tell of a mountain suspended in midair, it does graphically describe the awe and terror that filled the people upon hearing the Ten Commandments: “Let us no longer hear the word of God,” they said to Moshe. The terror

of the encounter not only robbed them of any ability to choose, it actually propelled them away from God. They needed distance in order to regain their humanity.

And while the Torah tells us that the people said “we will do” prior to the giving of the Torah, it is the Rabbis who read the more complete blind-faith declaration, “we will do and we will hear.” In this telling, the people are prepared to keep the Torah regardless of what commandments may be forthcoming. They unquestionably accept and submit to whatever God will ask of them.

The first image starts with commandedness and ends with the need to reestablish one’s autonomy; the second starts with autonomous choice and ends with unquestioning submission to God’s command. Examined together, these images represent what kabbalists refer to as the *ratzo va’shov*, the running and returning, the push-and-pull of a dynamic religious life.

There are few people who can live this paradox of *ratzo va’shov*. To do so requires that one maintain a passionate desire to cleave to God, to submit to God and to make oneself a vessel through which God’s will is realized in this world, while possessing an equally religious need to be a self-directed, independent agent, understanding that the best way we can serve God is by bringing the fullness of ourselves to the encounter and to the world.

Different people will find themselves at different points along this spectrum. For those of us who are deeply embedded in the modern world, the stance of autonomy and finding one’s own voice is taken for granted. Accordingly, while we may be fully committed to a life of observance, it is too often just that, a commitment to observance. We make a choice to observe without feeling a sense of *chiyuv*, of obligation and commandedness. Thus, our religious avodah is to cultivate that experience of being under the mountain, of feeling the power of the divine command. We must say to ourselves not, “I do this because I am an Orthodox Jew” or “because I keep halakha,” but rather, “I do this because I am obligated, because this is what halakha demands of me. This is what God demands of me.”

If we can make this a staple of our religious life, we will be able to live successfully in the *ratzo va’shov* between unquestioning submission and full autonomy. We will be able to stand beneath the mountain and at the same time freely say, *na’aseh v’nishma*, we will do and we will hear.

Shabbat Shalom!

From my archives. Note: Happy anniversary to Steve & Sharon Lieberman’s son Benjamin and wife Hannah on their fourth wedding anniversary on Sunday, the day after Shabbat Naso (12 Sivan 5782).

Nishmat HaTorah: Parshat Naso **The Sotah Ritual: A Case Study in Compassionate Halakha?** By Rabbi Ysoscher Katz *

Various Sifrei Machshava refer to Torah *sh’ba’al Peh*, the Oral Torah, as *nishmat hatorah*, the soul of the Torah.

R. Moshe Cordovero, among the foremost Kabbalists of sixteenth-century Tzfat, writes:

“One must, with absolute necessity, also study Torah sh’ba’al Peh; it is the interpretation of the Torah, and also its neshamah, revealing its spiritual essence through its explanations and secrets.”
(*Pardes Rimonim* 27:2)

As he is commonly understood, the Oral Torah is the soul to the Written Torah’s body; without it, the Written Torah is a mere body without a soul, a sealed book, impossible to fully understand, since many commandments require necessary detail, spiritual insight, and sensitive application.

This understanding of the Oral Torah as the *nishmat hatorah* is particularly evident when the simple meaning of the Torah text presents challenging situations. It is here that Chazal, employing careful and compassionate interpretation, reveal the

essential, sensitive intent of the Divine word. A vivid illustration of this process is found in this week's parsha, Parshat Naso.

This week's parsha introduces the Sotah procedure, the legal adjudication of a suspected adulteress. A close study of the Talmudic design of this procedure reveals the nishmat hatorah, the Torah's living spirit, by ensuring that the application of halakha remains sensitive to the complexities of human relationships and maintains its caring core.

In its literal sense, the biblical Sotah procedure describes a difficult moment of marital crisis and suspicion initiated solely by the husband, driven by a spirit of jealousy. A straightforward reading of the verses suggests a harsh and potentially unilateral process in which the husband's accusation triggers a humiliating public ritual while the wife lacks meaningful protection against a capricious charge. Chazal, however, looked beyond this surface-level reading, uncovering the deeper ethical and spiritual vision latent within the Torah's words. They understood that a purely literal application of the text could undermine the very "caring core" and "spiritual insight" that defines the Torah's essence.

As the custodians of Torah *sh'ba'al Peh*, the Rabbis employed their Divinely mandated interpretive process to reveal the Written Torah's inherent neshamah within its guf, the hidden soul of halakha. Through their interpretation, the Sotah procedure was transformed from a harsh unilateral ordeal into a delicate legal framework that protects individual dignity and carefully manages the marital crisis, ensuring that halakha functions as a mechanism for communal and marital healing rather than humiliation.

This transformation emerged through three major halakhic developments that fundamentally reshaped the marital dynamic and reflected a more sensitive understanding of the home:

First, Chazal established rigorous legal guardrails around the husband's suspicions. A man cannot simply accuse his wife of infidelity based on a flicker of jealousy. The process is not arbitrary; it must be preceded by a formal expression of suspicion and followed by a secluded encounter (*setirah*) witnessed by two reliable witnesses. These requirements effectively filter out capricious accusations and force the husband to acknowledge the severity of his actions and the potential humiliation of his wife. By demanding verifiable facts rather than just raw emotion, the Rabbis ensure that halakha proceeds on the basis of evidence rather than mere suspicion, protecting the accused from an easy and unwarranted public ordeal.

Second, even after the husband initiates these extensive procedures and the case is brought to the Beit Hamikdash, the process can be unilaterally halted. The Sages held that the husband retains the right to withdraw his accusation, thereby cancelling the punitive route. This emphasis on de-escalation reveals Chazal's governing principle: the preservation of shalom bayit over punitive justice. By providing a clear off-ramp, the Rabbis strongly encourage the couple to step back, sort out their differences, and work towards reconciliation, recognizing that a flawed peace is sometimes better than a devastating, though technically correct, legal conclusion.

Third, Chazal teach us that the sacred waters of the Sotah ritual test the husband as much as they test the wife. The punishment is conditional, dependent not only on the wife's fidelity but on the husband's own moral standing. If it is discovered that his sexual mores were less than impeccable, the woman is exempt from punishment. This profound ethical principle asserts that a husband who has contaminated his own home through lax morals has forfeited the right to complain about his wife's perceived infidelity. In effect, his own failure to uphold the sanctity of their relationship undermines his ability to invoke the ritual against her; he is the one whose spiritual contamination defiled the domestic sphere.

These three examples underscore a foundational principle of the Oral Torah: its mission is to ensure that the Written Law, even in its sternest moments, is always applied with an ethical sensitivity that reveals its true Divine intent. Chazal did not merely interpret halakha; they revealed its ultimate, living form, infused with neshama and profound relevance.

While the legal structure of the Torah is now fixed, the imperative to search for the soul of halakha remains an enduring spiritual task. We cannot alter the established halakha, but we are charged to follow in the Sages' footsteps by constantly seeking the nishmat hatorah within our own practice. This commitment requires us to approach every mitzvah not just as a technical fulfillment, but with a dedicated focus on the same principles of human dignity, compassion, and marital peace that Chazal championed. It is through this continuing search for the neshama that our personal *shmirat mitzvot* remains vibrant, morally profound, and an authentic expression of what the Torah is meant to be: a *Torat Chaim*.

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<https://library.yct Torah.org/2026/05/nishmat-hatorah-parshat-bamidbar/>

Together...Uniquely: Thoughts for Parashat Naso

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

When the Almighty calls on Moses to command the priests to bless the people of Israel, the instructions are in the plural (*emor lahem*). When the blessing is concluded, the Almighty indicates: “and I will bless them” (*va-ani avarakhem*) — also in the plural. The setting of the priestly blessing, then, is clearly to be a public event intended for the entire collective.

Yet, the tripartite blessing itself is entirely in the singular form. **Although the blessing is intended for the plurality of Israel, it is aimed at each individual separately.** It prays that God will bless and protect each of us; that God’s countenance should shine on each Israelite and grant each one of us peace — shalom. [emphasis added]

The formulation of the priestly blessing is alluding to a profound truth. The blessings are given to the entire community...not as an anonymous mass of people, but as an assembly of individual human beings. The emphasis is on the uniqueness of each person, the desire that each of us finds blessing and fulfillment in life. The goal is shalom...peace, wholeness, personal satisfaction.

God’s infinite wisdom encompasses all...but focuses on each. This idea is underscored in a Talmudic teaching (Berakhot 58a) that requires the recitation of a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews. We are to praise the Almighty Who is *hakham harazim*, the One who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual. “Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike.” The Creator made each person as a unique being. He expected and wanted diversity of thought, and we bless Him for having created this diversity among us. [emphasis added]

Religious life entails participating in a community, observing shared rituals, following traditional patterns. It can happen that one’s individuality may seem compromised or lost in the process. The overwhelming emphasis on communal mores tends to diminish the uniqueness of each individual. The priestly blessing reminds us of the need to be part of the community...but to retain our own distinctive individuality.

In his famous essay, “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson taught: “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.” We each are who we are; to squelch our individuality in order to imitate others is self-destructive. Emerson lamented the tendency to forfeit one’s ideas, ideals and values in order to blend in with the dominant group. Rather, one should be true to him/herself.

Poignantly, Emerson wrote: “Man is timid and apologetic. He is no longer upright. He dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.” These words, proclaimed in the mid-19th century, continue to ring true nearly 200 years later. So many religious people, including rabbis, are reluctant to express an original opinion unless it is authenticated by sages of earlier generations. Instead of relying on their own thinking, they seek to amass sources of earlier “authorities.”

The framework of the priestly blessing provides a vital dynamic. We are a community; we stand together in our beliefs and observances. At the same time, though, we are each unique individuals with our own particular thoughts, sensitivities and needs. While we — as members of a community — receive the blessings from the priests and from God, those blessings are directed to each of us separately.

This is not merely a blessing on us. It is a challenge for us.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. Rabbi Marc Angel has a youtube series on religion and literature, with the first session dealing with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqP9UMJOwmk>

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<https://www.jewishideas.org/article/togetheruniquely-thoughts-parashat-naso>

The Battle for the Jewish Mind: Book Review by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel *

Sina Kahen, the Founder of Da'at Press, has recently published a very important volume: *The Battle for the Jewish Mind: The Maimonidean Controversies and Why They Matter Today*. Sina works in the Medical Tech and AI industries and has been publishing a series of books that foster a grand religious vision. Born in Iran, Sina lives in London with his wife and two children. He is one of the leaders in Habura, a group that promotes a Judaism based on the “Geonic-Sepharadi tradition,” and even more specifically the “Geonic-Andalusian tradition.”

Maimonides (1138-1204) is the great exemplar of this tradition. He was a brilliant Talmudist and halakhist, and his *Mishneh Torah* continues to be a foundational work in Jewish law. Aside from his mastery of rabbinic sources, he was highly regarded for his medical and scientific works. Like others in the Geonic-Andalusian tradition, he valued philosophy and general knowledge. His classic *Guide for the Perplexed* offered an intellectually rigorous approach to Judaism: how to read the Bible, how to reconcile biblical texts with philosophic and scientific truths, how to seek reasons for the commandments, how to understand revelation, prophecy, messianism, etc. In short, Maimonides was a proponent of a thinking Judaism that drew on the best teachings of our rabbis and the best wisdom available from beyond Jewish sources.

Maimonides' commitment to philosophy was so great, he included basic philosophic principles about God in the opening chapters of his code of Jewish law. He stressed that a knowledge of physics and metaphysics was essential to a proper religious life.

While his approach was well within the Geonic-Andalusian tradition, many religious traditionalists advocated a very different view of things. They sought all truth in the Torah and rabbinic texts; they thought that philosophical inquiry could lead the masses away from religious observance. They taught a kabbalistic/midrashic Judaism that demanded *emunat hakhamim*, reliance on the opinions of sages who were not tainted by wisdom from the general world. They not only denigrated the philosophical approach of Maimonides, they strove to ban his books. What emerged was a century and more of “the Maimonidean controversies.” The anti-Maimonides group went so far as to denounce Maimonides heresies to Dominican monks who set fire to Maimonides' books in a public demonstration in Paris in 1233. The horror of this event caused some anti-Maimonists to repent their ways.

But the basic controversies did not disappear...and are still raging in religious Jewish life today. The Maimonidean approach to philosophical quest is highly discouraged among much of Orthodoxy today. Sina Kahen asks: “Why is the worldly tradition — the one that treated the sciences as servants of Torah, that saw rigorous and rational inquiry as a form of worship — not the mainstream?” (p. 75). Why is so much of Orthodoxy today steeped in kabbalistic/midrashic Judaism, rather than the intellectually sophisticated Judaism espoused by Rambam and the Geonic/Andalusian tradition?

Sina Kahen pointedly notes: “The question is not whether Jews “should” engage with the sciences — as though one were choosing between a safe path and a risky one. The question is whether a Jew who refuses to look at the world God made can be said to know the God who made it. The tradition we have followed through these pages answered: he cannot. Not

fully. Not with the depth that Torah demands” (p. 80).

Sina Kahen has written a remarkable volume that not only provides the historical context of “the Maimonidean controversies,” but demonstrates how those controversies persist today. While, happily, there are those within modern Jewry espousing an intellectually vibrant Judaism open to the sciences, humanities and arts — there are others who strive to narrow intellectual pursuits to the four cubits of Torah as they understand it.

Sina Kahen’s book is available through Da’at Press:

<https://www.daat.press/product-page/the-battle-for-the-jewish-mind-the-maimonidean-controversies-sina-kahen>

I recommend it very highly.

* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. and rabbi emeritus of the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City.

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Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Naso The Nazir — Restraint or Crown?

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel *

The Torah’s presentation of the Nazir (Numbers 6:1–21) invites a fundamental question: is nezirut primarily a discipline of restraint, or an ascent to a higher, crowned sanctity? The answer emerges from the Torah’s own language, which points simultaneously in two directions.

On the one hand, as Ibn Ezra observes, nazir is cognate with neder — a vow of abstention. The Nazir is one who refrains, most prominently from wine (Numbers 6:3–4). This aligns with a broader biblical pattern in which separation functions as a boundary against excess or impurity (cf. Leviticus 15:31). From this perspective, the Nazir is defined by deliberate restraint.

On the other hand, the very same root yields a different meaning. In Deuteronomy 33:16, *nezir ehav* refers to one “set apart,” even “elect,” among his brothers. Likewise, the Torah describes the Nazir’s hair as a *nezer*, a “crown” (Numbers 6:7–8). As Jacob Milgrom notes, the term also appears in the laws of the sabbatical year to describe an untrimmed vine (Leviticus 25:5, 11), suggesting that the Nazir’s uncut hair is not incidental but central. It is a visible, organic sign of consecration. Indeed, in Jeremiah 7:29, the term *nezer* itself denotes hair, reinforcing the centrality of the Nazir’s uncut growth. The Nazir, then, is not only one who abstains, but one who is “crowned” through that abstention.

These two meanings — withdrawal and elevation — generate two distinct perspectives on nezirut.

I. The Nazir as a Discipline of Restraint

Rambam, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:48), emphasizes the dimension of restraint. For Rambam, the prohibition of wine is the primary feature of nezirut. The Torah introduces wine first (Numbers 6:3) and then extends the prohibition to all

grape products (6:4), before turning to hair and corpse impurity. The structure suggests that wine is the axis around which the institution revolves.

This reading is reinforced by the rabbinic linkage between Nazir and Sotah, the suspected adulteress whose laws immediately precede this passage (Numbers 5:11–31). One who witnesses the degradation of the Sotah is moved to accept nezirut, abstaining from wine (Sotah 2a). Wine, in this view, leads to loosened inhibitions and potential moral failure; nezirut serves as a corrective discipline. It is a framework for regaining control.

From this vantage point, the Nazir is not primarily ascending to a new level of sanctity, but rather guarding against human weakness. Nezirut is temporary, reactive, and therapeutic. It addresses a moral danger by imposing structured limits. The Nazir withdraws in order to stabilize.

II. The Nazir as a Crowned Figure of Holiness

In contrast, Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel emphasize the nezer — the crown. Here, the Nazir is not merely avoiding sin, but entering a heightened state of sanctity, one that parallels the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest.

The textual parallels are striking. Like the High Priest, the Nazir may not become impure even for close relatives (Numbers 6:7–8; cf. Leviticus 21:11). The Torah explains this prohibition with the phrase, “for the crown of his God is upon his head” (Numbers 6:7), echoing the language of the High Priest’s consecration (Leviticus 21:12). Even the High Priest’s golden frontlet, the tzitz, is called a nezer (Exodus 29:6–7).

In this light, nezirut emerges as a voluntary assumption of priestly-like holiness. The Nazir becomes, for a limited time, a kind of private High Priest. His uncut hair serves as his crown, marking him as consecrated. He lives in a state of continuous sanctity, not merely during moments of ritual service.

This perspective also sheds light on a halakhic nuance. The Mishnah (Nazir 6:5) teaches that violations of corpse impurity or hair restrictions disrupt the Nazir’s status, whereas drinking wine, though prohibited, does not terminate the nezirut in the same way. This suggests that the defining core of nezirut lies not only in abstention from wine, but in the sustained state of consecration symbolized by the nezer.

III. Institution and Spontaneity

The comparison to the Kohen Gadol highlights a deeper distinction. The High Priest’s sanctity is institutional: it derives from his role, is regulated by precise norms, and serves the entire nation. The Nazir’s sanctity, by contrast, is voluntary and personal. It is an individual’s decision to enter a heightened religious state.

This contrast is reflected in their respective treatments of hair. The High Priest must remain meticulously groomed; the Talmud even prescribes a regular haircut schedule to maintain an appearance appropriate for Temple service (Ta’anit 17a). His sanctity is expressed through order and formality.

The Nazir, however, grows his hair *pera*, untrimmed and natural (Numbers 6:5). His sanctity is not institutional but organic. It emerges from within, through an act of personal commitment. As Rabbi Avia HaCohen suggests, nezirut represents a form of religious spontaneity — where an individual reaches beyond the baseline obligations of halakhah toward a self-chosen ideal.

IV. The Nazir Between Sotah and the Priestly Blessing

The placement of the Nazir passage sharpens its meaning. It appears immediately after the laws of Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31) and before the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:22–27). [emphasis added]

In the Sotah ritual, the woman's hair is loosened (u-para et rosh ha-ishah, Numbers 5:18), symbolizing disgrace and moral breakdown. Hair here becomes a sign of degradation. The Nazir, by contrast, grows his hair as a sign of sanctity. The same physical feature — hair — can express either degradation or elevation. **The Nazir transforms wild hair into a crown.** [emphasis added]

Immediately following, the Priests are commanded to bless the people. Their holiness is institutional, conferred from above. The Nazir stands between these two poles: he shares with the Sotah the centrality of hair, but redirects it toward sanctity; he shares with the Priests the quality of holiness, but achieves it through personal initiative rather than office.

As Ibn Ezra notes, the juxtaposition underscores that the Nazir, too, participates in holiness. But his path is distinct: it is chosen, not assigned.

V. Toward a Synthesis

These two perspectives — restraint and crown — need not be mutually exclusive. They may instead describe a progression.

Nezirut may begin as an act of restraint, a withdrawal from excess and a safeguard against moral failure. Yet that very withdrawal creates the conditions for transformation. The individual who separates from indulgence may come to experience a new form of sanctity. What begins as discipline becomes consecration.

In this sense, the Nazir embodies a broader religious possibility. Not everyone is called to the institutional holiness of the Kohen Gadol, and not everyone requires the corrective discipline of nezirut. Yet the **Torah introduces nezirut to suggest that beyond the baseline demands of halakhah lies a space for voluntary ascent.** [emphasis added]

The Nazir is one who, for a time, lives as if crowned — set apart not only from what is forbidden, but for what is holy.

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Naso -- Shalom Bayis
by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine* ©2026

May this Dvar Torah be a Zechus Refuah Shileima for Cholei Yisroel

Sometimes when the Torah wants to make its point clear it gives an example that is extreme. For example, when the Torah tells us about returning lost objects or assisting with packages, the Torah states it regarding the ox or donkey of someone you dislike (Shemos 23:4,5). Similarly, when the Torah states the obligation to bury the dead, it states it regarding a person who was killed by the court for a capital offense (Devorim 21:23). The Torah is telling us that even in such a case these Mitzvos and priorities still apply.

In this week's Parsha, the Torah uses a similar style to tell us the importance of Shalom Bayis. The Torah's example is the

Sotah, a woman who has acted inappropriately in her marriage, however it isn't clear if she crossed the line of no return. Hashem says, "If it is still repairable, I am willing to do whatever it takes to repair this marriage."

And so, Hashem instructs the Kohein to erase His name into a potion of water which the woman will drink. The point of erasing Hashem's name is not to create the potency of the water. Hashem can create potency with any ingredients. The point of erasing Hashem's name is to say, "I am willing to forgo my honor to save this marriage. Let all those involved emulate Me." Marriage is sacred. To the husband, to the wife, and to the supporting people of the community, the message is clear. Wherever possible, extend yourselves similarly to save marriage.

The Talmud (Yerushalmi 1:4) relates that Rebbi Meir took this lesson quite personally. There was a woman who attended his lectures and came home late to her husband. Her husband took offense and demanded that she spit in the Rebbi's face before he would let her back into the house. When Rebbi Meir heard of the marital crisis, he announced that he had an eye ailment and needed someone who knew the cure of spitting into the eye to heal it. The woman's neighbors advised her that this was her chance to spit in Rebbi Meir's face and fulfill her husband's demand. She approached Rebbi Meir but then, full of reverence and integrity, she just couldn't do it. She said, "I do not know this therapy." Rebbi Meir encouraged her, "Nevertheless, spit seven times," and it will work. She did so, and Rebbi Meir declared, "Now, go tell your husband that he demanded that you spit one time, and you did seven."

Rebbi Meir's students were appalled. When they realized that Rebbi Meir had accommodated the husband's demands through this trick, they said, "Had we known we would have flogged him to set him straight." Rebbi Meir replied, "My honor is not greater than my Master's. Hashem allows his Name to be erased in the waters of the Sotah to make peace between husband and wife."

I once heard a story of a couple who argued about who should take out the garbage. The woman was exhausted from her workday, and the husband felt it was beneath his dignity. They presented their conflict to a great rabbi, who listened respectfully and said that it was so serious that he would need to think about it. The next erev Shabbos the kindly Rabbi came to their home. They stood in awe before the great sage and wondered why he was visiting them. The Rabbi said, "I thought about your problem and realized you are both right. So, I came to help you out, to take out the garbage. It is an honor for me to help make your Mikdash (holy sanctuary) ready for Shabbos."

When we realize that marriage is something greater than each of us separately it becomes easier to extend ourselves physically and emotionally. Marriage is a partnership with Hashem to create a Mikdash (Sotah 17). Hashem is willing to do what He can, Rebbi Meir is willing to do what he can, and we must do what we can as well.

The Talmud (Gittin 52) recounts how a certain couple was having a difficult time with Shalom Bayis every Friday. Maybe it was in the stress of preparing for Shabbos that they lost control and slipped into arguing. Rebbi Meir encountered the situation and intervened. The Talmud does not say what Rebbi Meir did. Was his presence simply having a calming effect on the couple? Did he physically help them out? Did he give them a healthier perspective that allowed them to cope better? Knowing Rebbi Meir's behavior from the previous story it is not hard to imagine that Rebbi Meir would go to great lengths to help a couple and to restore Shalom Bayis.

In any case, after three consecutive Fridays of intervention, Rebbi Meir was successful in restoring harmony to this home. As he did so, the Talmud recounts, he heard Satan himself muttering, "Woe is to me, Rebbi Meir has evicted me."

Sometimes a couple might find that they inexplicably argue. They might not even be able to understand why suddenly they misinterpret each other's behaviors in the worst possible way, creating friction in their marriage. It is fascinating to know that there could be an unbalanced force, Satan, working against us to withhold the natural happiness between husband and wife. Taking initiative, as Rebbi Meir did, can evict the Satan. Praised is the husband or wife who steps up to break whatever bad cycle might have developed, emulating Rebbi Meir, taking whatever initiative is needed to restore happiness to the home.

Family Discussion Questions:

1. The Dvar Torah suggests that Satan can work to create inexplicable friction between people who love each other. Have you ever experienced a disagreement that seemed to come out of nowhere and couldn't easily be explained? What helped resolve it?
2. The Dvar Torah describes marriage as a "Mikdash" — a holy sanctuary. What is one practical thing each member of your family could do this week to help make your home feel more like a Mikdash?

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are www.care-mediation.com and www.teach613.org; his email is RMRhine@gmail.com.
For information or to join any Torah613 classes, or to help sponsor his Torah insights, contact Rabbi Rhine.

Success is a Journey, Not a Destination

By Rabbi Yehoshua Singer * (5786)

There are two grain offerings which we are associated with the Festivals. On Pesach we are commanded to bring a Korban Omer, an offering of barley flour, and on Shavuot we are commanded to bring the Shte Halechem, two loaves of wheat bread. The *Sefer Hachinuch* (Mitzvah 302 and 307) teaches us that these offerings are intended to help us deepen our appreciation of Hashem's love and concern for us and the wisdom and detail with which He protects our lives.

After the ground has lain fallow for two whole seasons, spring comes and the weather changes, bringing warmth and rain. That warmth and rain enable the crops to grow and ensure that we have another year of food. Year after year, Hashem maintains the cycle of the seasons and grants us another year of sustenance. To recognize this gift, we express our appreciation through these two offerings from the main grains of wheat and barley.

The *Sefer Hachinuch* adds that bringing an offering is more than just a means of expressing our gratitude. The offering's main purpose may even be to *increase* our gratitude. When we bring the offering and act out our gratitude for the gift of the seasons, we experience gratitude. This experience of gratitude now becomes emotional and awakens our senses and feelings. Once our feelings are awakened, our mind begins to focus and reflect more intently on the reason for our gratitude. Our intensified thoughts in turn then deepen our emotional awareness, and our appreciation of G-d's love continues to expand.

Our actions and the experiences they create can have a profound impact on us. The *Sefer Hachinuch* expounds on this further in Mitzvah 307. He notes that although these offerings are similar in purpose, there is a significant difference between the two offerings. The Omer brought from barley on Pesach is offered as flour, while the Shte Halechem brought from wheat on Shavuot must be offered as loaves of bread. He suggests that this distinction is specifically because of their common purpose. Since the offerings are intended to awaken our feelings and thoughts through the experience of offering G-d this gift in return for His annual gift of sustenance, the experience of the offering should be an experience which relates to the gift of the sustenance it represents.

Therefore, barley which is usually used as animal food, is brought in its raw state. Wheat, however, is generally used as human food, and is therefore brought as a finished product – bread. In the words of the *Sefer Chinuch*, "*through the action a person's thoughts are awakened to the matters.*" Our actions and choices create our experiences, and those experiences direct our thoughts.

If we want to enter into a meaningful and substantive relationship with G-d, it is not enough to think about it or even to talk about it. We must live that relationship and experience it. We have to celebrate Shabbos and experience G-d's celebration of the world He created for us. We must study His Torah and experience what it is to have a direct instruction from G-d. We have to turn to G-d in prayer and experience what it means to ask G-d for help. We have to reach out to support our friend in need and experience what it means to see our friend as important and valued by G-d. We have to follow the Torah's monetary laws and experience the feelings that our money is really G-d's money and that He decides when we can keep it.

Every mitzvah is an opportunity to experience an aspect of our relationship with G-d. If we take the time to truly experience any mitzvah we are doing, that experience can arouse our feelings and emotions, and thereby strengthen our thoughts and awareness. These powerful thoughts born out of experience will in turn deepen our emotions and our appreciation of our relationship with G-d. The more we engage in Torah and mitzvos, the more real our relationship will become.

This, in truth, is the very purpose of life and is one of the greatest benefits of the gift of Torah. As the *Mesillas Yesharim* (Path of the Just) explains in the first chapter, our purpose in life is to develop our relationship with G-d. The mitzvos we have been given are each a means by which we can enhance and deepen that connection. Every experience we live through changes our perspective and enables us to more readily feel G-d in our lives. As a result, even when we relive the same experience and do the same mitzvah twice, it is not the same experience – because we have changed after the first experience. We have a greater capacity to understand and feel, and the feelings and thoughts which are awakened are that much stronger and more impactful. It is a never-ending cycle of growth and achievement.

The Torah is our guide for how to find these experiences, because these experiences are the mitzvos contained in the Torah. May we merit to appreciate this great gift G-d has granted us, to experience all that the mitzvos represent and live a life of growth, meaning and fulfillment.

* Rav at Sha'arei Tefilla and the co-founder of the RI Torah Network in Providence, Rhode Island. For several years, Rabbi Singer was the Rabbi at Am HaTorah Congregation in Bethesda, MD. The RI Torah Network included this Dvar Torah in a booklet for Shavuot 5786. Rabbi Singer's recent Devrei Torah normally come as podcasts rather than texts. Limited Hebrew text omitted because of software issues.

Nasso: Embracing Life

By Rabbi Haim Ovadia *

[Ed. note: This Dvar Torah was obviously an oral presentation on Shabbat and not edited for a written record. Please read this essay in that spirit.]

At first sight, the laws of Nazir, detailed in Parashat Nasso, seem to suggest that the Torah encourages people to take upon themselves vows of abstinence. A closer, contextual reading, makes it clear that the life of a hermit, away from society and from the world's bounty, is not the Torah's idea of a perfect life. It makes perfect sense to anyone who knows his Tanakh. The Torah indulges us with the description of the Garden of Eden and the marvels of creation; it praises the beauty of our mothers and meticulously describes the architectural wonder of the Tabernacle. It never tires of mentioning the bounty of the land of Canaan and the riches awaiting those who will inherit it. The book of Psalms and the Song of Songs paint breathtaking canvases of the natural world and the human condition, even if only as allegories. There is no doubt that the Torah wants us to enjoy the opulent smorgasbord God has placed in front of us. The goal is to elevate the mundane actions and the quotidian life by infusing them with faith, loving kindness, justice and honesty. It is very easy to turn your back to the world and walk away. Settle down in the desert and see no one. Be alone with God, hone your spirituality and find your true identity as the poet said (America) - "in the desert you can remember your name for there ain't no one for to give you no pain." This is indeed what Jeremiah wished for (Jer. 9:1), but knew he could not have as a prophet whose role is to be with the people. It is much more difficult, but nonetheless enriching and fulfilling to integrate normal life and Torah values.

Unfortunately, though, it seems that we are gradually adapting the Nazirite view of the world rather than the one celebrating

life. Rather than adhering to the Rabbinical adage (Yer. Kiddushin, 4:12): "HaShem will punish those who refused to enjoy that which He has given them," they herald the concept that the stricter the better.

Now, if certain individuals want to be strict and afflict their souls and bodies, no problem, the Torah gives them a reluctant permission to do so, but why would they do it to others? At least let them admit that for almost any opinion in Halakha that says that something is forbidden, there is another that says it is allowed. So let us not look down on those who are "lenient" because they are very strict in keeping the concept of enjoying God's blessings.

Here are some examples that might be of use in the summer which are, for some, precariously near:

1. Relying on the Eruv:

it has been the Minhag of all communities, Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike, to rely on an eruv in ANY city in the world. Those who choose not to rely on it and go against the widespread Minhag must understand that they are the exception that goes against the norm. They are welcome to walk in the summer heat with no water and full regalia, but they should not teach their children, as I have personally witnessed, to close their eyes when they see someone "carrying" on Shabbat. Or consider this case which I have also witnessed: during the recent heat wave. A "strict" husband was pleasantly marching empty handed while his "lenient" wife had no choice but lag behind with a toddler on one hand and his tricycle on the other. Is this the way of Torah? I really wanted to remind this guy that the rabbis say that a husband and wife are one body and he is therefore "carrying" now, so they should either both stay at home or both rely on the Eruv, because it is OK to be a Nazir, a strict hermit for yourself but it is not OK to impose it on others and make them suffer.

2. Exercising on Shabbat:

It is clearly stated in the Shulhan Arukh that jogging and exercising are allowed for recreational purposes but not for pure medical ones (orah Hayyim 301:2 and 328:42). This includes using weights and non-electric machinery such as stationary bikes. There are those who say it is not in the Spirit of Shabbat because they simply do not connect to the practice, but this is exactly what the Shulhan Arukh says: those people who enjoy this activity are allowed to do so. Period.

3. Swimming:

Hakham Ovadia Yossef rules, in *Yalkut Yossef on Shabbat*, vol. 2, based on the Talmud and the Shulhan Arukh, that swimming in a pool on Shabbat is allowed, but by the time the fifth volume was published, the same ruling was restated with many restrictions because of "what will people say" and the "spirit of Shabbat." Here again we must say that if one does not enjoy the pool, no one will push him there, but if the Halakha clearly says that it is allowed, he should not mistake swimmers for sinners.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Haim Ovadia.

Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia, who has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.

* Judaic faculty, Ramaz High School, New York; also Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan (Potomac, MD). Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school). **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's**

Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria: <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats. Rabbi Ovadia retains all rights (copyright) to this and all other Devrei Torah that he permits me to share.

A Bissel of Torah from a Tiny Jewish Community

By Rabbi Natanel Kaszovitz *

Auckland, New Zealand Hebrew Congregation **

On Monday this week, I finally had the opportunity to meet the Jewish prisoners in Auckland. When I walked in, I saw a man covered in tattoos, dressed in a prison uniform. Immediately, I switched to Hebrew, greeted him warmly and gave him a big hug.

There is a story I grew up with that follows me wherever I go, a story from Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. [ed. note: Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, z"l, was the Rav at a shul in San Francisco for many years.]

Rav Shlomo used to visit Jews everywhere, but he had a very special place in his heart for those who were “far away,” people lost in the hippie world searching for meaning and love, the homeless, those who had left Judaism and prisoners. Wherever he went, he greeted everyone as “holy brother” or “holy sister,” always offering a hug. The prisons were no exception. Every Jewish prisoner received a hug.

On one visit to a maximum-security prison in America, Rav Shlomo sat with a group of Jewish prisoners, spoke with them, and embraced each one before leaving. As he began to walk away, one of the prisoners, whom Rav Shlomo described as “a refrigerator of a man,” huge and rectangular, came running after him.

Rav Shlomo later said, “For a moment, I was frightened just by his size and the way he was charging toward me.”

The prisoner cried out, “Please wait!”

When he reached Rav Shlomo, he asked softly, “Can I have one more hug?”

As Rav Shlomo embraced him, the man began to cry and said:

“Maybe if I had felt this kind of love growing up, I wouldn’t have ended up here.”

Love your children, not only in your hearts. Tell them. Hug them. Kiss them. At every age, let them know they are loved. It goes a very long way.

In this week’s parasha, Parashat Naso, we read the holy blessing of the Kohanim, a blessing many of us pass on to our children on Friday nights.

Bless your children and remind them that they are part of something beautiful – part of Am Yisrael.

Wishing everyone a meaningful Shabbat. B'ahavat Yisrael,

Rabbi Netanel

[Editor's note: If you became Rabbi of the only synagogue in a small, isolated Jewish community, at what level would you direct your Shabbat message for the congregation?]

* Rabbi Kaszovitz, an Israeli ordained at Ohr Torah Stone, previously served as Rabbi in Nairobi, Kenya. He became Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation in September 2025. Rabbi Moshe Rube, whose remarks I previously posted in this space, is in the process of starting a new Rabbinic position in Australia. Rabbi Rube is waiting for his visa to enter Australia, when he will be able to start his new position. I plan to use this space to include messages from Rabbi Kaszovitz and Rabbi Rube going forward.

** Rabbi Kaszovitz is now posting his Devrei Torah and classes on You Tube: <https://youtube.com/c/TheNairobisher> .

Rav Kook Torah Naso: Tithes and the Sotah

The Suspected Adulteress

The first ten chapters of the book of Numbers discuss the organization of the Israelites in the desert. The census, the placement of camps according to tribe, the duties of the Levites, the dedication of the Tabernacle, the inauguration of the Levites — all of these topics pertain to the preparatory arrangements needed to organize the journey of millions in the wilderness.

Yet, in the middle of all of these rather technical subjects, the Torah discusses the Sotah, the suspected adulteress. What does this unfortunate story of distrust and jealousy have to do with organizing the Israelites in the desert? This topic would more naturally belong in the section on forbidden relations in Acharei Mot (Lev. chapter 18).

This anomaly did not escape the Talmudic sages. Rabbi Yochanan noted that the verses immediately preceding the section on Sotah discuss the tithes given to the kohanim.

Why does the subject of the suspected adulteress immediately follow the laws of offerings and tithes for the kohanim? To teach that whoever does not hand over his tithes to the kohen, will in the end require the kohen's services to deal with his wife. (Berakhot 63a) [emphasis added]

What is the connection between withholding tithes and a wife's suspected infidelity?

Alienation from the Kohanim

It is vital that the masses maintain a strong connection with those dedicated to the service of God and the study of Torah, like the kohanim, about whom it is written (Malachi 2:7), "From the kohen's lips they will guard knowledge, and they will seek Torah from his mouth." This bond is crucial for the ethical instruction of the people, enabling the Torah's teachings to reach the entire nation. Scholars are uplifted as they study Torah and analyze its wisdom, and the rest of the people are influenced through their relationship with those who study and disseminate Torah and its ethical teachings.

What is the vehicle for ensuring this connection between the people and the spiritual elite? It is through the various gifts and tithes that the Torah designated to the kohanim.

An individual who cuts himself off from the spiritual leadership is likely to undergo a deterioration in his moral values and spiritual sensitivity. As a result of his overriding occupation with the material world and estrangement from Torah and all that is holy, the moral level of his household will decline to such an extent that even the most basic human values — modesty

and fidelity — will be seriously undermined.

This spiritual collapse will necessitate the assistance of the kohen because of his wife's suspect behavior. When the moral decline is so great that even his simple soul is appalled by the shocking decadence in his family-life, he will realize how wrong he was to distance himself from the kohanim and Torah scholars.

A Nation Gone Astray

This deplorable phenomenon may also occur on the national level. When the pursuit of material pleasures causes large sectors to cast off the Torah and its teachings, they will distance themselves from Torah scholars and deem them superfluous. They may even come to despise and ridicule them.

At this point, a plague of immorality and corruption will spread among the people. The situation will continue to deteriorate, until those individuals who still retain some spark of humanity and a feeling for the light of Torah will weep with broken hearts. They will painfully recognize that their lives have become debased and bleak by rejecting the ways of Torah. Their separation from Torah brought about such a wild, unbridled national spirit, that the nation is derided and mocked by other peoples.

They brought this affliction upon themselves, however, with their scorn for Torah scholars and contempt for all that is holy. The people, once famous for integrity and modesty, will require the services of the holy kohanim in order to repair the collapse of fidelity and trust.

(Gold from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. II, pp. 381-382.)

<https://ravkooktorah.org/naso64>

Naso: Two Types of Hero (5770)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former UK Chief Rabbi *

Last year in these studies we noted the well-known difference of opinion among the Sages about the nazirite – the individual who undertook to observe special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink wine or other intoxicants (including anything made from grapes), not to have his hair cut and not to defile himself by contact with the dead.

In relation to the biblical text, the argument turned on the fact that when the nazirite's period of self imposed restraint came to an end, he was commanded to bring a sin offering (Num. 6: 13-14). According to Nachmanides this was because he was returning to ordinary life after a time spent in special sanctity. He brought an offering for the sin of ceasing to be a nazirite.

According to the Mishnaic teacher Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar, it was for the opposite reason: he brought an offering for the sin of becoming a nazirite in the first place. He denied himself the pleasures of this world – the world God created and declared good. Rabbi Eliezer added: "From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life" (Taanit 11a; Nedarim 10a).

Clearly the argument is not merely textual. It is substantive. Specifically it is about asceticism, the life of self-denial. Almost every religion knows the phenomenon of people who, in pursuit of spiritual purity, withdraw from the world, its pleasures and temptations. They live in caves, retreats, monasteries. The Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls may have been such a movement.

In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted similar self-denial – among them the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. In retrospect it is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Hassidei Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among deeply pious, self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts would have been familiar with

Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews toward the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were movements in the first centuries of the common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were, in fact, dualisms. They held that the true God was not the creator of the universe and could not be reached within the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. The two best known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish tendencies in Christianity and Islam.

Yet none of this explains the view of Maimonides, who holds both views, positive and negative. In *Hilkhot Deot*, the *Laws of Ethical Character*, Maimonides adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer Hakappar. To be a nazirite is bad. "A person may say: 'Desire, honour and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world, therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the other extreme.' As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing . . . This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way." (*Hilkhot Deot* 3:1) Yet in the same book, the *Mishneh Torah*, he writes: "Whoever vows to God [to become a nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy . . . Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet" (*Hilkhot Nezirut* 10: 14). How does any writer in a single book adopt such contradictory positions – let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer is profound – so profound that it is hard to assimilate and digest, yet it remains one of the most insightful ideas ever formulated in ethics.

According to Maimonides, there is not one model of the virtuous life, but two. He calls them respectively the way of the saint (Hassid) and the sage (Hakham).

The saint is a person of extremes. Maimonides defines hessed as extreme behaviour — good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires (*Guide for the Perplexed III*, 52). So, for example, "If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint (hassid)" (*Hilkhot Deot* 1: 5).

The sage is a different kind of person altogether. He follows the "golden mean," the "middle way," the way of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. He or she avoids miserliness on the one hand, giving away all one has on the other, and thus becomes generous. The sage knows the twin dangers of too much and too little – excess and deficiency. He or she weighs the conflicting pressures and avoids the extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. That is what makes Maimonides so acute a thinker on this subject. He realises that you can't have both – that they are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But what about the members of the saint's own family? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's own country? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what about the rule of law, and justice? **Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. Yet you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society.** [emphasis added]

They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path. I know no one who makes this point as clearly as Maimonides – not Plato, not Aristotle, not Descartes, not Kant.

It is this deep insight that led Maimonides to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the nazirite. The nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a hassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, exemplary.

But it is not the way of the sage – and you need Sages if you seek to perfect society. The sage is not an extremist – because he or she realises that there are other people at stake. There are the members of one’s own family; the others within one’s own community; there are colleagues at work; there is a country to defend and a nation to help build. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For we are called on by God to live in the world not in escape from it; in society not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others.

Hence, while from a personal perspective the nazirite is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a “sinner” who has to bring an atonement offering.

Maimonides lived the life he preached. We know from his writings that he longed for seclusion. There were years when he worked day and night to write his Commentary to the Mishnah, and later the Mishneh Torah. Yet he also recognised his responsibilities to his family and to the community. In his famous letter to his would-be translator Ibn Tibbon, he gives him an account of his typical day and week – in which he had to carry a double burden as a world-renowned physician and an internationally sought halakhist and sage. He worked to exhaustion; there were times when he was almost too busy to study from one week to the next. Maimonides was a sage who longed to be a saint – but knew he could not be, if he was to honour his responsibilities to his people. That seems to me a profound and moving judgment – and one that speaks to us today.

Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I normally select an earlier Devar. Footnotes have not been preserved for this Dvar Torah.

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/naso/two-types-of-hero/>

Shouldering the Burden: Why Carting the Ark of the Covenant Led to Disaster

By Yossi Ives * © Chabad 2026

When it came to transporting the Mishkan – the portable tabernacle in the desert – the Torah¹ divided the task between the three families of the Tribe of Levi. The family of Kehat was assigned the duty of carrying the most sacred vessels, and specifically instructed to “carry it on their shoulders.”² They were responsible for transporting the Holy Ark, the Menorah, the table for the showbread, and the golden incense altar. The other two families – Gershon and Merari – were provided with wagons to carry the collapsible structure and all the other sacred vessels.

When Maimonides sets out the arrangement for transporting the tabernacle in his monumental code, the Mishneh Torah, he describes it as follows:

When the ark is transported from place to place, it should not be transported on an animal or on a wagon. Instead, it is a mitzvah for it to be carried on one’s shoulders. Since David forgot and had it transported on a wagon, there was an outbreak [of Divine anger] against Uzzah. Rather, it is a mitzvah to carry it on shoulders, as it states: “For the holy task is their obligation. They shall carry it on their shoulders.”

Many aspects of this segment are difficult to understand. Most astonishing is that Maimonides exclusively refers to the Ark being carried on the shoulders, when the Torah³ states that a range of other items were also to be transported by the Kehat family. Clearly, those other items were also carried by shoulder, as the Kehatites were given no wagons. Why does Maimonides only mention that the Ark was hauled by shoulder and make no mention of any of the other vessels? As several prominent commentators⁴ have noted, this is a striking omission.

Some⁵ suggest that Maimonides understands that the other vessels were only transported on shoulders while the Israelites were in the desert, and that only the Ark had to be permanently transported by shoulder (even once they crossed into the

Land of Israel). The problem is that Maimonides makes no such distinction in his text.

Another problem is that Maimonides doesn't identify who was supposed to carry the Ark. Was it the family of Kehat, as per above? Or was it the Kohanim (priests), as Maimonides⁶ suggests elsewhere?⁷

The Rebbe shows that the issues melt away once we properly understand Maimonides' intention.

Uzzah's Mistake

The Rebbe begins by pointing to the curious reference Maimonides makes to Uzzah. Who was he and why is he relevant here?

In II Samuel 6:1-7 we read an account of the Philistines seizing the Ark during a battle. When its presence brought calamity upon them, the Philistines released the Ark. It was eventually loaded onto a new wagon and brought to King David. Along the way, the oxen drawing the cart stumbled, and a man named Uzzah reached out to steady the Holy Ark, which appeared to be about to fall. At that moment, Uzzah was struck dead.

(Commentaries⁸ explain that G d showed His displeasure by having the oxen stumble so that the Ark would be removed from the wagon, but Uzza intervened to keep it there. So although it was King David who made the initial mistake of putting the Ark on the wagon, it was Uzza who tried to ensure that it stayed there, undermining the will of the Almighty.)

Maimonides asserts that the Almighty was displeased that the Ark was being transported by wagon, but why does he attribute Uzzah's death to this error rather than the more obvious reason that they had violated the Biblical mandate to carry the Ark on their shoulders?

Why does Maimonides divide his statement into two sections, one that the Ark "should not be transported on an animal or on a wagon," for which he brings proof from what happened to Uzzah, and second that there is an obligation to "carry it on their shoulders," for which he brings the Biblical verse?

Location, Location, Location

The Rebbe explains that in Maimonides' view, aside from the obligation to carry the Ark on the shoulder, there is a more fundamental prohibition against moving the Ark on a wagon (or any means of transport, for that matter).

Unlike any other vessel in the Tabernacle, the Ark was designed to be situated in a very specific location. Placed anywhere else, it loses its sacred status. [emphasis added]

The Ark's location when stationary was in the Holy of Holies, the Tabernacle's inner sanctum. When being transported, that location changed to the shoulders of its designated carriers. When the Ark was placed on the wagon by Uzzah, this diminished the Ark's power in a significant way. Uzza was struck down, Maimonides suggests, because putting the Ark onto a wagon was a uniquely serious affront. Simple failure to carry the Ark in the proper way would not have led to such tragic results.

The Other Vessels

Now we understand why the obligation to carry on the shoulders ceased for all the other vessels once they were no longer sojourning in the desert, but remained for the Ark. And that is why Maimonides focuses on the Ark and omits mention of the other vessels. At the time Maimonides wrote his code, a couple of thousand years had passed since the Tabernacle had been transported. Thus, there was no need to address the transport arrangements that had long been obsolete. He only references the Ark, because how it is carried is intrinsic to its essence.

Nor does Maimonides speak about who transported the Ark, as that also no longer had any practical relevance.

A clear lesson for us today emerges from this ancient law. The Ark contained the Ten Commandments and the Torah scroll. Torah needs to have its designated place, as it is our anchor and lodestar. Torah should not only be treated with reverence and respect, it must also be recognized as the one true fixed feature in our lives. Torah must never be treated as a piece of furniture that can be transported by wagon, but as a precious child that we carry on our person.

Adapted from *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 28, Parshat Naso III.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Numbers 7:2-9.
2. Numbers 7:9.
3. Numbers 4:7-15.
4. *Minchat Chinuch* 379, *Ohr Hatorah* Naso p. 256.
5. R' Avraham, son of Maimonides in *Maase Nissim* chapter 2.
6. *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandment 34.
7. Nachmanides *ibid* (and many others) disagrees, and insists that the Levite family of Kehat remained tasked with carrying the Ark.
8. Mahari Kra, II Samuel 6:6.å

* Rabbi of Cong. Ahavas Yisrael of Pomona, N.Y.; founder and Chief Executive of Tag International Development, a charitable organization that focuses on sharing Israeli expertise with developing countries.

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/5128229/jewish/Shouldering-the-Burden-Why-Carting-the-Ark-of-the-Covenant-Led-to-Disaster.htm

Naso: Aligning Our Thoughts and Actions

By Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky *

The tally of the clan of Gershon, by their families and according to their fathers' houses. (Num. 4:38)

The clan of Kehat carried the Ark, which housed the Torah. The clans of Gershon and Merari, in contrast, carried the Tabernacle itself, which alludes to the performance of G-d's commandments, which transform the world into G-d's "Tabernacle," or home.

The fact that the Torah places the census of the clan of Gershon at the beginning of a parsha, Naso, highlights the advantage of action over study. Torah study and the concrete performance of G-d's commandments are each superior in different ways: Torah study unites us consciously with G-d, but primarily affects our intellect. In contrast, performing the commandments unites us with G-d less obviously, but this union pervades the physical body.

Recording the command to take the census of the clan of Kehat first – at the end of the preceding parashah, Bemidbar – emphasizes the superiority of Torah study; having the command to take the census of the clan of Gershon introduce parshat Naso emphasizes the superiority of performing the commandments.

--From Kehot's *Daily Wisdom* Vol. 3

* Insights by **the Lubavitcher Rebbe** on the weekly parashat from Chabad's *Daily Wisdom* 3 by Rabbi Moshe Wisnefsky.

Gut Shabbos,

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Volume 32, Issue 31

Shabbat Parashat Naso

5786 B"H

Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

This week's sedra begins with a continuation of the census begun in last week's – the act that gives the entire book its English name: the book of "Numbers." Two things, though, are puzzling. The first is the very act of numbering the people. Jewish tradition conveys two quite different – apparently contradictory – attitudes toward the taking of a census.

Rashi notes that this is not the first time the people had been counted. Their number ("about six hundred thousand men on foot, not including women and children") had already been given as they prepared to leave Egypt (Ex. 12:37). A more precise calculation had been made when the adult males each gave a half shekel toward the building of the Sanctuary (yielding a total of 603,550; Ex. 38:26). Now a third count was taking place. Why the repeated calculations?

Rashi's answer is simple and moving: Because they (the children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again. Rashi on Bamidbar 1:1

For Rashi, the counting of the people was an act of Divine love. Yet this is not the impression we receive elsewhere. To the contrary, the Torah sees the taking of a census as profoundly dangerous: Then the Lord said to Moshe, "When you take the census of the Israelites, as you count, each must give ransom for his life to the Lord, so that no plague strikes them when you count them. Ex. 30:11-12

Centuries later, when King David counted the people, there was a moment of Divine anger, during which 70,000 died. It seems hard to reconcile the idea of counting as an act of love with the fact that counting involves great risk.

The second source of perplexity is the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *naso/se'u et rosh*, literally, "lift the head." There are many verbs available in classical Hebrew to indicate the act of counting: *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispor*, *lachshov*. Why, in the books of Exodus and Numbers, does the Torah resort to

the strange circumlocution, "lift the heads" of the Israelites?

To understand the revolution the Hebrew Bible brought to the world, we have first to enter imaginatively into the consequences for humanity of the birth of civilisation. In the earliest hunter-gatherer societies, people lived together in small groups. There were, as yet, no cities, no states, no large concentrations of population. The Torah attributes the building of the first city to Cain.[1]

Cities emerged with the birth of agriculture – in the fertile alluvial plain in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates, and the well-irrigated Nile delta.

Twice in the book of Genesis the Torah sketches a portrait of urban culture: first, the Tower of Babel, second, the Egypt to which Joseph is brought as a slave. They are both highly critical accounts. In Babel, human life was cheap (when the Tower was being built, said the Sages, if a person fell and died, no one noticed. If a brick fell, they wept). In Egypt, entire populations – among them, eventually, the children of Israel – could be pressed into service as a labour force to build pyramids, temples and monuments, many of which still stand today.

The birth of agriculture and the growth of towns had huge social implications. For the first time, surplus wealth was possible and could be stored in the form of money (initially, precious metals such as silver and gold). So too, as populations expanded and the division of labour became more elaborate, social stratification began. Inequality – deep, pervasive, and systemic – became one of the universal features of the earliest societies. At the top was the king, emperor, or pharaoh, seen as no less than a god or child of the gods, who held a massive concentration of power. Below him or her were the various ranks of privilege: court circles, military chiefs, administrators and priests. The mass of the people – poor, illiterate, expendable – was significant, whether as an army or a construction force, as a mass, by sheer weight of numbers. Hence the significance of censuses in the ancient world (and in this respect, little has changed from then to now). Size meant strength, military or economic. Population counts gave rulers information about the size of the army they could muster, or of the income they could raise by taxation.

The religion of Israel is a sustained protest against this view – military, political, and economic – of the human situation. At this distance in time, it is hard fully to appreciate the breathtaking novelty, the transformative potential, of the cluster of ideas generated by a single revelation – that the human person as such, man or woman, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, is the image of God and therefore of non-negotiable, unquantifiable value. We are each equally in the image of God, therefore we stand equal in the presence of God. Much of Torah, Jewish history, and the development of Western civilisation is about the slow translation of this idea into institutions, social structures, and ethical codes.

It should now be clear why the taking of a census is fraught with spiritual risk. The numbering of a people is the most potent symbol of humankind-in-the-mass, of a society in which the individual is not valued in and for him- or herself but as part of a totality whose power lies in numbers. That is precisely what Israel is not. The God of Israel, who is the God of all humankind, sets His special love on a people whose strength has nothing to do with numbers, a people that never sets itself to become an empire, that is never commanded to wage holy war in order to convert populations, that was and remains tiny in both absolute terms and relative to the empires with which it was and is surrounded, standing as it does at the vulnerable crossroad between three continents.

Both questions with which we began are now answered. There is a difference between a human census and one commanded by God. David's was a human census. As Israel's second king, he had laid the foundations of a nation. He had waged successful wars, united the tribes, and established Jerusalem as his capital. Shortly after his death, Israel reached its zenith as a power in the Middle East. Under Solomon, through strategic alliances, it became a centre of trade and scholarship. The Temple was built. It must have seemed at the time as if, after many centuries of wandering and war, Israel had become a power to rival any other. It was a short-lived, cruelly-shattered illusion. Almost immediately after

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Solomon's reign, the kingdom split in two, and from then on its this-worldly fate was sealed. A history of defeats, exiles and destructions began, which has no parallel in the annals of any other nation. The Hebrew Bible is not wrong in seeing the starting-point of this decline in the moment at which David acted like any other king and ordered a census of the people.

A Divine census is utterly different. It has nothing to do with strength-in-numbers. It has to do, instead, with conveying to every member of the nation that he or she counts; that every person, family, household is held precious by God; that distinctions between great and small, ruler and ruled, leader and led, are irrelevant; that we are each God's image and the object of His love. A Divine census is, as Rashi says, a gesture of endearment. That is why it cannot be described by the usual verbs of counting — *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispor*, *lachshov*. Only the phrase *naso/se'u et rosh*, "lift the head", does justice to this kind of enumeration, in which those entrusted with the task are commanded to "lift the head" of those they count, making every individual stand tall in the knowledge that they are loved, cherished, held special by God, and not merely a number, a cipher, among the thousands and millions.

There is a wonderful verse in Psalm 147 which we say every morning in our prayers: "He counts the number of the stars and calls them each by name." A name is a marker of uniqueness. Collective nouns group things together; proper names distinguish them as individuals. Only what we value, do we name (One of the most chilling acts of dehumanisation in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany was that those who entered were never addressed by their names. Instead they were given, inscribed on their skin, a number).

God gives even the stars their names, all the more so human beings – on whom He has set His image. God counts to signal to us that each of us counts, for what we are as individuals, not en masse. He "lifts our head" in the most profound way known to humankind, by assuring each of us of His special, enduring, unquantifiable love.

That is the nature of the census in the book of Numbers. As the Israelites prepared to become a society with the Sanctuary - visible home of the Divine Presence - at its centre, they had to be reminded that they were to become the pioneers of a new and revolutionary social order, whose most famous definition was given by the Prophet Zechariah as the Israelites prepared to rebuild the ruined Temple: "Not by might, nor by strength, but by My spirit, says the Lord." Zechariah 4:6
[1] See Gen. 4:17.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

The "Magic" of the Bitter Waters

"And in the hand of the kohen shall be the bitter waters that bring about the curse."
(Numbers 5:18)

One of the strangest passages in the Bible is the law of the woman suspected of adultery which is recorded in this biblical portion. The text tells us that if a woman is suspected by her husband of having an affair with another man, and he warns her before two valid witnesses not to be alone in a secluded place with that particular individual, and nevertheless the woman is seen to have sequestered herself privately with that person, the woman becomes subject to an eerie sort of "trial" in order to establish her innocence.

The husband must bring his wife to the kohen together with an offering of barley flour. The kohen then takes sacred water mixed with earth from the floor of the Sanctuary and dissolves within this mixture a parchment scroll inscribed with the following curses which he recites to the shamed wife: "May the Lord render you as a curse and as an oath amidst your people when the Lord causes your thigh to collapse and your stomach to distend. These waters which bring about a curse shall enter your insides to cause your stomach to distend and your thigh to collapse" (Numbers 5:21–22).

The accused woman responds "Amen, amen," after which she is given the bitter waters to drink. The kohen then takes the meal offering from the hand of the woman, waves it before God, and offers it up on the altar. The woman drinks the waters. If no symptoms of the curses occur, the woman is considered innocent and the couple can resume their marital relationship in peace (Numbers 4:11–31).

What is the significance of this entire procedure? It sounds almost like voodoo, or some sort of black magic, a kind of supernatural activity of the occult which does not appear to be in consonance with biblical rationality.

To be sure, this entire "trial by bitter waters" only lasted until the end of the First Temple period (70 CE). By the time of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, the Talmudic sages insisted that the test was no longer efficacious because an increasing number of men were having extramarital affairs (Yerushalmi Sota 1:4). Their prooftext is the closing verse of this biblical chapter (Numbers 5:31) which reads, "The man shall be innocent of iniquity, then that woman shall bear her iniquity." The sages take this to mean that it is only when the man is innocent of sexual dalliance that we can condemn the woman for her sexual

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immorality. But even given that limitation, the entire procedure of the bitter waters smacks of barbaric primitivism which jars modern sensibilities!

An incident occurred in Efrat about a decade ago which gave me an insight into the meaning of this ritual. Due to the positive relationships we enjoy with the local Arab villages adjoining Efrat, I am often called upon to adjudicate disputes between Palestinians and Israelis, and sometimes even between Palestinians and Palestinians. In one particular instance, two Palestinian cousins from two separate Palestinian villages were suspected of having a sexual relationship. The modesty codes are quite strict within the Muslim Palestinian community, and so the family of the young woman was incensed at the rumors of her breach of morality; her brothers even spoke of killing the young woman for dishonoring her family. The family of the young man became terrified, convinced that an "honor" killing was likely to take place (as happens not infrequently in the Middle East). The couple convinced the families to come to me for arbitration and to abide by any ruling I would hand down. I interviewed the two cousins both separately and together, listened to the testimonies of witnesses, who had seen unseemly behavior but had not seen any actual sexual activity. Based on this lack of real evidence, I ruled that there was no legitimate proof that cohabitation had taken place. I insisted however that the two get married, which they did with alacrity. I even bestowed a blessing upon their union....

The Bible emerged from the matrix of the Middle East, where jealousy is rampant and women are often considered the chattel of their husbands. A jealous husband can easily persuade himself to harm the wife whom he suspects of adultery. I therefore believe that this trial of the bitter waters provided a marvelous psychological ploy to protect the women from a husband's jealous wrath. To the best of my knowledge, there is no record in the Talmud of a woman whose thighs actually collapsed or whose stomach became distended after drinking the bitter waters; hence, the unscathed woman would generally be declared innocent and her husband would take her back. And if her fear of the consequences resulted in a confession of guilt, then the marriage deserved to be terminated with the payment of a fine, to be made by the adulterous woman. In any case, a murder by a jealous husband or on behalf of family honor would always be avoided. Hence the "trial of the bitter waters" served as marvelous protection for the woman in a society only too ready to lay the blame upon her for a suspected act of immorality.

A Personal Postscript - I'd like to share a personal story. Some readers may already

know from my writings in the past that I was not born into an observant family. Because the yeshiva in my neighborhood was considered far more academically challenging than the local public school, my parents consented to my grandmother's urging that I receive a day school education. But living in a non-observant home required certain balancing skills. On Friday nights I would join my grandmother for the Shabbat meal, and every Shabbat lunch I was invited to the home of the principal of our yeshiva, Rabbi Menahem Manes Mandel, who was a major religious influence in my life.

After returning to my neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, I would spend a quiet hour with my mother, a kind of quality time when we would both talk about what was closest to us. At that time my mother smoked three cigarettes a day, and on Saturdays she would save her afternoon cigarette for her relaxed talk with me. The latter part of the afternoon I would spend with Saul Berman, the son of a prominent community rabbi and my special "Shabbos" friend.

But one particular Shabbat, while my mother and I were busy talking, there was a knock on the front door. When my mother opened the door and saw it was my Shabbos friend, she was clearly a bit discombobulated; she hid the cigarette she was holding behind her back – and I jumped to explain that I would meet him at his home in about thirty minutes.

When my mother came back into the living room, still holding the cigarette, she looked at me and said rather sadly, "I think God made a mistake by putting you and me together. You're religious, and every day becoming even more religious. I'm afraid that despite my best efforts, you'll end up an Orthodox rabbi. Why should God have given me a son like you? He should have put you with my religious parents instead of with me!"

But then my clever mother made an about-face. "On second thought," she said, "I think I understand why God did what He did. Perhaps He made me your mother so that you would learn to love everyone, even people who aren't necessarily observant." In retrospect, that attitude more than any other – which I truly learned from my mother – has been a guiding principle of my life.

The Person in the Parsha
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb
Defining Spiritual Excellence

Last year, I came across an interesting biography of Maimonides (Rambam). It is entitled *Maimonides: His Life and World*, and the author's name is Joel Kraemer.

I learned many facts about Rambam's life, relationships, travels, political involvements, and far-reaching leadership activities.

I credit the author for giving me an appreciation of Rambam's struggle to surmount extreme challenges in a wide variety of circumstances.

But somehow, my own assessment of Rambam's greatness is based upon another aspect of his career.

I refer to the superb quality of his written works. His authoritativeness is astounding, his decisiveness is convincing, and his clarity is exemplary.

What is most fascinating to me is that despite all these talents, many Talmud scholars, especially in Yeshiva circles, find passages in his works that seem to contradict each other. Much ink has been spilled in efforts to reconcile these contradictions.

It is one of those alleged contradictions that I propose to address in the next several paragraphs.

I must begin with a passage in this week's Torah portion, Naso (Numbers 6:1-21). The gist of these verses reads as follows: "... When a man or woman takes a special vow, the vow of a nazir, to separate him or herself to the Lord, he must separate from wine and strong drink... nor may he drink any juice made with grapes, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. No razor shall touch his head... He must let the locks of his hair grow long. He must not come near a dead body, even for his father or mother or brother or sister... He is holy to the Lord."

This is the role of a nazir, an individual who is moved to commit himself to these excessive restrictions. The Talmud records differences of opinion as to whether such a commitment is noble and praiseworthy, or uncalled for and even sinful.

Rambam unequivocally, and vehemently, sides with the latter view. He writes: "Lest one think that since envy, lust, pride and similar faults are all paths to evil, and drive one out of this world, I will remove myself to the opposite extreme to the extent that I will neither eat meat nor drink wine, I will remain celibate, I will not dwell in a luxurious abode, I will not wear fine clothing but rather sackcloth and coarse wool, and similar abstentions, as is the custom of Christian clergy; let him know that this ascetism is itself the path to evil and is prohibited. One who goes astray in this manner is called a sinner!" (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Deot 3:1).

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There are those who find a source in Rambam's works that seem to contradict the above forceful statement. They point to this passage: "A person who takes vows to improve himself and control his bad habits is correct and praiseworthy. For example, if he tends toward gluttony and vows to avoid meat for a year or two, or one who drinks excessively and commits himself to stay away from wine for a while, or refrain from inebriating beverages forever... this kind of self-discipline is akin to divine worship and is commendable..." (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Vows 13:23).

I ask you, dear reader, whether you believe that these two lucid and powerful selections are contradictory to each other. Personally, I think not! The motivations of the two individuals described by Rambam are very different from each other. The subject of the former passage is motivated by a search for a spiritual experience. Rambam advises him that ascetism and self-torture are not the way to divine worship and certainly do not bring one closer to the Almighty.

On the other hand, the subjects of the second passage are a man or woman who are struggling trying to heal themselves physically and mentally. They are trying to overcome an addiction, an unhealthy habit. Such a vow, if necessary to achieve self-betterment, is a sign of health and deserves our admiration.

I would like to conclude with a poem by Yosef Tzvi Rimon, the grandfather of a very prominent contemporary rabbi and esteemed colleague of mine who bears his grandfather's name. I am indebted to a memorable leader of the Religious Zionist movement and author of *A Lille Bit of Light (Me'at Min Ha'Or)*, the late Hanan Porat, for highlighting this poem in his essay on this week's Torah reading.

The poem reads, in the Hebrew original:

פאר ראשי, ואמר לאלוהי:
 לא אבוא עוד בהרים,
 לא אעלה על שיאיהם
 בקש הדרך שמה.

מערות-סתרים לא אחקר
 בקש את פעמך,
 כי שפכת הוד גם על שדות קרובים,
 על כל עץ פורח.
 אין הוד בלי הודך.

עד מה אשכן בהרים,
 אגור בציה-
 ואתה חמדת כל שביל,
 ועל כל שביל אתה...!

In my admittedly inadequate translation, the poem reads:

I will shear the long hair of my crown,

So beautiful upon my head.
I will say instead
to my God:

I will no longer wander among mountains,
Nor climb up to their peaks
To seek Your echoes there.
I will not search hidden caves

To seek Your footsteps,
For You have poured Your glory upon nearby
fields,
Upon every blossoming tree.
There is no glory without Your glory.

Until when must I dwell in the hills,
Or reside in the wilderness—
For You cherish all paths equally,
And upon all paths are You to be found.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Who's on First? No One – They Are All Riding a Merry-Go-Round!

Parshas Naso contains Birkas Kohanim (the Priestly Blessing), immediately followed by the identical korbonos (sacrificial offerings) that each of the twelve nesi'im (tribal princes) brought on consecutive days during the Chanukas Hamizbayach (inauguration period of the altar / the Mishkan dedication).

What is the connection between these two Torah parshios? Why does the Torah place Birkas Kohanim right before the parsha of korbanos shel hanesi'im (the princes' offerings)? Furthermore, we can specifically ask about the connection between korbanos shel hanesi'im and the very last pasuk of Birkas Kohanim, immediately preceding the korbanos shel hanesi'im, namely the pasuk "v'yasem lecha shalom" (and establish peace for you) (Bamidbar 6:26). What do the korbanos of the nesi'im have to do with shalom?

In addition, why are there certain differences among the otherwise identical korbonos that the nesi'im brought? Every nasi brought exactly the same korban, and yet the Torah spells out the exact same details of the offerings twelve times. When I was a little boy, I used to think that this is the hardest parsha to have as your Bar Mitzvah parsha because, with 176 pesukim, it is the longest parsha to lein! However, when I discovered what is in the parsha, I realized that it is not really so hard to lein because we repeat the same six pesukim twelve times!

Nonetheless, there are slight differences. One difference is that while the Torah identifies each of the final eleven nesi'im as "nasi" (the prince of his specific tribe), by the first nasi (Nachshon ben Aminadav of Shevet Yehudah), the pasuk does not mention that he was the nasi. Another difference is that by Shevet

Yehuda, the pasuk begins v'korbano k'a'ras kesef achas (And his offering was one silver bowl...). Ironically, the conjunctive vov does not appear where we might expect it by princes #2-12 (connecting one nasi's korban to the next), but rather only by the first nasi from Shevet Yehudah, where we would least expect it (connecting the entire topic of korbanos shel hanesi'im to Birkas Kohanim). Why would that be?

There is a beautiful Kli Yakar on this pasuk, which says that the "vov" at the beginning of the korban of the first nasi is indicative of a connection between korbanos shel hanesi'im and the bracha (blessing) of shalom, which appears at the end of Birkas Kohanim, for if there is no peace, there is nothing.

The last Mishna in Shas (at the end of Tractate Uktzin) says that the Ribbono Shel Olam did not find a more appropriate receptacle to hold bracha for the world than shalom. The Medrash says that shalom is so critical that even the deceased need shalom, as it is written "And you will come to your fathers in shalom." This does not mean that the deceased fight, but rather, if those who are still living fight with one another then the deceased have no peace either. Unfortunately, such stories occur on a daily basis. Someone dies, there is a contested will, the children are not happy with the division and families get into the most bitter of arguments. The Medrash is saying that if these problems of the living are not solved, even the dead will have no peace.

Then the Kli Yakar writes that all the other brachos of Birkas Kohanim are lacking until the bracha of shalom at the end, and then, after Birkas Kohanim concludes with shalom, the Torah immediately begins another parsha, which also involves shalom (that of the korbonos hanesi'im). That is why the latter section is connected to the prior section with the connective vov.

However, what is the connection between the korbonos hanesi'im and the idea of shalom? The connection is that it was not so obvious which nasi should be the first one to offer his korbonos. The Medrash says that Reuven said "I should go first because I am the bechor." However, the Ribono shel Olam told Reuven that he would not go first because Yehuda was the melech (king) and the melech needs to go first. Reuven then said "Okay, so I will go second." Again, the Ribono shel Olam told him "No. Yissacher comes after Yehuda because he is the shevet of limud haTorah (Torah learning). Reuven was then willing to settle for third place but again he was told that Zevulun merited the third spot, because he supports Yissacher.

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So, it was not so simple. As a matter of fact, the Medrash says that the twelve shevatim correspond with the twelve mazalos (constellations). The mazalos don't stay in the same Heavenly position. They rotate around and around. Chazal say that even though Yehuda brought the first korban, he wasn't really first because the rotation of shevatim was like a merry-go-round. When a merry-go-round is rotating, there is no first and there is no second. Each horse in the merry-go-round moves in a circular movement, constantly changing position, just like the heavenly constellations.

The Medrash is saying that this is how they solved the jealousy problem. Even though Nachshon Ben Aminadav went first, he was only first temporarily. That is why, says the Kli Yakar, Yehudah's korban begins with the conjunctive vov "v'korbano" (And his korban). Why 'And'? His was the first korban! The answer is that the 'and' does join his korban to the next nasi's korban and then to the next one because they were all going around. And that is also why even though it says nasi this shevet and nasi that shevet, by Nachshon ben Aminadav, it does not call him nasi Yehudah. This is because even though someone had to be 'first' but in the end, he wasn't really first, because they were all rotating. That is the "semichus haparshiyos" between "v'yasem lecha shalom" and the parsha of hakravas hakorbonos. If you don't have shalom, you don't have anything.

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Our understanding of one tiny word will provide us with the key to giving a good blessing.

In Parashat Nasso, Hashem presents us with the words of the priestly blessing, so well known: "Yevarechecha Hashem Veyishmerecha," – "may the Lord bless you and keep you," and so on. But these words are prefaced with the statement, "Ko tevarchu et B'nei Yisrael", "–in this way, you must bless the people." But we're not told what the meaning of the word "Ko" – "in this way," actually is.

So let me present you with three beautiful Peirushim. The first is from the book Me'am Loez. He says, if you have a look at the passage immediately before this, it's all about the importance of the Nazarite not drinking wine and never becoming intoxicated. And therefore, Me'am Loez says, just like the Nazarite: "KO," – "in this way," means: without the necessity to take artificial stimulants, without becoming intoxicated. The Kohen just needs to allow the words to flow genuinely from his heart. That is how you give a blessing.

A very different peirush Is given by the Rambam. He says, “in this way, you must bless,” means, with these exact words. What happens if a Kohen gets carried away and he wants to double the number of words? Or double the number of blessings? Can he enhance the prayer in this way? No, says the Rambam. This is the set formula – whether you are blessing one person or many people. Whether it is a man or a woman. Whoever it is, under whatever circumstances – the formula remains the same.

And then there’s a beautiful third peirush I want to share with you. It was given by the Maggid of Mezrich. And he says, “Ko tevarchu,” – “in this way you must bless,” means: “ke’mo she’heim,” – “according to the way that they are.” He says that when you are blessing somebody, you must accept the person for who she or he actually is. Which means that to give a good blessing, you need to love other people. You need to empathise with them. You need to be accepting of them. Indeed, this is the reason why the Kohen, before blessing the people, says, “levarech at amo Yisrael, be’ahava,” – “thank you God for giving me this precept to bless the people of Israel, be’ahava” – with love. Without true love, you cannot give a genuine blessing.

So, who are the best people to give blessings to others? It’s those who really love others.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

The Priestly Blessing – The Connecting Thread - Tamar Herbst

In our community, we often host soldiers from the Nativ program who are in the process of conversion. One recent Shabbat, after the prayer service, one of the female soldiers approached me and asked, “Why do we lower our eyes when the Kohanim ascend to bless the congregation?”

The questions of those who do not take traditions for granted can often catch us off guard. I had never asked myself that question. I told her it was an interesting one—and that I didn’t know the answer. Later, at home, I decided to look into it.

The Kohanim bless the people of Israel and channel abundance from the heavenly realms into our world. But what is the true meaning of this blessing that we receive through the mouths of the Kohanim? What role do they play in the relationship between us and the Almighty?

In this week’s Torah portion, Aharon and the Kohanim are commanded to bless the people of Israel. I opened *Matnat Chelko*, the book written by my grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Halevi Filber, may he live and be well, on Parashat Naso, where he writes the following:

The ideal state for a person is to live by [the verses]: “I have set the Lord always before me” and “In all your ways know Him”—which means, to be directly connected to God, without intermediaries. As the prophet Yirmiyahu describes, “[...] for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” This will be the reality in the end of days. But until that time, a person cannot elevate himself solely by his own strength—he must rely on those greater than he is. That was the role of the Kohanim. [...]

If so, does this mean a person needs a Kohen in order to connect to the Creator of the world? That on one’s own, one cannot reach a level close to God?

My grandfather continues:

At the same time, Rav Kook explains in his book *Orot* [p. 54] that the Kehuna should not be seen as a form of mediation—an intermediary between man and God. Rather, the Kehuna is “like a fitting clasp,” the thread that connects two pieces of fabric together and ensures that the connection between them remains intact. The Kohanim help the members of the nation of Israel to stay connected to their Father in Heaven.

Rav Kook further explains that the need to draw closer to God through an external force arises because “when a person draws near to God, it is not through his baser inclinations or his lower tendencies, but through the highest part of himself—and it is this higher aspect that pulls the rest of his being toward the radiant, Divine life.” [...]

The Kehuna does not exist to replace man or stand in his place, but to assist him in drawing closer to God through his own strengths and abilities.

In the end of days, a person will no longer need any form of mediation in order to be connected to God, as the prophet Yirmiyahu foretells. But until then, the role of the Kohanim is to serve as a link—not a channel, not a conduit. The connection between the simple Jew and God is direct. Despite all his flaws, a person is connected to God at every moment, in every place, and at every stage. Even in our most straightforward blessings, we address God in the second person—Baruch Atah—as one who speaks to another face-to-face.

The role of the Kohanim is to be that connecting thread which ensures that the two edges of the fabric remain in contact. To guard and sustain the bond.

Likutei Divrei Torah

Ashreinu—how fortunate we are. May we merit to see the light of God and the complete redemption, especially in these days—a redemption for the entire people of Israel, in wholeness and in unity.

Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

Rabbi Daniel Stein - Unrealistic Goals

Regardless of how the calendar falls out, the shortest weekly keriyas HaTorah of the entire year always coincides with Shabbos Shuva, the Shabbos in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. If there is a Shabbos in between Yom Kippur and Sukkos, then Parshas Vayeilech, the shortest single parsha consisting of thirty pesukim, is read on Shabbos Shuva. If there isn’t a Shabbos in between Yom Kippur and Sukkos, then Parshas Vayeilech is combined with Parshas Nitzavim, totaling seventy pesukim, and Parshas Haazinu, which contains fifty-two pesukim is read on Shabbos Shuva. (Only Parshas Vezos Habracha, which is read on Simchas Torah, and not on a Shabbos, has less pesukim). Rav Avraham Pam suggests that this phenomenon is deliberate, timely, and instructive. Even on Shabbos Shuva, while in the throes of cheshbon hanefesh and sincere teshuvah, it is critical to maintain modest aspirations and sensible expectations. Lasting and comprehensive change happens not in giant leaps or large and impressive undertakings but gradually, small parsha by small parsha, week after week, year after year, as the Talmudic saying goes “if you grasped too much, you did not grasp anything; if you grasped a bit, you grasped something” (*Kiddushin* 17a). To demonstrate the accumulated value of incremental accomplishments even the haftarah for Shabbos Shuva is taken from the Twelve Minor Prophets, a collection of the shortest seforim in Tanach.

Conversely, Parshas Naso, the longest single parsha in the Torah, is always read on the Shabbos following Shavuot, which the Chiddushei Harim suggests is also calculated. After the day of kabbalas HaTorah on Shavuot it is critical to set out with big plans and ambitious goals. In the realm of physical bounty and monetary possessions, the Gemara (*Berachos* 50a) cautions the supplicant to be humble and restrained in his requests before Hashem. However, as it relates to Torah learning it is advisable to be bold and assertive, as the pasuk states “Open your mouth wide and I will fill it” (*Tehillim* 81:11). Rav Ahron Kotler (*Mishnas Rebbi Ahron*, Volume 1) derives from here that even audacious and implausible aspirations in Torah will be rewarded with access to unrealized powers and potential that pull the desired objective within reach. Similarly, Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Iggros Moshe*, Volume 8 Introduction) writes, “a person is forbidden to

aspire to greatness in any matter beyond what his rank and capabilities allow, except for greatness in Torah, for which the aspiration should be limitless”.

There are one hundred and seventy-six pesukim in Parshas Naso, the longest parsha in the Torah; one hundred and seventy-six pesukim in Tehillim Chapter 119, the longest chapter in Tanach; and one hundred and seventy-six dapim in Bava Basra, the longest masechta in the Talmud Bavli. Rav Moshe Wolfson (Emunas Itacha) deconstructs the significance of the number one hundred and seventy-six. Chazal in numerous places (Sanhedrin 104a, Medrash Tehillim 7, 4) emphasize the role of the twenty-two letters of the aleph beis in the creation of the world and their central role as the building blocks of Talmud Torah. Hence, the census of Shevet Levi in Parshas Bamidbar equaled 22,000, for their primary task was to learn and teach Torah which is comprised of twenty-two letters. According to the Maharal (Ner Mitzvah Chapter 2) the number seven represents the natural world, which was created in the seventh month over the course of seven days, and wherein there are seven continents, seven seas, and seventy nations, while the number eight corresponds to that which supersedes nature. For this reason, Chanukkah, which commemorates the miracle of a small flask of oil burning beyond its natural limits, lasts for eight days. Perhaps it is not coincidental either that the lemniscate (∞), or lazy eight, is the universal symbol for infinity since it too defies comprehension and definition. One hundred and seventy-six is the product of eight times twenty-two and signifies the maximum threshold of Torah learning, pushing the boundaries of possibility into new and uncharted territory.

On the heels of Shavuot, the custom is to read Parshas Naso and its one hundred and seventy-six pesukim as an expression of the insatiable drive to learn Torah, even to a degree that seems unattainable and grandiose, which must invigorate us at this time. Devising and embarking upon new Torah projects, even when they appear fantastic and beyond our capabilities, is a fundamentally healthy and productive endeavor. When the potential gerim approached Hillel the Elder (Shabbos 31a) and conveyed a desire to become the kohel gadol or to learn all of Torah in one sitting and on one foot, Hillel indulged them. Hillel was confident that over time they would normalize, and he didn't feel obliged to temper their expectations, burst their bubble, or provide a cold dose of reality. He let them dream, because maybe just maybe they would exceed all expectations, and even if not, he knew that this was all part of the process. "Do not touch My anointed ones" (Divrei Hayamim 1:16:22), warns against interfering with the study of

literal schoolchildren whose learning is precious and essential to the functioning of the world (Shabbos 119b), but it also applies to the immature unrealistic side in every growing person. As we leave the time of kabbalas HaTorah, the reading of Parshas Naso should inspire us to maintain idealistic, lofty, nay unrealistic goals for ourselves, for however wide we open our mouths in Torah, Hashem assures us "I will fill it."

Mizrachi Dvar Torah

Rav Doron Perez - The Profound Paradox of Truth

In the early 20th century, Nobel Prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr made a startling discovery: light can behave as both a wave and a particle – two opposites that are both empirically true. This led him to articulate one of the most profound ideas of modern thought: that some truths are so deep, their opposites can also be true.

Remarkably, Judaism articulated this same idea thousands of years earlier. The Talmud teaches that both the rulings of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai – though often diametrically opposed – are "divrei Elokim chayim," the words of the living G-d. Not because truth is subjective, but because G-d's truth is vast enough to contain multiple perspectives.

In a world of increasing polarization – religious, political, and ideological – this insight is more necessary than ever. Parashat Naso climaxes with Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing, whose ultimate prayer is for shalom – peace. And peace is only possible when we accept that there can be more than one path within the framework of divine truth.

May we have the courage to hold fast to our convictions while making space for others to do the same.

Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm's Derashot Ledorot

A Jewish Definition of Power*

Our haftara this morning tells of the birth of one of the most colorful personalities in biblical history, Samson. He is the only biblical figure known in Jewish literature as a gibor, a hero or strongman. His power was proverbial. This would not be remarkable if Samson were only a rare specimen of brute force who could slay a lion with his bare hands, throw fear into the hearts of his enemies, smite them with the jawbone of an ass, and cause a great building to collapse by pulling down the pillars. But Samson is also known to us as one of the shoftim, the "judges." He experienced hashra'at haShekhina, divine inspiration and prophecy. And he was, from before his birth, consecrated as a Nazirite, one who for reasons of saintliness abstains from wine and the cutting

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of his hair. Does this not indicate something unusual about him? Indeed, are we not here offered a new insight into the whole concept of gibor and gevura, a new Jewish definition of power?

Our question is: What is that definition? What, in the context of the Jewish tradition, is gevura, strength or heroism? It obviously is not mere brawn. What then?

For an answer to our question, let us turn to the Kabbala, that infinitely rich mystical mine of Jewish ideas and ideals. The Kabbala understood creation not as a single event, but as a two-step process. The first step was hitpashtut, an overflowing or emanation of God, a flood of divine creativity released at the moment He determined to create the world. However, this alone is not enough. For when an infinite God creates, the creation too tends to be infinite – there is too much, it proceeds without limit, and hence a real world cannot exist. Therefore there must be a second step to counteract this ever-spreading emanation from God, and that is tzimtzum, divine restraint, God's self-limitation. Thus, God calls a halt to His own creative endeavors. He limits, as it were, his own impulse to keep on producing world upon world.

The first step, the divine effusion, His overflowing and emanation, the Kabbalists referred to the attribute of chessed, loving-kindness, and because true love knows no bounds, it always seeks to increase, grow, and intensify. However, while we call it chessed, the same idea of expansion can refer to any drive or will or passion.

The second element, that of restraint and self-limitation, is referred to by the Kabbalists as the quality of gevura, strength. Gevura thus means the ability to limit oneself, for it certainly takes moral strength to know when to stop.

This, then, is essentially the definition of power or heroism: self-restraint, self-contraction. And as with God, so with man: gevura means not brawn, not grasping for more and more, but on the contrary – self-limitation, self-control. True strength is not the passion for power, but knowing when, and when not, to use it; not the quest for bigness, but recognizing when big becomes too big; not in growth, but in retrenchment; not in dominating others, but in dominating oneself. Gevura consists of knowing when to call a halt to man's outgoing and outreaching drives.

This is, of course, true in every aspect of life. Growth is good, but not too much or too fast. The body's cells which proliferate without end are the cause of cancer. An economy which rises too quickly and without inner controls is

liable to collapse in the long run. A child who grows but grows without limits is actually sick. A teacher who tries to impart all his knowledge to his charges without modifying his information to fit the child will be a failure.

Even the desire of knowledge, meritorious as it is, must be controlled by man's moral principles. The chessed of increased knowledge of the world, as it is expressed in modern science and technology, can no doubt be a good thing. We are all beneficiaries of the constantly ongoing programs for unlocking the secrets of nature. But if we moderns also are threatened with sudden and calamitous extinction it is because we have not merged gevura with chessed; because we have not exercised moral restraint in directing the goals and purposes of our scientific research. If more nations were to learn how to make atomic bombs, as they surely will, and each of them were to conduct atmospheric tests, there is no doubt that the function of chessed would be achieved – more scientific knowledge would be accumulated. But because of the lack of moral heroism in self-control and denying one's self this increased scientific information, the whole world may destroy itself or, at the very least, irrevocably cripple all future generations. Chessed without gevura, in science as well as in the formation of the world, leads to destruction and not to creation.

Consider another example, a more personal one, of the moral courage called gevura. Love is a wonderful thing. But it sometimes can be so overdone that it destroys the object of affection – reminding us of the bitter observation of Oscar Wilde that, "Every man kills the thing he loves." I refer to too much love expressed by parents for children, love given in such excess that it becomes possessive and interferes in the life of a child. This kind of unrestrained chessed has rightly been called "smother love." All parents know this instinctively. More sophisticated ones are aware of it consciously. Yet it bears repetition and reminder. Too much paternal and maternal affection can lead to making too many decisions for the child so that he never learns to think for himself, choose for himself, or decide for himself. An overdose of chessed can make a child's personality permanently immature. A parent whose heart overflows with tender affection for a child needs the divine quality of gevura, of moral courage to discipline, control, and guide his parental love – or at least the expression of it – for the good of the child. Unless a parent controls his outgoing love for a child, unless he limits it intelligently and at the right times, the child will never learn that life has its harsh aspects, that without discipline one cannot live in a civilized society, that one must be prepared to deal with people who will view him critically

and objectively and not always with unthinking admiration and affection.

The problems of Jewish education are also affected by the combination of chessed and gevura. As a rabbi, I have heard every good and legitimate reason for a loving parent not to subject a child to the regimen of the study of Torah: there is too little time for fresh air, there is too great a competition for getting into better high schools and colleges, there are so many other things that one must learn in order to achieve a "rounded personality." And so parents often love their children so much that they deny them the opportunity to learn the meaning of life, the roots of their people, the history and destiny of their own spirit.

Perhaps it is for this reason that in Yiddish, a wealthy man of decent instincts is often called a *gevir*, a word which is derived from *gevura*, meaning heroism and strength. True wealth, in the Jewish sense, is the exercise of *gevura* as we have defined it: moral restraint, refraining from ostentation, self-indulgence, or domination of others; ethical control in acquiring riches and character control in spending them; a quality of graciousness and generosity. This is true heroism, true *gevura*. This kind of man is never *nouveau riche*; he is a true *gevir*.

In today's *sidra* we read the commandment of God that the priests should bless the Children of Israel with the three-fold blessing. The first one is: "The Lord bless you and keep you." Blessing, or *berakha*, has always been understood in our tradition to mean: *hosafa*, increase, growth, expansion. It is a quality of chessed. "Keeping," *shemira*, always refers to moral control and ethical limitation, as in "hishamer lekha pen..." (see, for instance, Genesis 24:6). Thus, the priests extend to us the blessing of God: May you have a great deal, more than you have now. But may your *berakha* be graced with *shemira*. May you learn how to keep your naturalness and humility intact, regarding your money and your wealth as a trust; may you learn how to retain your dignity and suppress arrogance and haughtiness so that you will achieve true blessing.

Indeed, the quality of *gevura* is a fundamental prerequisite for the religious life of the Jew. What distinguishes the Jewish religion is not the holidays – for other people have them too; not a synagogue – other people have their churches or mosques; but rather, the *Halakha*, the Jewish regimen which extends into every aspect of a person's existence. A life of Jewish law, of *mitzvot*, is an expression of the moral courage we have called *gevura* – for it means that the Jew must learn to restrain himself and his appetites in every phase of life. His desire to eat indiscriminately must be curbed by the

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inner strength that comes from observing the rules of *kashrut*. His desire to exploit nature, by means of industry or farming or doing business, must be curbed by the inner discipline that causes him to rest on *Shabbat* in the manner decreed by Jewish law. His lust and his passion, what the Torah in one place has called chessed and Freud has called the libido, must be restrained by the *gevura* of the Torah's code of sexual morality. The discipline life of the Jew is his greatest strength. "Ein giborim ela giborei Torah," "There are none as heroic as the heroes of Torah" (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* 1:23). Physical strength is transitory; military power is ephemeral; political influence is impermanent. Only the moral strength of Torah is abiding and everlasting.

Now, I believe, we may understand why one of the most cherished of biblical characters is called Samson the *gibor*, the man of strength, the hero. If Samson had only possessed *ko'ach*, brute physical power, he would have been no better than any Philistine. But he was charged to keep his great physical strength secondary and subordinate to his *gevura*, his spiritual power and moral courage. His greatness lay in that he was consecrated to exercise greater power over himself than over others. Unfortunately, Samson was not consistently successful. At a crucial moment in his life when he failed, when he forfeited his moral *gevura* and became a spiritual weakling – allowing himself to be tempted by *Delilah* – his physical power proved to be useless and insignificant too. The strength of Samson lay not in his muscles, but in his morals; not in his biceps but in his spirit. When the spirit and the morals failed, all else was valueless.

No wonder that Samson was commanded to be a *Nazirite*, to abstain from wine, as were his parents from the moment that – as recorded in today's *haftara* – they were informed by the angel that they would have a child. For wine releases inhibitions, it weakens one's self-control; it makes a man effusive and gives him a feeling of limitlessness and omnipotence. He becomes all chessed, no *gevura*. The abstention from wine was therefore both a symbol and charge to Samson to exercise the moral self-limitation which is the *gevura* of a religious man.

Perhaps all this can be summed up in the words of the Rabbis in *Avot* (4:1): "Eizehu *gibor*, *hakovesh et yitzro*," "Who is strong? He who suppresses his [evil] inclination." The word for inclination, *yetzer*, derives from the Hebrew *yetzira*, creation. The passions and inclinations of man are directed towards self-aggrandizement, reaching out for more power, more conquest, more insight, more affection, more influence. The first impulse of creativity, with man as with God, is *yetzira* or *yetzer* – the centrifugal movement, the outward

expansion of force, character, desire, and interest. But a world cannot exist with this alone. It needs the quality of gevura, of limitation. And therefore: Who is the gibor, the true hero or strong man? He who can suppress his yetzer, his chessed, his desire to go and grow farther and faster.

We conclude with the words of David (I Chronicles 29:11): "Lekha Hashem hagedula vehagevura vevatiferet" – "To you O God, is the greatness and the strength and the beauty." The Kabbala has taught that when both tendencies, that of expansion, called chessed or gedula, and that of contraction, called gevura, are united in the proper proportions, the result is tiferet – beauty, harmony, majesty. From God's example we human beings may learn the great secret of combining chessed and gevura to produce tiferet. May we and all the world be blessed with the quality of tiferet – beauty of life, majesty of ideals, and nobility of destiny.

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Sifsei Chaim – Rav Chaim Friedlander

The Nazir from the South

Summarized by CS

Shimon Hatzadik and the Nazir from the South

The Gemara in Nedarim 9b state תניא אמר שמעון הצדיק מימי לא אכלתי אשם נזיר טמא אלא אחד פעם אחת בא אדם אחד נזיר מן הדרום וראיתיו שהוא יפה עינים וטוב רואי וקווצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים אמרתי לו בני מה ראית להשחית את שערך זה הנאה אמר לי רועה הייתי לאבא בעירי הלכתי למלאות מים מן המעיין ונסתכלתי בבבואה שלי ופחו עלי יצרי ובקש לטורדני מן העולם אמרתי לו רשע למה אתה מתגאה בעולם שאינו שלך במי שהוא עתיד להיות רמה ותולעה העבודה שאגלחך לשמים מיד עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו אמרתי לו בני כמוך ירבו נזירי נזירות בישראל עליך הכתוב אומר איש כי יפליא לנדור נדר נזיר להזיר Shimon HaTzaddik never ate from the טומאה of a Nazir until one day, when he met a young nazir traveling from the South who possessed beautiful eyes, a handsome face, and thick, curly hair. When Shimon HaTzaddik asked why he'd destroy such striking beauty, the young man answered: he was simply his father's shepherd, but everything changed when he went to draw water from a spring and caught his own reflection. His יצר הרע immediately flared up and tried to drive him from the world. The young man fought back, telling the inclination it shouldn't take pride in a world

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that isn't its own. He reminded it that the flesh will eventually become worms and maggots. Right then, he swore by the Temple service to shave his head לשמים as a Nazir. Deeply moved, Shimon HaTzaddik stood up, kissed his head, and prayed Israel would see many more nezirim just like him.

To fight the יצר הרע, a battle that involves מוח ולב (intellect and heart), we must identify the יצר הרע from its very beginning and distance it while it remains in its hidden, early stage. The Torah teaches us to fight it right at this starting point. This is the only way to stop the יצר הרע early on.

Distancing the יצר הרע

Parshas Nazir teaches us how to distance ourselves from the יצר הרע, as we don't want to give it an opening. Chazal state in Berachos 63a that someone who sees a suspected sotah in her disgrace should stop drinking wine. Seeing her provides an opening for the יצר הרע and a person must look at what caused her serious sin. How do we close this opening? The Gemara explains that taking a vow of nezirus helps, because the nazir must build a protective fence against sin. The pasuk in Naso 6:2 איש או אשה כי יפליא לנדור נדר נזיר להזיר לה' discusses a person clearly utters a vow. The Ibn Ezra explains this means he separates himself or does something wondrous יפליא while most people simply follow their physical desires. When he completes his Nezirus it is a נזר אל-קיו על ראשו. The Sforno comments on Naso 6:13, a verse stating the nazir shall bring himself to the entrance of the Ohel Moed when his vow is complete, that when person attains a level of holiness like the כהן גדול when he removes himself from physical desires, thereby meriting to elevate himself.

The Ramban explains why the nazir must bring a קרבן חטאת when his successful term ends. The nazir shouldn't return to worldly desires after drawing close to God, and he's considered a sinner when he returns to these physical cravings. A person becomes holy when separating from wine and desires, and he really should remain a holy nazir his entire life.

Confronting False Pride

The Netziv analyzes the young Nazir from the south's words ופחו עלי יצר הרע rising within him. Its source was fear or weakness stemming from his thoughts, as seeing his handsome reflection in the water could easily lead to גאווה (arrogance). He sensed how this arrogance would create a dangerous chain reaction that sought to drive him from the world. Arrogance removes a person from the world because it serves as the root of all sins. The young man had to cry out to stand against the strong pull of יצר הרע.

Chazal teach in Berachos 5a that יצר טוב על יצר הרע a person should always stir up the יצר טוב against the יצר הרע. We must actively reveal the true, evil face of what seems good right now. The man from the South felt this declaration was his only escape. He knew arrogance happens when a person's heart becomes haughty and forgets God, as stated in Deuteronomy 8:14. An arrogant person mistakenly takes credit for things that actually belong to God. A person disconnects from God when they take pride in physical traits, since it's a world that isn't yours. There's no logical reason to feel arrogance over a physical body that will decay, and expensive garments don't give a person independent value.

Shaving for the Sake of Heaven

The young man used the language of a vow when he promised to shave for the sake of Heaven. He did this to resist the temptation of

his hair and avoid arrogance, recognizing he'd just be showing off his hair again if he merely got a normal haircut.

He needed the strict rules of a neder nezirus to guarantee he would use his physical appearance for a mitzvah instead of vanity. He accepted the separation of his body from the power of his hair, realizing his hair wasn't really his, and he therefore returned it to God. The hair itself is eventually burned under the pot of the peace-offering, as described in Numbers 6:18.

The Maharal explains this concept in Nesivos Olam (Nesiv HaAnavah, chapter 1). Sacrifices show that everything belongs to God, and a person shows that an animal was created to serve God when bringing it as a sacrifice. The same applies to the nazir's hair, as he returns his physical power to God by accepting this mitzvah. The young man transformed the cause of a potential sin into holiness. He taught us to create holiness by (i) turning away from evil, (ii) actively doing good, and (iii) recognizing God's ultimate ownership. He knew a vow acts like a strong lock against הרע יצר. A simple haircut wouldn't be enough, so the strict mitzvah of shaving the head as a nazir gave him the tools he needed to win.

The True Greatness of Man

Shimon HaTzaddik immediately kissed the young man's head and hoped there would be more people like him in Israel. The nazirite vow is deeply connected to the head, as the main physical restriction involves not cutting the hair on the head.

The head is the highest part of the body and represents human greatness. A person reveals true greatness when realizing their beauty comes entirely from God. The Talmud in Chullin 89a states that one who makes himself small is actually great. A person who recognizes his smallness connects to God's greatness, while someone who considers himself great is truly small. He simply doesn't understand true greatness.

We can't just turn away from evil and leave an opening for הרע יצר, so we must fill our hearts with Torah and good deeds. The Rambam writes about this in Hilchos Issurei Biah 22:21, stating a person should turn his thoughts to Torah and broaden his mind with wisdom. Immoral thoughts only overpower a heart that is empty of wisdom, and Proverbs 5:19 reminds us we should always be intoxicated with the love of Torah wisdom.

Birkas Kohanim

Adopted based on **Nechama Leibowitz's** essay in בספר במדבר עיונים by C. Shulman

Birkas Kohanim, in parshas Naso, is among the most familiar passages in the Torah, but its familiarity can obscure its precision. Its three short pesukim are not merely three poetic ways of saying that Hashem should bless Israel. They form a carefully ordered ascent: from material blessing to protection, from Divine illumination to Chein, and from Divine favor to Shalom. Through the classic mefarshim and Chazal, the blessing emerges as a compact statement of what a full human blessing really requires.

The opening words, וישמרך, יברכך ה' וישמרך, begin with the most basic human need. Rashi explains יברכך ה' as יברכך, שיתברכו נכסידך, *that your possessions should be blessed*. On this reading, the first blessing is not abstract spirituality, but the plain blessing of material increase. Yet the Torah immediately adds וישמרך, *and may He guard you*. Rashi explains that one who receives possessions needs protection from loss, theft, and damage. The blessing therefore contains its own qualification: having

more is not enough. Wealth that is not guarded may disappear, or worse, may become a source of anxiety and danger.

Sforno deepens the meaning of וישמרך. It is not enough for Hashem to give ברכה; the blessing itself must be guarded so that it remains good for the recipient. Material success can become a nisayon, and prosperity may bring arrogance, distraction, rivalry, or spiritual decline. Thus, וישמרך is not merely protection from thieves or external loss, as in Rashi's simpler reading. It is protection from the dangers that may come through the blessing itself. Haamek Davar develops a similar point with a slightly different emphasis: the concern is not only that the blessing may be lost, but that it may generate new spiritual vulnerability unless Hashem preserves the person within the blessing. The Torah therefore begins with material good, but immediately teaches that even good must be guarded, disciplined, and kept within the service of Hashem.

The second pasuk, ויאר ה' פניו אליך ויהנך, moves from the protection of material blessing to the blessing of Divine illumination. Many mefarshim understand this second blessing as a gift of spiritual abundance, while the first blessing concerned material abundance. The phrase ויאר ה' פניו אליך is therefore not merely a metaphor for success. The Sifri explains it as יתן מאור תורה, *may He give you the light of Torah*, so that one's eyes and heart are illuminated in Torah, as in כי נר מצוה ותורה אור. Rashi, however, explains the phrase as יראה פנים צהובות, *may He show you a smiling face, a radiant face*. The blessing is that Hashem's countenance should be turned toward the person in warmth, light, and favor.

ויהנך then describes what flows from that Divine illumination. Rashi explains it simply as יתן לך חן, meaning that Hashem should grant the person favor, the quality of being received graciously and looked upon favorably. Ibn Ezra reads it as a gracious response to need: if a person turns to Hashem in distress, Hashem should show חסד and grant his request. Chazal deepen the word further. The Sifri connects ויהנך with דעת ובינה, echoing דעת ומלמד לאנוש בינה. Yet this דעת is not merely intellectual achievement. The Midrash adds, יתן לך חן, *may He place in you daas so that you will be gracious to one another and merciful to one another*. In this way, ויהנך becomes the human result of ויאר ה' פניו אליך: one who receives מאור פנים from Hashem is meant to become capable of showing חן and רחמים to others.

The third pasuk, וישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום, opens with the most difficult phrase in the blessing. וישא פנים can suggest favoritism, yet the Torah elsewhere insists that Hashem does not show improper favoritism. Rashi therefore avoids reading the phrase as favoritism and explains וישא ה' פניו אליך as יכבדו כעסו, *may He suppress His anger*. This follows the direction of the Midrash, which reads it as יעביר כעסו ממך, *may He remove His anger from you*. On this reading, the פנים are not yet a smiling face of favor, but a face of anger that is withdrawn or restrained.

Other parshanim read the phrase differently. Ibn Ezra and Rashbam explain וישא ה' פניו אליך as Hashem turning His face toward the person in favor, while Chizkuni explains it as יסביר לך פנים, *may He show you a pleasant face*, bringing success and protection. The phrase פנים can carry different meanings in Tanach, sometimes anger, sometimes presence, sometimes favor. In this pasuk, especially because it concludes וישם לך שלום, the phrase points toward Hashem's gracious turning to Israel.

The theological problem nevertheless remains, because Chazal ask how Hashem can be described as נושא פנים when the Torah says He does not show favoritism. The Gemara answers that Israel itself goes beyond the strict legal measure: although the Torah says ואכלת ושבעת and וברכת, they recite Birkas Hamazon even after a כביצה or כזית. The point is not that Hashem abandons דין. Rather, when Israel lives לפנים, Hashem responds with a corresponding נשיאת פנים. Divine favor here is not arbitrary preference, but covenantal closeness that goes beyond cold legal calculation without becoming injustice. The blessing ends with וישם לך שלום, because Shalom is the completion and vessel of all the earlier blessings. Chazal teach that after food, drink, and material plenty, if there is no peace, there is nothing; only after באתי שלום בארץ is the blessing complete. This is why Rashi, on Bechukosai, says that שלום is הכל כנגד הכל, *equal to everything*. Shalom is not merely the absence of conflict. It is wholeness, harmony, and the condition that allows blessing to endure.

Abarbanel's reading clarifies the architecture of the whole unit. The three pesukim are not parallel blessings placed side by side, but a progression. The first concerns worldly good and its preservation. The second concerns illumination, Chein, and the experience of Divine favor. The third reaches the highest point, Hashem's gracious turning toward Israel and the gift of Shalom. This structure also appears in the form of the pesukim themselves: three words, then five, then seven. The blessing expands as it ascends; its form mirrors its meaning.

The repeated use of Hashem's Name is equally central: ברכת ה', יאר. Every line identifies Hashem as the source of the blessing. This guards against a mistaken view of the Kohanim. They do not possess independent sacred power, and they are not the origin of ברכה. Their task is ושמנו את שמי על בני ישראל, to place Hashem's Name upon Israel. The conclusion, ואני אברכם, makes the theology explicit: the Kohanim speak, but Hashem blesses. Some mefarshim understand ואני אברכם as referring to the blessing of Israel, while others see it as also including blessing for the Kohanim who bless Israel. Either way, the essential point is the same. Human beings may transmit the words of blessing, but only Hashem can make blessing real.

The result is a full ladder of blessing. Rashi anchors the opening phrase in ordinary material life. Sforno and Haamek Davar show that material blessing must itself be guarded so that it remains spiritually safe. The Sifri and Midrashim raise the second blessing into the realm of Torah, דעת, בינה, חן, רהמים, and דעת. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Chizkuni, and Rabbeinu Bachya refine the meaning of פנים. Chazal resolve the difficulty of ישא ה' פניו by linking Divine favor to Israel's own משורת הדין לפנים. Abarbanel highlights the progressive structure, and the teaching about Shalom explains why peace must be the final word. Birkas Kohanim therefore teaches Israel what to desire: not wealth alone, not protection alone, not spiritual light alone, but a life in which every gift from Hashem is guarded, illuminated, gracious, morally ordered, and gathered into Shalom.

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to: ravfrand@torah.org date: May 28, 2026, 10:45 Rav Frand
Parshas Naso

Manoach Was Given a Lesson As How To Raise His Son
These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi

Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly portion: Parshas Naso #1383 Birchas Kohanim – Whose Mitzva Is It? Good Shabbos!

Manoach Was Given a Lesson As How To Raise His Son

In past years, I have shared a beautiful observation from Rav Shimon Schwab, z"l. I want to repeat this observation and add some very interesting additional insights that I recently found.

The Haftorah for Parshas Naso is the famous story of the birth of Shimshon, the Nazir. A malach (angel) comes to Manoach's wife and tells her that although she is currently barren, she will become pregnant and have a son. She is warned not to consume wine or eat "tameh" (ritually unclean) food. Her son is to be a nazir from the womb for his entire life, and he will deliver Yisrael from the hands of the Plishtim.

The woman relays this message to her husband. Manoach then davens to Hashem to resend the malach to instruct them specifically how to deal with this to-be-born special child. Hashem answers Manoach's prayers and the malach returns. After confirming that this was the same malach who had spoken earlier with his wife, Manoach asks the malach "Tell me, what are we to do with this child?" The malach basically repeats the same message that he had earlier shared with Manoach's wife: "Whatever I told your wife, that is what you should do..."

Rav Schwab asks three very basic questions: Did Manoach not know the laws of nezirus? And even if he did not know them (the Talmud in fact says that Manoach was an am ha'aretz.), was it necessary to find a malach to teach Manoach the laws of nezirus?

Why did the Ribono shel Olam answer Manoach's tefilla? Normally, Hashem does not send malachim around at the drop of a hat!

What did the malach add in his response to Manoach? Apparently, the malach just repeated the same answer over again that he had already told to Manoach's wife a day or two earlier!

Rav Schwab makes a brilliant observation that is a basic principle in raising children. He interprets Manoach's question to the malach as follows: How can I raise a child who is a nazir if I myself do not observe the practices of a nazir? The boy will see his father having his grapes and drinking wine. Why will he agree to abstain from these sweet delicacies himself?

Rav Schwab explains that the malach's response was as follows: Manoach, guess what? You need to become a nazir yourself! He bases this on a grammatical inference which is echoed by the Meshech Chochma in this very parsha: The malach tells Manoach: "All that I said to the woman, tishamare (shall be observed)." Tishamere can either mean "she shall keep" or "you shall keep." This, Rav Schwab says, is what the malach added when he returned a second time to speak with Manoach. The first time he said only "She shall keep (the laws of nezirus)." The second time, he is telling Manoach that he too must observe those laws. (Everything that I told her, you shall keep as well!)

This is a fine example of the old educational principle that "Do as I say, not as I do" never works! Therefore, in order to create a nazir in your family, you need to be a nazir as well.

Thus far, I shared the words of Rav Schwab, and as I mentioned, the Meshech Chochmah very briefly says the same thing. Now, I will share a pshat in a Rashi and an incredible Seforno.

The last pasuk in this week's parsha says: "And when Moshe came

into the Ohel Moed to speak with Him, he heard the voice communicating with him from atop the cover that was upon the Ark of the Testimony, from between the two cherubim, and He spoke to him.” There is a strange word in this pasuk: meedaber. Typically, the pasuk would say “and he heard the voice of Hashem midaber Elav (talking to Him), with a shva under the mem. What is this word, meedaber? Rashi comments and says that meedaber is equivalent to misdaber (a hispael (reflexive) verb, which conveys doing an action to oneself, meaning that the Ribono shel Olam was talking to Himself). The idea is that the Ribono shel Olam was not talking to Moshe Rabbeinu, but rather Moshe Rabbeinu overheard a conversation between the Ribono shel Olam and Himself. It may be possible to interpret Rashi differently, but the Seforno in this week’s parsha says an amazing thing: On the words meedaber eilav, the Seforno comments “medaber beino l’bein atzmo” (The Ribono shel Olam was speaking to Himself and Moshe Rabbeinu was listening in). The Seforno explains: “If someone wants to have an effect on someone else, he must practice what he preaches.” He needs to preach the lesson to himself and become the object of his own instructions. That is how a person has an effect on people. The Seforno is saying that Hashem was talking to Himself. He was saying over to Himself the whole Torah: “You shall be holy.” “You shall not sow mixed seeds.” This is the way a person has an effect on other people.

I don’t know if I would have ever come up with this pshat in the Seforno itself but there is a sefer from Rav Schach, zt”l, in which Rav Schach says the same thing:

When someone speaks to someone else and wishes to have his words have an effect on that person, it is necessary for the speaker to not only “talk the talk” but it is necessary for him to also “walk the walk.” It is impossible for someone who himself is somewhat lacking in yiras Shamayim (fear of Heaven) to preach Yiras Shamayim to others! Likewise, someone cannot chastise another person for not learning Torah with proper intensity when he himself is weak in this area. Rav Schach here cites both the aforementioned Rashi and Seforno.

The way to have an effect on others is to act that way yourself. The Ribono shel Olam sent that message to Klal Yisrael by virtue of the fact that when Moshe came into the Ohel Moed, Hashem was not talking to Moshe, but rather, as it were, Hashem was talking to Himself. The message being sent here is that the only way to have an effect on people is to become those people yourself.

To add to this, there is an interesting Baal Haturim in Parshas Beshalach. When Moshe Rabbeinu is supposed to split the sea, he is told “Lift your staff.” The Baal Haturim notes that the word harem (lift) only appears three times in all of Tanach:

“lift your staff” (in Parshas Beshalach) (Shemos 14:16),
 “kashofer horeim kolecha ” (like a Shofar lift your voice) (Yeshaya 58:1), and “horeim loch” (lift yourself) (Melachim II 6:7).

What do these three appearances of this word have in common? I saw a vort from the Kedushas Tzion, one of the Bobover Rebbes. He says an amazing thing: There are three ways to have an effect on children: #1 Lift the staff (i.e. – don’t spare the rod); #2 Lift your voice. Both of these techniques can be effective but they may have adverse effects in the long run. But number three is harem loch – Lift yourself up. When you lift yourself up (as a role model), that has the most effective impact on children. Again, this means not only “talk

the talk” but also “walk the walk.” We saw this and learn this from none less a personage than the Ribono shel Olam Himself. Meedaber Eilav. Hashem talks to Himself and thus teaches Moshe Rabbeinu. The best way to reach is to raise yourself and become the best possible example to the child.

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 DavidATwersky@gmail.com Edited by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org This week’s write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand’s Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas’ Nasso is provided below: 059 Sheitel: A Woman’s Obligation to Cover Her Hair 103 Birchas Kohanim 148 Sotah: The Case of the Unfaithful Wife 195 Birchas Kohanim: Who Can and Who Can’t? 241 Yichud and the Housekeeper 285 Sa’ar B’isha Ervah 331 NassoMust A Kallah Cover Her Hair at the Chasunah? 375 Ain Osin Mitzvos Chavilos and many, many more A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information. Rav Frand © 2023 by Torah.org. Torah.org: The Judaism Site Project Genesis, Inc. 2833 Smith Ave., Suite 225 Baltimore, MD 21209 <http://www.torah.org/> learn@torah.org (410) 602-1350

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If I Hate Myself I Need the World to Love Me

The Narcissist & the Nazirite: Narcissism in Greek Mythology and the Talmud

By: Rabbi YY Jacobson

The Golfers

A rabbi, a teacher, a millionaire, and a narcissist were golfing together.

As they walked the course, they came up behind a foursome that was moving very slowly, and that didn’t offer to let them play through. Calling over the club pro, the foursome inquired about the slow group’s poor sportsmanship. The pro explained that the slow golfers were blind. The rabbi said: Oh, G-d bless them, I will keep them in my prayers. The teacher said, I will tell my students how inspiring they are. The millionaire said, "I will offer to pay their green fees for the year." The narcissist said, "Why do they have to play by day and occupy the field? If they're blind anyway, why can't they play at night?"

This little anecdote describes the narcissist, the person who sees the entire world as a mirror.

The Definition

The term “Narcissism” was first coined by Henry Havelock Ellis, a British physician and scientist living in the 19th century, and then explained by Dr. Sigmund Freud in his book “On Narcissism,” published in 1914.

It was the Jewish Austrian-American psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut who first coined the phrase “NSD,” Narcissistic Personality Disorder, in 1968, describing a person who needs endless admiration and adulation; experiences a sense of superiority toward others; feels that all his expectations must be met. This person is always ready to use people to meet his goals and will have no issues lying in order to self-inflate and discuss his accomplishments. He also does not know how to show empathy to others. This person often has wide, fast

mood swings and will fantasize about unlimited success, money, and power. He can be explosive, abusive, needs his world to be perfect, and wants everyone to love him.

There are both overt and covert narcissists. The covert ones are beloved and appreciated, but are secretly selfish, calculating, controlling, angry, and vindictive. Covert narcissists create an illusion of selflessness while gaining from their elevated status. Although they share similar basic traits with the overt narcissist, i.e., the need for attention and recognition, they are stealthier about hiding their egocentric motives. These narcissists can trick others, sometimes even themselves, into believing they are altruistic and empathetic individuals.

The fascinating thing is that many narcissists are not even aware that they are narcissistic. It is deeply etched into the subconscious of their psyche, and it is the only way of life they know.

Today, we want to examine two stories on the theme of narcissism—one in Greek literature, the other in the Talmud.

The Myth of Narcissus

Where does the term “Narcissism” come from?

Henry Havelock Ellis retrieved it from Greek mythology. The Greeks told the story of a young man named Narcissus, who was remarkably handsome—so handsome that even one of the pagan Greek gods, Echo, fell in love with him. (The English word “echo,” was named after this Greek god, since she was supposedly cursed not to have her own voice, but only to repeat what others say.)

One day, Narcissus arrived at a pond, where he saw for the first time his reflection in the water. He was so taken by the splendor of his reflection that he did not want to move, but stood there gazing and admiring his own reflection in the pond. At some point, he declared to his reflection, “I love you.” Echo saw him and repeated, “I love you.” Narcissus thought his reflection had spoken, and he continued to gaze at himself in the water for days and weeks. At the end, he takes his own life.

The term Narcissism coined in the 19th century was named after that Greek. The narcissist too is incapable of connecting with anything or anybody, but a reflection of himself or herself. The narcissist is so in love with his/her reflection that they have no space for genuine concern or love for anything or anybody else.

Question: How do you drown a narcissist? Answer: Put a mirror at the bottom of the swimming pool.

Shimon the Righteous

This Greek story was authored around the year 50 BCE, 120 years before the destruction of the Second Temple. Yet a similar story is found in Jewish sources, taking place a few centuries earlier. The end of the Jewish story is completely different, capturing the key distinctions between Greek mythology and Judaism.

The story is quoted three times in the Talmud (in tractate Nedarim and Nazir in the Babylonian Talmud, and in tractate Nedarim in the Jerusalem Talmud.[1] It is about a young handsome man who came to Shimon Hazaddik, Shimon the righteous one, who served as a High Priest in the beginning of the Second Temple era, around 300 BCE.

Shimon Hatzaddik was one of the last surviving members of the “Men of the Great Assembly,” who rebuilt Judaism during the onset of the second Temple era. He was a legend even in his own day—considered the greatest Jew of his generation. He is the one who

famously stated that “The world stands on three pillars: Torah study, prayer, and kindness.”[2]

The Nazirite

In order to appreciate the story, a brief introduction is necessary.

In this week’s portion, Naso (Numbers chapter six), the Torah relates the laws of the Nazirite—a man or woman dedicated to holiness in an extra intense way. The Nazir was an individual who undertook, usually for a limited period of time, to observe special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink wine or other intoxicants (including anything made from grapes), not to have his hair cut, and not to defile himself by contact with the dead. His vow was for a fixed term (though it could also be for life), at the end of which he would come to the Temple, cut and burn his hair there, and bring a special offering. Samson was the most famous of all Nazirites.

(In our generation too, there were too famous Jewish Nazirites—the Ragatchover Gaon, Rabbi Yosef Razin (1858-1936), Rabbi of Dvinsk, Poland,[3] and Rabbi David Cohen, known as “Reb David Hanazir” (1887-1972), a student of Rabbi Avraham Isaac Kook, first chief rabbi of Israel, and the father of the present chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi Shaar Yeshuv Cohen.)

The Handsome Shepherd

Now, Shimon Hatzaddik as a rule was critical of Nazirites. He felt that under ordinary circumstances it should not be done. It is too difficult a life style and most Nazirites will regret their vow at some point. Thus he never ate of the sacrifices they offered. But there was one exception described in the Talmud:

נדרים ט, ב: אמר שמעון הצדיק: מימי לא אכלתי אשם נזיר טמא אלא אחד. פעם אחת בא אדם אחד נזיר מן הדרום, וראיתו שהוא יפה עינים וטוב רואי, וקווצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים. אמרתי לו: בני, מה ראית להשחית את שערך זה הנאה? אמר לי: רועה הייתי לאבא בעירי. הלכתי למלאות מים מן המעיין, ונסתכלתי בבבואה שלי, ופחז עלי יצרי ובקש לטורדני מן העולם. אמרתי לו: רשע! למה אתה מתגאה בעולם שאינו שלך, במי שהוא עתיד להיות רימה ותולעה? העבודה שאגלחך לשמים! מיד עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו. אמרתי לו: בני, כמוך ירבו גוזרי נזירות בישראל. עליך הכתוב: "באומר: 'איש כי יפליא לנדור נדר נזיר להזיר לה'".

Shimon Hatzaddik related this story:

Once, a young man, a Nazirite, came from the South [of Israel] to the Holy Temple. I saw that he had beautiful eyes, a handsome appearance, and long, braided hair. He came to the High Priest and sage Shimon Hatzaddik and told him that he had just completed a term as a Nazir, and was now going to shave off the hair on his head. Shimon Hatzaddik asked him, “What made you decide to take this vow and destroy your beautiful hair?”

The young man replied, “I worked for my father as a shepherd in my city, and I went to draw water from a wellspring. I began to gaze at my reflection in the water. When I saw how gorgeous and attractive I am, how awesome my hair looked, my evil inclination asserted itself and urged me to engage in immoral and promiscuous behavior, and thus destroy my world. I told my evil inclination: ‘Wicked one! Why are you so arrogant in a world that does not belong to you? Why are you so arrogant about a body that will end up rotting in the grave, eaten by worms?! I swear, I will shave off your hair for the sake of heaven!’”

“Immediately, I stood up and kissed him on his head. And I said, ‘May there be many more Nazirites like you among Israel.’”

The Danger

This young man, just like the Greek character Narcissus, was attractive. His body was comely, his physique exquisite, and his hair

enthraling. In the Greek myth, Narcissus falls in love with the figure to the point of self-destruction. In the Jewish story, in stark contrast, the handsome shepherd is keenly aware of the danger of self-worship.

He knows, in his own words, that he is capable of becoming a hedonistic glutton, of fulfilling every promiscuous craving. With such magnificent hair and striking features, he can get his hands on perhaps anyone he desires, and as a result, ultimately—as he put it—lose his entire world. He realizes how easily he can forfeit his integrity and balance if he aggrandizes that which will “end up rotting in the grave.”

He decides to do something drastic: Dedicate his beauty to G-d. He takes his hair and burns it in the Holy Temple, as is the tradition of every Nazirite.

Celebrities

This Talmudic story guides every potential celebrity and success story, people who are prone to the danger of living a lie, not allowing themselves to enter into real relationships with people who will speak truth to beauty and power. All men and women of fame, affluence, and power ought to internalize this story. If only they would understand, like that young Shepherd from the south, the perils of being so beautiful, so talented, so famous, so successful, so wealthy, so brilliant, so artistic, so charismatic, so captivating, it can save their future.

And who of us is not a narcissist in some measure? Each of us—at least I can speak of myself—has a tinge, or more than a tinge, of narcissism, and must confront it daily.

In the best-selling book *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*, by the cultural historian Christopher Lasch (1932–1994), the author believes that our Western culture has essentially become a “narcissistic culture,” in which we have become pathologically obsessed with ourselves above anything and everything. Where it used to be that people believed in making sacrifices for something outside of themselves—say for marriage, family, children—today more and more people feel that they want to gaze at nothing but their own image for their entire life.

The Deeper Cause

This story of the shepherd may contain a yet deeper message about narcissism.

It's not known what causes narcissistic personality disorder. As with other mental disorders, the cause is likely complex. Narcissistic personality disorder may be linked to nurture, nature, genetics, or psychobiology.

Yet some scholars have speculated that it often stems from the person experiencing, consciously or unconsciously, a major void in self-worth and dignity. To compensate for sensing no real place in this world and feeling very unsafe in an essentially overwhelming universe, this person developed the need to focus on himself or herself exclusively. If my “I” does not really exist, creating space for the “Thou” is too scary.

Narcissism may be a brilliant coping mechanism to deal with my profound sense of worthlessness. If I hate myself, I need the entire world to tell me how much they love me, so that for a few minutes a day I can make believe that I have value.

And the remedy to this is when I can experience the Divine energy flowing through me, more potent than any compliment in the world.

What this shepherd can teach us is not only the honesty of knowing what great beauty or success can do to you, but also a method to confront it. If you realize and viscerally feel that this world belongs to G-d; that you were formed by G-d to serve Him in His world, you discover that your identity has true and infinite value. You need not resort to narcissism. G-d loves you unconditionally, your inherent beauty is infinitely greater than anything anyone will ever appreciate about you.

You can then love others the same way. You will not melt and die from opening your heart to others, because your baseline is safe. You know you are safe in G-d's eternal grip.

When your vulnerable and bare core emerges, you will not fall into the abyss; rather, you will find the arms of G-d embracing you.

If I want to live, I want to tear myself away from my fake, external image, so that I can experience my authentic image: the visage of the Divine reflected through me, which nobody can ever take from me.

[1] Talmud Nazir 4b; Nedarim 9b; Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 36a.

[2] The Talmud (Yuma 69a) and Josephus relate this fascinating tale about Shimon: When Alexander the Great—the great Greek warrior who conquered almost the entire world (his tutor was the Greek philosopher Aristotle)—marched through the Land of Israel in the year 333 BCE, Shimon Hatzaddik, dressed in his eight priestly robes, went out to greet him. As soon as Alexander saw him, the most powerful person in the world descended from his chariot and bowed respectfully before him. When Alexander's courtiers criticized his act, he replied that he had had a vision in which he had seen an old man, dressed in special garb, who had predicted his victory. When he saw the visage of Shimon Hatzaddik, he realized that this was the man. Alexander demanded that a statue of himself be placed in the Holy Temple; but Shimon explained to him that this was impossible, promising him instead that all the sons born of priests in that year should be named Alexander. Hence, despite the fact that Alexander is a Greek name, at that moment it was converted into a Jewish name to this very day. [3] It is unclear if he was indeed a Nazir, which is why his hair was so long. In *Hearos Ubiurim* issue 920, Rabbi Leibel Groner relates that the Lubavitcher Rebbe told his father, Rabbi Mordechai Groner, that he heard from his own father-in-law, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, that his father, the fifth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Dovber, asked him how the Rogatchover drinks the four cups of wine on Pesach since he is a Nazir. At a meeting in 1988, the Lubavitcher Rebbe asked Rabbi Mordechai Savitzki from Boston if he had heard that the Rogatchover was a Nazir, which is why he did not cut his hair.

from: **Michal Horowitz** <michalchorowitz@gmail.com> date: May 28, 2026, 8:04 AM subject: **The Power to Elevate** Naso (Chutz La' Aretz) – Beha'aloscha (E"Y) 5786: The Power to Elevate By Michal Horowitz on May 28, 2026

In the beginning of Parshas Naso, the Torah continues the census of the nation. Hashem commands Moshe: *וְנִשְׂא אֶת רִאשׁוֹת בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן* - Take a census (lit. lift up the heads) of the sons of Gershon (Bamidbar 4:22). On a simple level, the Torah is instructing Moshe to count the numbers. Yet the commentators note that the Torah does not merely say “count.” Instead, it uses the language of elevation - “lift up.” This teaches us something powerful about the Torah's view of every individual. To count a person in the Torah is not merely to record a

number. It is to recognize his value and unique role within Am Yisrael. Every individual matters and carries dignity and purpose. Interestingly, this theme of elevation appears repeatedly throughout the parsha.

The Torah speaks about the responsibilities of the Leviim, each family entrusted with its own sacred task in carrying the Mishkan. It discusses the procedure that takes place with the Sotah, the woman suspected of being unfaithful to her husband. It presents the laws of the Nazir, a person striving for a heightened level of holiness and self-discipline. And the parsha culminates with Birkas Kohanim, through which the Kohanim bless the nation with peace, protection, and Divine grace.

Although these topics appear very different from one another, what emerges is that they are all connected by a single underlying idea: the ability to elevate.

The Leviim elevate physical labor into avodas Hashem. The Nazir seeks to elevate himself spiritually through restraint and discipline. Birkas Kohanim elevates the nation through blessing. Even the process of the Sotah is ultimately intended to restore dignity, harmony, and holiness to the relationship between husband and wife. Again and again, Parshas Naso teaches that the role of Torah is to elevate ourselves and those around us.

This idea finds especially powerful expression in Birkas Kohanim. The Torah commands the kohanim: **כִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל** - So shall you bless the Children of Israel: May Hashem bless you and guard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance toward you and show you favor. May Hashem lift His countenance toward you and grant you peace (Bamidbar 6:23-26).

While these brachos encompass every dimension of life - physical, spiritual, Divine closeness, and peace - perhaps the most remarkable aspect of these blessings is that Hashem chooses human beings to serve as the vehicle through which His blessing is conveyed.

The concluding pasuk states: **וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם** - And I shall bless them (6:27). The blessing ultimately comes from Hashem alone. Yet the Kohanim are entrusted with the sacred privilege of becoming the conduit through which that blessing reaches the nation.

This carries a powerful message.

Every Jew has the ability to elevate others. Sometimes elevation occurs through formal acts of leadership or teaching. But often it takes place through far simpler actions: a kind word of encouragement, a moment of patience, sincere concern for another person. A person can lift someone else emotionally, spiritually, or psychologically through the way he speaks, listens, and behaves.

In this sense, the message of “Naso” extends far beyond the census at the beginning of the parsha. We are all capable of “lifting” others. This idea is especially relevant in the world in which we live. So much of society around us encourages comparison, criticism, and competition. People often feel ignored, discouraged, or diminished. In such a world, the gift of elevating another person becomes extraordinarily significant.

Small actions can transform another person’s day, and perhaps even another person’s life. The Torah reminds us that true greatness is not measured only by personal achievement. It is also measured by the extent to which we elevate those around us.

This also explains why the parsha concludes with the offerings of the Nesi'im, the tribal princes. Although each Nasi brought the exact same korban, the Torah repeats every offering individually.

This repetition teaches us an important lesson. In the eyes of Hashem, no individual is overlooked. Each offering mattered because each leader mattered. Once again, the Torah teaches the importance of recognizing and elevating the individual.

As Parshas Beha'aloscha is read this week in E"Y, the image of the Menorah being kindled provides a beautiful parallel to this idea. The flames of the Menorah spread light outward, illuminating the surrounding space. In many ways, this reflects the message of Naso as well. A Jew is called upon not only to grow personally, but to bring light, blessing, and elevation to others.

Indeed, this is one of the central missions of living a Torah life: not only to seek personal spiritual growth, but to become a person who uplifts others; a person - and a nation - whose presence brings encouragement, dignity, kindness, and light.

May we merit to recognize the value within ourselves and within every member of Klal Yisrael. May we use our words, actions, and relationships to elevate those around us. And in this merit, may Hashem bless all of Klal Yisrael with protection, peace, unity, and abundant bracha.

בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום, Michal

from: **Rabbi Chanan Morrison** <chanan@ravkooktorah.org>

date: May 27, 2026, 1:52 PM

subject: **Rav Kook on Psalm 50: Torah from Zion**

"From Zion — the perfection of beauty! — God has shone forth."
(Psalm 50:2)

What is this beautiful radiance that shines forth from Zion?

Rav Kook explained that it refers to the distinctive quality of Torah in the Land of Israel. Scholars who live in Israel are able to connect with the Torah on a level that is impossible to attain outside of Israel. The unique quality of Torat Eretz Yisrael is illustrated in the following story, as recorded in Shabbat 53a.

Rabbi Zeira Arrives in Israel

Despite his teacher’s opposition, Rabbi Zeira fulfilled his dream and ascended from Babylon to the Land of Israel.

When Rabbi Zeira arrived in Israel, he encountered Rabbi Benjamin bar Yefet, a disciple of the famed scholar Rabbi Yochanan. Rabbi Benjamin was teaching the laws regarding the care of domestic animals on the Sabbath. One is allowed to cover one’s donkey with a saddle-blanket to keep the animal warm, but one may not place a fodder-bag around its neck.

Upon hearing this ruling, Rabbi Zeira exclaimed, “Well said! And that is how a king in Babylon translated it.” The ‘king’ to whom Rabbi Zeira referred was Samuel, a master jurist and leading halakhic authority in third-century Babylon.

Why was Rabbi Zeira so excited when he heard this ruling? And why did he say that Samuel ‘translated’ this law in Babylon?

Animal Care on the Sabbath

We should first reflect on Rabbi Benjamin’s ruling, which seeks to navigate a path between two important values. On the one hand, we are responsible for the welfare of our animals. We have a moral obligation to care for them and relieve them of any pain (tza’ar ba’alei chaim). But if we were to spend our entire Sabbath tending to the needs of chickens and donkeys, what would remain of the special holiness of Shabbat? Excessive involvement in animal husbandry would greatly diminish the holiness of a day meant for spiritual pursuits.

For this reason, the Sages distinguished between a saddle-blanket and a fodder-bag. The blanket is permitted as it protects the donkey from the cold. The fodder-bag, on the other hand, is only a convenience for the donkey, making it easier for the animal to eat. Here the rabbis drew the line, safeguarding the sanctity of the Sabbath day.

Straight from the Source

Rabbi Zeira had heard this ruling before when he lived in Babylon. Nonetheless, hearing it in the Land of Israel was an entirely different experience. Rabbi Zeira felt a surge of energy in this teaching that he had not experienced before.

“Yishar!” he shouted. The word yishar literally means ‘straight.’ The scholar felt an inner connection to this ruling, straight from its vibrant source. What happened?

When the song of holiness pulsates in the heart, we can sense the spiritual and ethical source for each specific law. Even when dealing with what would appear to be dry, prosaic rules, the soul is overwhelmed by the beauty of its sublime poetry.

Our sensitivity to this inner song is a function of our physical and spiritual state. When the soul is exiled to foreign lands, the inner content of the Torah is relegated to a shadow of its true self. Torah laws become detached from their living source. Learning Torah outside the Land of Israel is like reading a poem that was translated into a foreign language. Something of the vitality and lyric beauty of the original is lost.

When Rabbi Zeira achieved his life’s goal and ascended to the Land of Israel, he underwent a profound transformation. His entire world was elevated. He could now perceive with greater clarity the inner essence of every law.

Yishar! he cried out. Now he could feel the inner vitality, the holy life-source residing within this law. Wonder filled his heart, as he perceived how the Torah’s lofty ideals penetrated even the most mundane aspects of everyday life.

Torah Outside the Land

Samuel, the great Babylonian scholar, had given a similar ruling. But there, outside of Israel, it was only a translation. It lacked the vitality of the original. “And that is how a king in Babylon translated it.”

With his great legal acumen, Samuel could distinguish between covering a donkey with a blanket and hanging a fodder-bag over its neck. But to truly feel this fine distinction — when involvement in mundane life warranted and when it is detrimental — can only be experienced at the Torah’s source, in the Land of Israel. In Babylon, this could only be grasped intellectually.

When Rabbi Zeira heard Rabbi Benjamin teaching this law, he was struck by the contrast between Torah law studied in exile and the brilliant light of Torah heard in its natural setting.

Thus wrote King David, “From Zion, the perfection of beauty, God [Elokim] has shone forth.” The verse specifically uses the Divine name Elokim. For in the Land of Israel, even the Divine attribute of middat hadin — the legal realm of Halakhah — shines with a special light, as its original beauty is revealed.

(Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. IV, pp. 15-16)

Excerpted from

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The Triple Blessing

May Hashem bless and protect you. May Hashem cause His

countenance to shine to you and favor you. May Hashem raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace. (Bemidbar 6:24-26) When Birkat Kohanim, which appears in our parasha, is recited by the hazzan (every day in hutz laaretz, and when there is no kohen present in Eretz Yisrael) during the repetition of the Amida, he prefaces the verse with an introductory prayer that begins, "Bless us with the threefold berakha."

Why is Birkat Kohanim called a "threefold berakha"? There are three verses, but as Rabbi Mordechai Willig points out, there are actually six berakhot, two in each verse. Perhaps it should be called the "sixfold berakha"! Rabbi Willig suggests that each verse actually contains one twofold berakha, totaling three berakhot (each of which has two components). Am Mordechai Berakot, Introduction. What does this mean?

The first berakha, "May Hashem bless and protect you," is about wealth, meaning that Hashem should bless us with material wealth and preserve and protect that wealth. Every blessing must be protected. HaKadosh Barukh Hu might bestow something on us, but if we misuse it, then it can turn into something terrible, not a berakha at all. The berakha is that Hashem should provide for us but also protect us to make sure we use our wealth properly, in our service to Hashem, not in pursuit of our desires. The Sifrei (Ekev 6) explains that a person only rebels against Hashem when he is satiated, when he feels that he doesn't need God because he has what he needs. Thus, the berakha of material wealth must be accompanied by protection against its corrupting influence.

"May Hashem cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you." What is the "shining" of Hashem's "countenance"? This refers to Torah, as we say at the end of the Amida: "For with the light of Your countenance, You, Hashem our God, granted us the Torah." The berakha is that Hashem should light up our life with Torah. However, just like wealth is a double-edged sword, Torah can also be a double-edged sword. The more Torah we know, the more responsibility we have to act in a way that is fitting for it. If we're viewed as Torah scholars and don't act in an appropriate manner, then we desecrate Hashem's name. We have to be careful that our Torah knowledge doesn't cause us to be arrogant. Therefore, it must be balanced by a berakha that we find favor with others.

The first berakha relates to a material pursuit, and the second to a spiritual pursuit. The third berakha is a synthesis of the first two. We ask that we will be able to properly balance between the material and the spiritual, a difficult balance to achieve. We therefore ask for peace and tranquility.

Birkat Kohanim is thus indeed a threefold berakha, but each berakha requires a specific counterbalance, a protection against the excesses of the first berakha, ensuring that it isn't misused but properly channeled in order to enhance our service of Hashem.

A Receptacle for Berakha

They shall bestow My name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them. (Bemidbar 6:27)

After recording Birkat Kohanim, the Torah states: "They shall bestow My name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them." This pasuk is somewhat cryptic. What does it mean that the kohanim "bestow God's name" on the children of Israel? And who is blessing us, the kohanim or Hashem?

The Akedat Yitzhak, quoted in Lekah Tov (R' Yaakov Yisrael Bifus),

suggests, as do many baalei mussar, that in order to receive berakha, one must first prepare himself to be a worthy recipient of it. The Akedat Yitzhak explains with a parable: Imagine a river with rushing water and rapids. One section, you notice, is much deeper than the rest. There is more water there because the riverbed is deeper. The lower the bed, the more water can gather there. The wider the depression, the more water can gather there. God's blessings, His shefa, works similarly. He's constantly bestowing bounty and blessing on the world, and the more we prepare ourselves and make ourselves worthy of them, the more we're able to receive them. As the pasuk in Tehillim (81:11) states: "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it."

This, explains the Akedat Yitzhak, is the meaning of the kohanim "bestowing the name of Hashem" upon Bnei Yisrael. The kohanim have to be the leaders and teachers of Klal Yisrael and must make sure that the people are worthy of Hashem's blessings. It's the job of educators and parents to teach and inspire the people so that they conduct their lives in a way that makes them worthy of Hashem's blessings.

The Peninei HaTorah (Rabbi David Hadad) expresses a similar idea. He quotes the Dubno Maggid as asking, "Why, when the kohanim bless the people of Israel, do they face the people? Wouldn't it make more sense for them to face the Ark and pray toward Hashem, asking Him to bless the people?" The Dubno Maggid answers that the kohanim facing the people expresses to them that it's up to them, to us, to make ourselves worthy of receiving Hashem's berakha. Hashem wants to give us His blessing, it's up to us to become worthy receptacles of it.

<https://jewishlink.news/minyan-and-kiddush-levana/>

Minyan and Kiddush Levana

By Rabbi Haim Jachter

May 28, 2026

B'rov Am Hadrat Melech

Many mistakenly think that Kiddush Levana requires a minyan, especially since most say Kaddish at this occasion (German Jews do not). However, Kiddush Levana does not appear on the mishna's (Megillah 4:3) list of activities that require a minyan. Moreover, the desirability of a minyan at Kiddush Levana first appears in the Magen Avraham (426:13). The Magen Avraham's idea is well-accepted, as the Biur Halacha (426:2 s.v. Ela) and Kaf HaChaim (426:13) codify it. However, the Biur Halacha clarifies (citing the Pri Chadash) that, strictly speaking, one may recite Kiddush Levana by himself.

Moreover, it is not a minyan that is required, but a large group, as the Magen Avraham and Biur Halacha mentions, "b'rov am hadrat melech—the larger the group, the greater the glory extended to the king." Thus, the larger the group, the more we glorify Hashem. In addition, the Biur Halacha cites the Chayei Adam, which states that even three people reciting Kiddush Levana together also constitutes "b'rov am hadrat melech." Rav Moshe Feinstein (Teshuvot Igrot Moshe Orach Chaim 1:144) adds that there is even significance to two people saying Kiddush Levana together.

The Source: Kabbalat Pnei HaShechina

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 42a) speaks of Kiddush Levana in grand terms, stating that it involves kabbalat pnei haShechina. The Gemara even says that it would be sufficient for us if we were only to conduct

our monthly Kiddush Levana. As such, Kiddush Levana is not an ordinary bracha.

The Gemara continues by saying that, since we greet Hashem when saying Kiddush Levana, we must say it while standing. The Gemara even records that Mereimar and Mar Zutra (following Yad Rama's interpretation) exerted great effort, in their elder years, to stand as best they could to recite Kiddush Levana, thereby expressing the great stature of Kiddush Levana.

Therefore, we accord Kiddush Levana extraordinary honor and respect. We recite it outdoors as we would to greet a king, say it on Motzei Shabbat while still wearing our Shabbat finery, dance afterwards, and include various pesukim and teachings of Chazal that emphasize the importance of Kiddush Levana. Reciting Kiddush Levana with a large group is yet another way to exalt this great ceremony and elevate its monthly recital into a very special event. How Long Should We Wait?

The Biur Halacha cites the Eishel Avraham, stating that, just as the Rama (Orach Chaim 426:2) says we wait for a Motzei Shabbat to recite Kiddush Levana only until 10 days past the molad, the same applies to waiting for a large group. Both a large group and the Motzei Shabbat recital glorify Kiddush Levana, but neither is essential to its recitation. Thus, we tolerate the risk of missing the opportunity to recite this precious bracha only until 10 days from the molad.

Separate Ashkenazic and Sephardic Kiddush Levana Groups? Surprisingly, Rav Ovadia Yosef (in a letter printed in Kovetz Mishnat Yosef 18:108:2) rules that, due to their slightly different nuschaot for Kiddush Levana, Sephardim and Ashkenazim should split into two groups to recite Kiddush Levana. Rav Mordechai Willig disagrees. Rav Willig's ruling seems much more compelling, as the differences are not so stark as to require sacrificing "b'rov hadrat melech" to create two separate groups.

Conclusion: Priority to Say Kiddush Levana With a Group Although not required, there is a strong preference to recite Kiddush Levana in a large group. It is so important that the Shaa'ar HaTziyun (426:20) writes that if one has a choice between saying Kiddush Levana with a large group during the week and alone on Motzei Shabbat, saying it in a large group has priority.

Rabbi Jachter serves as the rav of Congregation Shaarei Orah, rebbe at Torah Academy of Bergen County and a get administrator with the Beth Din of Elizabeth. Rabbi Jachter's 22 books, including the most recently published "Chiddush Levanah: New Insights and Clarifications of Kiddush Levanah," may be purchased at Amazon and Judaica House.

Parshot Bamidbar and Naso: Introduction to Sefer Bamidbar

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

PART I

This week, we will introduce the 4th book of the Torah. What is the name of this new sefer? Or, more properly, what are its names?

- 1) Hebrew: "Sefer BeMidbar."
- 2) Latin: "Numeri."
- 3) English: "Numbers."
- 4) Hazal: "Humash ha-Pekudim."

Which of these names does not belong? Clearly, "BeMidbar": this name says nothing about the content of the sefer. The origin of this name is the fact that it is the first significant word in the book (like the word "bereshit" in the first book of the Torah, the word "shemot" in the second book, the word "va-yikra" in the third book, and the word "devarim" in the fifth book). On the other hand, the other names here all seem to fit into a category: numbers, or "pekkudim," which means "counting." These names tell us there will be counting and listing in this book, and indeed, there is plenty of that. But "pekkudim" is more than just "numbers." What does the root "P-K-D" mean in the context of the Humash Ha-Pekudim?

MEANINGS OF P-K-D IN THIS SEFER:

P-K-D means to remember something and pay special attention to it. This basic meaning of P-K-D is what ties together the three specific ways in which P-K-D is used in our sefer:

- 1) P-K-D = to count or list. Counting or listing is a process which recalls each individual and focuses attention on every individual in the list or count.
- 2) P-K-D = to appoint to a task / position. Appointment to a task, or the appointment of an institution, is a process which involves considering a person's (or an institution's) capabilities and record and then focusing special attention on that individual as a person capable of a particular task.
- 3) P-K-D = to punish. Punishment takes place when Hashem decides to "remember" what a person has done and that the time has come to pay special attention (in this case, special negative attention) to that person.

[Reward, of course, is the opposite of punishment: Hashem decides to "remember" a good deed or a promise He has made to someone, and pays special attention to that person by fulfilling the promise. In Tanakh, we often find P-K-D used in this positive sense, like when Hashem 'recalls' His promise to give Sara a son -- "va-Hashem pakad et Sara." But this sense of P-K-D does not appear in the Humash Ha-Pekudim.]

P-K-D AS COUNTING OR LISTING:

What counting takes place in this sefer, or what lists do we find in the sefer?

- 1) Nesi'im (chiefs or leaders of tribes) are listed many times in the Humash ha-Pekudim:
 - a) When they are selected to help take a census of the nation.
 - b) As commanders of the fighting force of each shevet (tribe).
 - c) When they donate large gifts to the Mishkan (portable Temple) to celebrate its grand opening.
 - d) When scouts are sent to Eretz Yisrael to check out the land and the strength of its inhabitants.
- 2) Counting of all males of fighting age:
 - a) Each shevet's fighting-age males are counted and their number is reported to us.
 - b) The total of all the shevatim is also reported.
 - c) Toward the end of the sefer, all fighting-age males are counted again; the Torah again reports the number of each shevet and total of all shevatim.
- 3) Listing of the degalim:

a) The Torah describes how the shevatim were split into four degalim (military wings, or "flags"). Several times, the Torah lists the degalim and each of their member shevatim, as well as listing the number of fighting men in each degel and listing the commander of each degel.

4) Counting of the Leviyyim: The Leviyyim are not counted with the fighting men of the nation because their job is to be the "army of Hashem." But they are counted separately:

a) First, their total number is counted.

b) In a second count, the number of Leviyyim old enough to be part of the "army of Hashem" is also counted and reported.

5) Counting of bekhорim: One of the major events of the Humash Ha-Pekudim is that the bekhорim (first-born), who are considered holy, are replaced by the members of Shevet Levi. The bekhорim and Leviyyim are both counted, then the bekhорim transfer their holiness to the Leviyyim.

6) Gifts of the Nesi'im: The leaders of each of the twelve shevatim help celebrate the 'grand opening' of the Mishkan with large donations. Even though all of the Nesi'im donate exactly the same thing to the Mishkan, the Torah still takes the trouble to present a complete list of the gifts, repeating exactly the same lengthy description of the gift twelve times.

7) Travels: Toward the end of the sefer, the Torah reviews for us the long list of all the places where the nation stops to camp in its 40-year journey through the desert.

8) Korbanot of Succot: The Torah reports the korbanot (sacrifices) of each day of Succot, which follow a very regular and systematic pattern. On the first day, they are to bring 13 bulls; on every successive day, one less bull. But instead of telling us what pattern to follow, the Torah spells out exactly what korbanot we are to bring on each day, spelling it out: on the first day, 13. On the second day, 12. On the third day, 11

[An example of contrast: the Talmud does not spell out how many candles to light on each night of Hanukka; it simply tells us to start with one and to add one each night.]

P-K-D AS APPOINTING:

To be "poked" means "to appoint"; in modern Hebrew, for example, "pakid" means "an official" or "clerk," someone "appointed." Sefer BeMidbar is the Humash ha-Pekudim in the sense of "Book of Appointment" because it describes how the nation is to be organized: each group and individual is appointed a specific task; a national infrastructure is created.

1) Nesi'im are appointed to help with the count of their people.

2) Fighting-age men are assigned to the task of being the nation's military force.

3) First-born sons of the nation are removed from their designation as servants for the Mishkan. The Leviyyim are appointed in place of these bekhорim. Shevet Levi is assigned the task of being the nation's "religious force," paralleling the appointment of the rest of the adult males as the "military force." The Leviyyim are assigned to the Mishkan as guards, transporters, and builders/dismantlers. The three family groups within the Leviyyim are each assigned responsibility for a specific part of the Mishkan:

a) Kehat family: the kelei ha-kodesh (holy vessels: Aron, Shulhan, Menora, Mizbehot)

b) Gershon family: the curtains which cover the Mishkan and surround it.

c) Merari family: the structure of the Mishkan itself.

4) The Kohanim are assigned the task of supervising the Leviyyim and protecting them from overstepping their bounds and being injured by Hashem; for instance, the Leviyyim are not to touch the kelim or look at them, so the Kohanim must wrap the kelim before the Leviyyim enter to take the kelim in order to transport them.

5) The camp itself: everyone is assigned a place to camp and a position in which to move with the camp as it travels. The nation is divided into four degalim, each with three shevatim. Each degel is led by one shevet, and the Nasi of that shevet is appointed supreme military commander of that degel. The Kohanim and Leviyyim travel with the Mishkan in the center of the camp; each of the four degalim has an assigned position around the Mishkan.

6) The trumpets: besides the setting up of the camp, the Torah also sets up an intra-camp communication system: two silver trumpets. One kind of blast on the trumpet gathers the Nesi'im together. Another type gathers the whole nation. Another type is the signal to decamp and begin travel. Another type is the signal of war. And another type is blown over korbanot on festive occasions.

7) The Mishkan: in Sefer VaYikra, we saw that the grand opening of the Mishkan was celebrated with an elaborate series of korbanot. This was an appropriate angle to take on the grand opening when we were in the middle of VaYikra, which is all about korbanot. In Sefer BeMidbar, the Torah focuses on a different aspect of the "appointment" of the Mishkan in its official capacity as the Center of Worship: it focuses on the 12-day celebration of the grand opening of the Mishkan by presenting us with a grand list, the list of the identical gifts of the Nesi'im. The list is as typical of BeMidbar as the korbanot are of VaYikra.

8) The Zekenim: later on in the sefer, Moshe becomes frustrated with the burden of leading this uncooperative people through the desert and refuses to go on as leader alone. In response, Hashem commands him to assemble 70 elders and takes some of the spiritual power which is concentrated in Moshe and bestows this power on the elders.

9) Elazar succeeds Aharon: also later on in the sefer, Aharon transfers his authority as the Kohen Gadol to his son, Elazar, by giving him the special clothing worn only by the Kohen Gadol.

10) Yehoshua succeeds Moshe: also later on in the sefer, Moshe transfers his authority as leader to Yehoshua by giving him semikha.

P-K-D AS PUNISHMENT:

One of the darker meanings of "P-K-D" is "punishment." Misdeeds and punishment for misdeeds are one of the major themes of Sefer BeMidbar. The opening sections of Sefer BeMidbar paint a picture of beautiful order and organization as the nation prepares for its journey from Sinai to Eretz Yisrael. The structure of the physical camp is set up, the military structure is created, and different groups are assigned to different tasks. But once we get past the first part of the sefer, we encounter a series of stories in which, time after time, an individual or the whole nation does something wrong and is punished, and the beautiful structure which was designed to bring the people successfully to their land becomes ineffectual and irrelevant:

1) Tav'era: people complain against Hashem and are punished by Him. This is the first hint of trouble in the sefer.

2) Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava: the people complain that they are tired of the "man" (i.e., manna from heaven) and want meat. For the first time, we hear rumblings of enormous ingratitude: the people look back nostalgically at Egypt (!) and wish they had never left that lap of luxury and culinary delicacies. Hashem becomes angry, and although He provides them with meat, He sends a plague to punish them.

3) Moshe becomes frustrated with the people: they just don't seem to get it. They receive the Torah straight from Hashem, and 40 days later they're worshipping an idol; they are taken out of slavery with miracles, and before long they are wishing to be back in good old Egypt and furious with Moshe for taking them out. Moshe, demoralized and frustrated, refuses to go on alone as leader, so Hashem removes some of the burden of leadership from him and places it on the 70 elders Moshe selects.

4) Miryam: Miryam and Aharon, Moshe's siblings, join with the chorus of voices challenging Moshe's leadership. Moshe, ever humble, does not react, but Hashem does, angrily putting Miryam and Aharon in their place and striking Miryam with tzara'at (*not* leprosy; if you want more details, see the shiur on Parashat Tazria). It is Moshe who magnanimously prays for her recovery.

5) The Meraglim: Hashem commands that the nation send scouts to reconnoiter Eretz Yisrael. When they return, they describe the beauty of the land but convince the people that they do not have the strength to conquer the powerful nations of the land. The people accept this evaluation even though they have been promised Hashem's help, and they again raise the cry for a return to Egypt. Hashem, furious, decrees that no one of this generation will see the land. For the next 40 years, they will wander the desert, until they are all dead; then the new generation will enter the land.

6) Aftermath of Meraglim: once Hashem has decreed their punishment, the people realize they have made an enormous mistake. They try to regain the opportunity they have lost: they try to enter Eretz Yisrael. But Moshe warns them that they

will fail, as indeed they do. The nation of Amalek meets them in battle, and without Hashem's help, they flee the field and fall before Amalek.

7) The Korah rebellion: Korah, a Levi, challenges the status of Aharon as a Kohen (Aharon is also the Leviyyim's chief supervisor), while Datan and Aviram challenge Moshe's leadership as chief of the people. Moshe becomes angry and arranges a test to show who has truly been selected by Hashem, and the result of the test is the deaths of Korah, Datan, Aviram, and all of their followers in an angry Divine confirmation of the selection of Moshe as leader and Aharon and his sons as Kohanim.

8) Aftermath of Korah rebellion: the people blame Moshe and Aharon for the deaths of the rebels. Hashem, furious again, responds by sending a plague against the people, which Moshe and Aharon halt -- showing the people that, if anything, they are the people's defenders. But then the people simply transfer blame for the deaths to Hashem, and whine that everyone who approaches Hashem seems to meet with a terrible fate.

9) Mei Meriva: Moshe and Aharon lose their chance to enter Eretz Yisrael when they hit the rock and disobey Hashem's instructions to speak to it to tell it to release its water. This is a disaster of tremendous proportions for Moshe personally, as he himself will tell us when we get to Sefer Devarim and he describes how he begged Hashem to allow him to enter the land.

10) Ba'al Pe'or: Toward the end of the sefer, as the people are moving closer to Eretz Yisrael, they encounter the nation of Midyan. The people of the two nations mix, and Bnei Yisrael quickly become involved in the worship of the god of the Midyanites, Ba'al Pe'or, and also in sexual immorality with the Midyanites. Ironically, this takes place just after Hashem has protected Bnei Yisrael from the curses of Bil'am the prophet; instead of cursing Bnei Yisrael, Bil'am is forced to sing praises of their faithfulness to Hashem, but before you can turn around, the people are behaving unfaithfully.

In all of these incidents, individuals or the entire nation makes terrible mistakes which lead to "pekida" -- punishment. These incidents are so frequent that they become part of the theme of the sefer.

PART II:

In Part I of this shiur, we traced many of the events of Sefer BeMidbar. We split these events into three different categories of "pekida," since Sefer BeMidbar is the Humash Ha-Pekudim. In this sefer, "pekida" has three primary meanings: counting/listing, appointing, and punishment.

In this part of the shiur, we will first present a number of examples of how the word P-K-D is used in the sefer in these three different ways, and then we will discuss how the three themes of pekida interact with one another to produce the coherent literary unit we call a "sefer."

P-K-D: SOME EXAMPLES:

The word P-K-D appears in various forms in Sefer BeMidbar 96 times (Shemot runs a distant second place, with fewer than 20 "P-K-D"s. Many of these instances (the great majority) are in contexts in which counting or listing takes place. In order to demonstrate the use of P-K-D in this "counting" sense but not to belabor the point, I will cite just one example:

BeMidbar 1:19 -- . . . Just as Hashem commanded Moshe, he counted (P-K-D) them in the Sinai Desert.

Somewhat less frequently, we find P-K-D used to describe the appointment of an individual or group to a particular position or function. Some examples:

BeMidbar 1:50 -- "Appoint (P-K-D) the Leviyyim over the Tabernacle of Testimony and over all its utensils and all that belongs to it"

BeMidbar 3:32 -- The head of the princes of Levi was Elazar, son of Aharon, the kohen, appointed over (P-K-D) the guards of the watch of the holy.

BeMidbar 3:36 -- The appointed task (P-K-D) of the children of Merari was the boards of the Tabernacle, its bars, pillars, and sockets, all of its utensils....

BeMidbar 27:16 -- "Let Hashem, God of the spirit of all flesh, appoint (P-K-D) a leader over the congregation."

Finally, our last P-K-D category is that of punishment. Certainly, not every punishment in the sefer is described as a pekida, but I have found it useful to organize the themes of the sefer around this root because the word is used in these ways in the sefer and because, as we will see, the intimate interactions of these three themes, all traceable to this one root, produce the unique character of the sefer. Some examples of this last category:

BeMidbar 14:18 -- Hashem, slow to anger and great in kindness, forgiving sin and transgression, but who will not simply forgive, who visits (P-K-D) the sins of the fathers on the children

BeMidbar 14:29 -- "In this desert will your carcasses fall, all of your countings (P-K-D) according to all of your numbers, from age twenty and up" [This example will be explained further.]

BeMidbar 16:29 -- "If like the deaths of all men do these men perish, and if the visitation (P-K-D) of all men is visited (P-K-D) upon them, then [you will know that] Hashem did not send me."

THE THEMES OF THE HUMASH HA-PEKKUDIM:

Why is it important for the Torah to tell us all of these details about the various countings, listings, and appointments? Since our assumption in reading Tanakh is that it is written for its meaning to all generations, why do we care how many soldiers there were in the shevet of Naftali over 3,000 years ago in the desert? Why is it important for the Torah to painstakingly repeat -- 12 times! -- the gifts of the Nesi'im? Do we really need to know how many male Leviyim there were from one month old and up, and also how many Leviyim there were from 25 years old and up? Why does the Torah tell us -- more than once -- all the details of how the degalim were set up, who were the military commanders, and how many soldiers they each commanded? How many times, after all, does the Torah need to repeat to us the list of the Nesi'im?

Second, whatever the significance of these numbers and lists, what do they have to do with all of the disasters and punishments with which the sefer is so occupied?

It seems to me that two of the aspects of P-K-D are in tension with the third aspect: the P-K-D of counting and the P-K-D of appointing stand together in contrast with the P-K-D of punishment. More fundamentally, the former two represent a vision which conflicts with the vision represented by the latter.

The Humash Ha-Pekudim presents Hashem's grand plan for the entrance of Bnei Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael. These former slaves -- miraculously rescued from the death and despair of Egypt, presented with the Torah amid flashes of lightning and peals of thunder -- are now ready to march triumphantly on to their land, trumpets blaring, ready to scatter their enemies with the help of Hashem's sure hand. Soldiers are numbered and formed into battle units, military leaders appointed, each shevet assigned a specific place in the symmetrical formation of the nation surrounding its crown jewel, the Mishkan. Within the army's protective circle nestles the Levite circle, again with each family assigned to a particular task and position in the traveling camp. With the Kohanim directing, the Leviyim dismantle the Mishkan, shoulder the Aron and other Kelim, and prepare to transport the movable Temple. The silver trumpets blast a signal, the nation breaks camp, and incredibly, two million people move in unison through the desert in ponderous synchronicity.

The lists and numbers of Sefer BeMidbar seem repetitive only when we expect them to communicate discrete bits of information rather than painting a picture. When we put the entire Sefer into perspective, what appears is a dynamic representation of organization, regimentation, assignation, preparation, and finally transportation. The telos of this vision is clear as well: confident, with roles defined and well understood, this group is on the road home. No obstacle can deter them. This is the vision of Hashem and the vision of Moshe.

But it is not the vision of the people. The people do not see the drama or share the excitement; for them, tomorrow is not filled with promise, but with insecurity. At the time of the enslavement, Egypt had been unbearable, a daily genocide. But in rosy hindsight, Egypt was not only the lap of culinary luxury but also, strangely, a place of security. The people made no choices and bore no responsibility to make decisions; their tasks were thrust upon them, their government provided for them from without. In the desert, they must organize themselves, create their own institutions -- their own judiciary, their own army, their own political structure, their own religious representatives. Hashem guides them in all of these tasks, but ultimately the people are responsible for themselves. As if this were not unfamiliar enough after over 200 years of slavery, their daily bread comes falling down from the heavens; instead of the predictable fish, fruits, and vegetables of Egypt, the people are provided with supernatural food directly from Hashem.

Despite incontrovertible evidence of Hashem's presence among them and of His intention to help them reach their goal (after all, He did split the sea and drown their enemies in it), the people cannot muster the courage to undertake the conquest of the Land and its powerful inhabitants; their insecurity deafens them to assurances that Hashem will help them and amplifies the claims of those who insist that the nation cannot match the power of the Canaanites.

The creation of institutions and the appointment of individuals and groups to various responsibilities becomes for many of the people an opportunity to pursue power struggles and bicker over who deserves honor; those who are blind to the Divine vision behind the counting and appointing impute to those in power -- to Moshe especially -- the same motives which energize them. Throughout the Sefer, Moshe's leadership is challenged by those who want more power than they have; for his part, Moshe is bewildered and eventually angered by these attacks, as he sees his leadership function in the context of the Divine process and not as part of the dynamic of ego-driven self-promotion and political jockeying. A reluctant leader from the first moment of his career, Moshe can hardly believe that others accuse him of promoting himself to a position he tried so hard to decline.

In this sense, Sefer BeMidbar is a tragic story of the clash of two visions. The clash between the grand, orderly beauty of P-K-D/counting/appointing and the petty, chaotic P-K-D/punishment produce a Sefer which opens with energy, momentum, and promise, but ultimately delivers death and disappointment. As Hashem says when the people accept the spies' evaluation that they cannot conquer the land, "In this desert will your carcasses fall, all of your countings (P-K-D) according to all of your numbers, from age twenty and up" All of the pekudim, all of the countings and appointments which have been such a focus of this Sefer, all of that will crumble in the desert and come to nothing. All of the planning, all of the assignments of leaders and tasks, all of it is ultimately meaningless and wasted; all of these pekudim are trampled by the pekida of punishment. In this sense, the vision of the people wins out over the vision of Hashem. They refuse (or are unable) to abandon their position, and eventually Hashem gives up on them and pins His 'hopes' on their children, the next generation. For this reason, there is another great counting at the end of the sefer, where the Torah pointedly notes that no one included in the second counting had been counted in the first counting. That entire generation dies; their count amounts to zero. The new generation, unbound by the limitations of their parents, is counted again, undergoing the same process of the setting up of institutions and structures so that they, this time successfully, can enter the land.

Besides being a tragic Sefer, the Humash Ha-Pekudim is also an ironic Sefer: we accompany emancipated slaves whose most plaintive refrain is, "Too bad we left slavery"; we learn of mitzvot introduced by the phrase, "When you get to the Land I am giving to you," when the recipients of these mitzvot already know they will die in this desert and will never see the Land at all; the Leviyim enjoy the status of being raised to holiness above the rest of the nation in an elaborate public ceremony and are assigned to the caretaking of the Mishkan, but they are the same people who, led by Korah, challenge Moshe and Aharon: "Why do you raise yourselves above the congregation of Hashem?"; the Nesi'im, constantly in the spotlight in our Sefer, appointed to positions of responsibility and leadership, are the very same people who participate in the greatest catastrophes of the Sefer: the Torah notes that Korah's supporters are "nesi'im," as are the meraglim (spies), as is Zimri ben Salu, the man who publicly fornicates with a woman from the nation of Midyan; Moshe's leadership, attacked by Korah and his supporters, by the entire nation's frequent angry complaints ("Why did you take us out of Egypt?"), and even by Miryam and Aharon, is something Moshe never wanted at all. He tried unsuccessfully in Sefer Shemot to resist Hashem's command that he lead the people, and in our Sefer, Moshe repeatedly demonstrates great willingness to share his power with others: he wistfully wishes that all of the people could be prophets (not just himself), he willingly grants a portion of his authority to the seventy elders, he is described as an "exceedingly humble" man who did not bother to respond to Miryam's carping at him and indeed seems unperturbed by it (it is Hashem who is furious with Miryam; Moshe intercedes and asks Hashem to heal her of her tzara'at); Bil'am, the sorcerer hired to curse Bnei Yisrael, is forced by Hashem to sing their praises: "[Hashem] sees no evil in Ya'akov, no bad in Israel . . . ," but the very next perek reports that the God-beloved nation has become entrenched in the worship of the idol Ba'al Pe'or and in sexual immorality with the Midyanites.

Above all, the greatest irony of the Sefer is the clash of visions: Hashem and Moshe attempt to build a grand, beautiful organization to accomplish transcendent goals, but the people remain interested in water, tasty and varied food (not just manna every day!), and power politics.

Sefer BeMidbar is a Sefer of missed opportunities. It sets the stage for Sefer Devarim, where Moshe reviews these failures for the benefit of the second generation, attempting to inoculate them against these mistakes, and exhorts them to learn from the limitations of their parents.

Shabbat Shalom