

Weekly Parsha NASO

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

When the Torah describes the count of the tribe of Levi, at the onset of this week's reading, it uses the expression "raise the head of the tribe of Levi." At first glance this is a strange way of to present the matter. The Torah should say directly, "count the tribe of Levi." By using the expression "raise the head" the Torah communicates to us a subtle but vital lesson. And that is that pure numbers by themselves are insufficient when we wish to appreciate the value of tribes, groups, or individuals. For if that group or individual does not have a sense of pride, a sense of mission and purpose, then numbers alone, in the long run, are almost worthless.

The Levites were assigned a special role in Jewish society and temple service. They were also to be the teachers of Israel and, perhaps just as importantly, the role models for Jewish generations and public service. It is no accident of random choice that the greatest public servant the world has ever known, our teacher Moshe, was a Levite. Because, unless leadership feels the impetus of mission and exalted responsibility upon itself, it can never achieve the fulfillment of its assigned task.

This can only be accomplished by raising one's head, by having a sense of pride and self-worth and an individual commitment to excellence in the performance of one's duties and obligations, be they personal or societal. By using the phrase, "raise the head," the Torah emphasizes to us the correct and eternal way of assessing human numbers and accomplishments.

Modesty and humility are necessary traits for all of us and they are extremely necessary for those who find themselves in positions of public leadership, spiritual guidance, and education. Yet, in these areas of human character, like in all other areas of thought and behavior, a proper sense of balance is required. Our teacher Moshe is the most humble and self-effacing of all human beings, yet he realizes that he is Moshe, that his face shines with Godly eternity and that upon him lies the responsibility for preserving the Jewish people and their loyalty to Torah. Therefore, his head is raised while at the same time his inner self retains the humility that characterizes his nature. This is a very delicate balancing act and many a potentially great leader has failed because of an excess of pride, on one hand, and meekness on the other.

We find for instance that King Saul was reprimanded by the prophet Samuel for being overly modest and therefore weak in his response to public pressure. The prophet said to him, "You may be small in your own eyes, but you are the head and leader of the tribes of Israel." Throughout history all of us, and especially those that find themselves in roles of familial, social, educational, and religious leadership are challenged by this exquisite balancing act – how to have a humble heart and a raised head at one and the same time, a demand that the Torah places upon us.

Shabbat shalom

In My Opinion Commentary on Zoom

Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

I have been conducting classes and lectures on Zoom for about three months now. I admit that Zoom is a great creation and that it enabled many of us to remain connected one to another, and to be able to study together. However, as with all good things in life, like chocolate and ice cream, they have their limitations and perhaps should only be done in moderation. I find it quite difficult to speak on Zoom. It requires much more preparation and basically does not allow for any spontaneity as does delivering my lectures in classes. In fact, it has a certain degree of inhibitors to it, because even though you may see people whom you were talking to, you're not really talking to people, but you're talking to a machine that is quite impersonal and shows no reaction to whatever you are saying.

This is hard for me because, as someone who has been a public speaker for most of his life, I always depended on audience reaction to instruct me as how to proceed, when to pause and when to stop. All of this is

lacking naturally when I am on Zoom and I am oftentimes at a loss for words. And I find it hard to express my emotions when I am only speaking to a machine

However, there are instructive things about speaking on Zoom as well. Firstly, one realizes the power of the spoken word. It becomes the means of connection to other people. When you cannot see the person in the flesh and you are not getting a response from your audience, then your only means of connection is the spoken word itself.

The rabbis assign great weight to speech; life and death are in the hands of the spoken word. When one is on Zoom, or at least when I am on Zoom, I measure my words perhaps more carefully than I do when speaking to a live audience, face to face. Also, if one makes a mistake speaking on Zoom, it's hard to rectify. In an ordinary conversation or even in public speaking, somehow it becomes easier to correct errors and to set matters straight.

Zoom has taught me that greater preparation is necessary before giving any sort of lecture. Now, as a rabbi, I have spoken many times about the same subject, albeit in different venues and to varied audiences. Every rabbi has in his arsenal, so to speak, prepared speeches that can be repeated, but I find that with Zoom that becomes almost impossible. Without an emotional or psychological reaction, I am always creatively challenged whenever I deliver a Zoom speech or lecture.

Now that is good for me because somehow it refreshes my old brain, but it also takes a lot out of me, and I noticed that when I used to be able to give a one hour class, let us say, in person, I was not as tired as when I have to give a 40 minute class on Zoom. This is because creative thinking is always something that taxes us physically as well as emotionally and intellectually.

With the reopening of synagogues, there will be also a revival of speeches and lectures that will be delivered personally. I do not know exactly how this will work out and what form it will take, but I am certainly looking forward to it. The question has arisen whether our synagogue should continue Zoom programs even when all of this has passed. I imagine we will cross that bridge when we get to it, but I am much more in favor of speaking to an actual physical audience than I am of Zooming all the time.

However, whatever is necessary will be done. We have all been taught how adaptable we really are and how we can face unimagined situations and somehow deal with them. So, this situation will also be resolved, and we will be able to experience the restoration of personal communication face to face. Personally, I hope it will happen speedily and in good health.

Shabbat Shalom

The Blessing of Love (Naso 5780)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

I confess to a thrill every time I read these words:

Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

"May the Lord bless you and protect you.

May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn His face toward you and grant you peace."

Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:23-27)

These are among the oldest continuously-used words of blessing ever. We recite them daily at the beginning of the morning service. Some say them last thing at night. We use them to bless our children on Friday nights. They are often used to bless the bride and groom at weddings. They are widely used by non-Jews also. Their simplicity, their cumulative three-word, five-word, seven-word structure, their ascending movement from protection to grace to peace, all make them a miniature gem of prayer whose radiance has not diminished in the more than three thousand years since their formulation.

In previous years I have written about the meaning of the blessings. This time I ask three different questions: First, why Priests? Why not Prophets, Kings, Sages or saints?

Second, why the unique form of the birkat ha-mitzvah, the blessing made by the Priests over the commandment to bless the people? The blessing is, “who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless His people with love.”[1] No other blessing over a command specifies that it be done with love.

There is an argument in the Talmud as to whether commands must be performed with the proper intent, kavannah, or whether the deed itself is enough. But intent is different from motive. Intent merely means that I am performing the command because it is a command. I am acting consciously, knowingly, deliberately, in obedience to the Divine will. It has nothing to do with an emotion like love. Why does this command and no other require love?

Third, why have human beings bless the people at all? It is God who blesses humanity and His people Israel. He needs no human intermediary. Our passage says just this: “Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” The blessings come not from the Priests but from God Himself. So why require the Priests to “put His name” on the people?

In answer to the first, Sefer ha-Hinnuch[2] says simply that the Priests were the sacred group within the people. They ministered in the House of God. They spent their lives in Divine service. Their life’s work was sacred. So was their habitat. They were the guardians of holiness. They were therefore the obvious choice for the sacred rite of bringing down God’s blessings upon the people.

Rabbi Aharon Walkin, in the preface to his Matsa Aharon, offered a more prosaic explanation. The Priests had no share in the land. Their sole income was from the mattenot kehunah, the gifts of the Priests, that was their due from the people as a whole. It followed that they had an interest in the people prospering, because then they, too, would prosper. They would bless the people with a full heart, seeking their good, because they would benefit thereby.

Rabbi Avraham Gafni offered a third explanation.[3] We read that on the consecration of the Tabernacle, “Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them” (Lev. 9:22). Rashi says that the blessing he gave the people on that occasion was indeed the priestly blessing as specified in our parsha. However, Ramban suggests that perhaps Aaron’s blessing was spontaneous, and because he showed such generosity of spirit, he was given by God the reward that it would be his descendants who would bless Israel in future.

What then about the reference in the blessing to love? There are two different interpretations: that the reference is to the Priests, or that the reference is to God.

The second reverses the word order of the blessing and reads it not as “who commanded us to bless His people with love,” but rather, “who in love commanded us to bless His people.” The blessing speaks of God’s love, not that of the Priests. Because God loves His people, He commands the Priests to bless them.[4]

The first reading, grammatically more plausible, is that it is the Priests who must love. This is the basis of the statement in the Zohar that “a Priest who does not love the people, or a Priest who is not loved by the people, may not bless.”[5] We can only bless what we love. Recall how the blind and aged Isaac said to Esau, “Prepare me the tasty food that I love and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die” (Gen. 27:4). Whether it was the food that Isaac loved, or what it represented about Esau’s character – that he cared enough for his father to find him the food he liked – Isaac needed the presence of love to be able to make the blessing.

Why then does the blessing for this mitzvah and no other specify that it must be done with love? Because in every other case it is the agent who performs the ma’aseh mitzvah, the act that constitutes the command. Uniquely in the case of the priestly blessings, the Priest is merely a machshir mitzvah – an enabler, not a doer. The doer is God Himself: “Let them place My name on the children of Israel and I will bless

them.” The Kohanim are merely channels through which God’s blessings flow.

This means that they must be selfless while uttering the blessings. We let God into the world and ourselves to the degree that we forget ourselves and focus on others.[6] That is what love is. We see this in the passage in which Jacob, having fallen in love with Rachel, agrees to Laban’s terms: seven years of work. We read: “So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her” (Gen. 29:20). The commentators ask the obvious question: precisely because he was so much in love, the seven years should have felt like a century. The answer is equally obvious: he was thinking of her, not him. There was nothing selfish in his love. He was focused on her presence, not his impatient desire.

There is, though, perhaps an alternative explanation for all these things. As I explained in Covenant and Conversation Acharei Mot – Kedoshim, the ethic of character.

The key text of the holiness ethic is Leviticus 19: “Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” It is this chapter that teaches the two great commands of interpersonal love, of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness, taught by the Priests, is the ethic of love. This surely is the basis of Hillel’s statement, “Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them close to Torah.”[7]

That ethic belongs to the specific vision of the Priest, set out in Genesis 1, which sees the world as God’s work and the human person as God’s image. Our very existence, and the existence of the universe, are the result of God’s love.

By blessing the people, the Priests showed them what love of one’s fellow is. Here is Rambam’s definition of what it is to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’: “One should speak in praise of his neighbour, and be considerate of his money, even as he is considerate of his own money, or desires to preserve his own honour.”[8] Blessing the people showed that you sought their good – and seeking their good is what loving them means.

Thus the Kohanim set an example to the people by this public display of love – or what we would call today “the common good.” They thus encouraged a society in which each sought the welfare of all – and such a society is blessed, because the bonds between its members are strong, and because people put the interests of the nation as a whole before their own private advantage. Such a society is blessed by God, whereas a selfish society is not, and cannot, be blessed by God. No selfish society has survived for long.

Hence our answers to the questions: why the Kohanim? Because their ethic emphasised love – of neighbour and stranger – and we need love before we can bless. Love is mentioned in the blessing over the commandment, because love is how blessings enter the world. And why have human beings bestow the blessing, instead of God doing so Himself? Because the Kohanim were to be role models of what it is for humans to care for the welfare of others. I believe that Birkat Kohanim contains a vital message for us today: A society whose members seek one another’s welfare is holy, and blessed.

Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89)

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – This week’s reading of Naso describes the “Sota,” the woman who acts immodestly. At the very least, she sequesters herself alone with a man despite the fact that her husband warned her against seeing that person. She therefore undergoes the test of the bitter waters. However, during the spring holiday period, we saw two other women – great heroines of our people, Esther (Purim) and Ruth (Shavuot) who also commit immodest acts, for which they are ultimately praised and through which salvation and redemption are brought about. Let us revisit their stories to see how they differ from that of the Sota.

Both heroines compromise their modesty and perhaps even their chastity, Esther with Ahasuerus in the palace of the king and Ruth with Boaz on the threshing floor in Efrat. Moreover, both of these

outstanding women hail from gentile countries of exile and one even from gentile stock: Esther from Persia and Ruth from Moab.

But here is where the comparisons end. Although each of these two women undergoes a profound, existential change, a switch in direction with profound ramifications, they part company in very significant ways.

Esther seems to have been an assimilating Jewess who was eager to become the Queen of Persia. She used her Persian name – from the pagan goddess Astarte – rather than her Hebrew name Hadassah; she is taken for the nighttime beauty contest and undergoes a 12-month preparatory beauty treatment without protest. She even concurs with Mordecai (her cousin, or even perhaps her husband as the midrash suggests) not to reveal her national heritage (lest she be rejected on the grounds that she is Jewish – see the suggestion, albeit rejected by the Ibn Ezra).

It is only when Mordecai publicly demonstrates in front of the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes against Haman's decree to annihilate the Jews of Persia, bidding Esther to "come out of the closet," as it were, and go before the king on behalf of her people, that Esther puts her life on the line. By doing so, she becomes one of the greatest penitents of Jewish history.

The words Mordecai uses to convince Esther have reverberated throughout Jewish history: "Do not imagine in your soul that you will be able to escape in the king's palace any more than the rest of the Jews. For if you persist in keeping silent at a time like this, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether it was just for a time such as this that you attained the royal position" (Esther 5:13,14).

The Jews in Shushan gather for three days of prayer and fasting, Esther persuades the king to allow the Jews to protect themselves during the Persian "pogrom" against them, Haman and his sons are killed, and the Jewish community survives.

The Talmud (B.T. Megila 14a) rules that despite all the other festivities, Hallel (psalms of praise) is not to be chanted on Purim; since "we still remained slaves to Ahasuerus" – and an Ahmadinejad can still become a replacement for Haman.

Esther, was born of Jewish parents but married the gentile Ahasuerus: Ruth was a Moabite, she followed Naomi to the Land of Israel, changing geographically and existentially by converting to Judaism. Her ancestor Lot had defected from Abraham when he left Israel and moved to Sodom, now she repaired this by becoming a second Abraham.

Like our forefather, she left her birthplace and homeland for the Land of Israel, a strange nation and the God of ethical monotheism. In her own words, "Where you go, I will go" (to the Land of Israel) – "your nation will be my nation, your God shall be my God" (Ruth 1:16).

In the deepest sense, Ruth entered Abraham's "Covenant between the Parts" (Genesis 15). God promised Abraham that he would be an eternal nation, his seed would never be destroyed and his descendants would live in their homeland, Israel and through this nation, "all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:1). This is far more than the survival of the Jews in Persia; this is world redemption.

Hence Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor to seduce Boaz, to bear his Jewish seed, just as Tamar, the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi's ancestor Judah the son of Jacob, had seduced her father-in-law in order to bear his seed (Gen. 38).

But Ruth is not satisfied. She understands that Jewish eternity is linked to two crucial components: Jewish seed in the land of Israel. She doesn't consummate their relationship on the threshing floor; she asks him to "redeem" her, to buy back Naomi's familial inheritance and to marry her "in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel" so that her descendants can be Jews in the Jewish homeland.

Through their actions, Esther succeeded in gaining a respite in persecution, which is the most we can hope for in galut (exile). Ruth succeeded in entering Jewish eternity, the Abrahamic Covenant, and due to her compassionate righteousness and loving-kindness toward Naomi she became the herald of Jewish redemption. Her journey leads to the

day when the nations of the world will join the family of Abraham, father of a multitude of nations.

Shabbat Shalom!

BS"D Parashat Naso

Rabbi Nachman Kahana

Degrees of Punishments

Four degrees in a Yiddishe father's tool chest of punishments: frask, shmice, potch, pet'chala.

Father comes home to the mess that his kids made in the house. The oldest boy gets a frask (a big slap on the cheek in anger), the younger one gets a shmice (hit of a stick where he sits), the youngest boy, a potch (a medium slap on his cheek.) and the little daughter gets off with a pet'chala (barely a slap on her cheek).

The Angel of Severe Justice, in his appointed role of prosecutor of humanity, appeared before the Creator with voluminous documentation attesting to the sins of man, which included only one small paragraph regarding the Jewish people. HaShem passes judgement with a punishment of a pandemic virus to mirror the pan-avairus (raixez) that the majority of the world's nations are committing.

What is this pan-avaira the world is being accused of? Some heavenly initiatives take longer than others to register in the dull minds of human beings; but now the puzzle is taking shape, even though the details are still a bit sketchy.

The Gemara declares (Shabbat 55a) that the cause of all human suffering is their sins.

And the corollary: the severity of the punishment is proportional to the sin or to the sum of a variety of misdeeds collectively. So, what is humanity doing so wrong at this time?

We are in the throes of a vicious, obstinate pandemic which is killing hundreds of thousands now, and possibly even millions of human beings around the world. It could bring starvation and deprivation to billions and has signs of reverting national economies to levels of 100 years ago! HaShem the Creator is demonstrating great anger with His creations. Some nations are feeling His frask, others his shmice, others his potch and even we in Eretz Yisrael, albeit a little pet'chala (no more – Thank HaShem).

This degree of world punishment has to be on a Biblical scale of sin. But why now, when there is an unprecedented awareness in many nations of human rights, social justice and transparency in government?

The answer has to be a sin that is rampant throughout the vast majority of the world's states through a common sin. That avenue of sin is the international body that incorporates 193 nations, The United Nations.

Explanation:

The UN Charter of 1945 in Article 2(4) declares that all UN member states "shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations".

A day does not pass when some psychotic, delusional Shi'ite Iranian leader reiterates his country's intention to destroy the holy state of Israel, with never an attempt on the part of Iran to disguise that this is the major thrust behind their ongoing race to develop a nuclear weapon. Despite all this, there has never been a proposal by any UN member state to expel or even censure the rogue state of Iran, based on the above-mentioned article 2(4)! However, It's actually very simple.

Who are we talking about? The Jews and their little Jewish half-acre!! Most Christian and Moslem theologians, their adherents and allies, would feel spiritually uplifted and fulfilled if there was no State of Israel. The return of the Jewish nation to the holy land and to Yerushalayim is conclusive confirmation of the Biblical proclamation that we, the Children of Israel, are God's chosen people and 'replacement religion' is the figment of some illusionary anti-Semite. Rome, Mecca, the churches, and mosques and certainly those billions of people who are godless are all living a lie. Hence, most UN nations would be delighted if Iran would do the dirty work for them.

Here lies the worldwide pan-avaira – the 70 plus wolves (nations) surrounding the lonely sheep.

The Sifrei (Midrash Halacha Parashat Beha'alatacha) teaches:

Whoever hates Yisrael (the Jewish people) is considered as hating the Creator... Whoever rises against Yisrael is considered to have risen against HaShem, and whoever touches (harms) Yisrael is as if he has harmed the pupil of his eye.

But this is not new, as King David stated in Tehilim (83):

A psalm of Asaph.

O God do not remain silent; do not turn a deaf ear, do not stand aloof, O God.

See how your enemies growl, how your foes rear their heads.

With cunning they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish.

Come, they say, let us destroy them as a nation, so that Israel's name is remembered no more.

With one mind they plot together; they form an alliance against you

The tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites, of Moab and the Hagrites, Byblos, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, with the people of Tyre.

Even Assyria has joined them to reinforce Lot's descendants.

Do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon, who perished at Endor and became like dung on the ground.

Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna (all four were defeated by the judge Gidon), who said, let us take possession of the pasturelands of God.

Make them like tumbleweed, my God, like chaff before the wind.

As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm.

Cover their faces with shame, Lord, so that they will seek your name.

May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace.

Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord, that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.

The pity in all this is that the world's nations are at this time incapable of doing tshuva (repentance) and will have to undergo more suffering before they see the light. So, until then the words of the prophet MIcha (4,5) will have special meaning:

All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever.

So dear friends just remember the three B-s:

B careful B healthy B HERE!

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

Weekly Insights Parshas Nasso - Sivan 5780

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig
This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Robert Lipton, Reuven Leib ben Mordechai HaLevi. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

Jealousy vs. Envy

And a spirit of jealousy passed over him and he warned his wife and she became defiled... (5:14)

In this week's parsha, the Torah discusses the laws regarding a suspected adulteress. Essentially, this refers to a situation where a husband is concerned that his wife may be beginning a relationship with another man and he warns her in front of witnesses not to go into seclusion with that person. If she does indeed go into seclusion with that man, then the husband can charge her with being an adulteress.

If she claims that she was never intimate with the other man, then the husband can bring her before the kohen to test her fidelity by undergoing the Sotah test which, among other things, consists of drinking "bitter water." If she is guilty her body begins to "explode" (she dies gruesomely and so does her paramour); if she is innocent then she is blessed with fertility. It is important to note that a woman can avoid going through the process by confessing and merely forgoing her kesuvah to receive her divorce.

This concept of the Torah catering to a jealous husband requires some explanation. After all, Chazal find jealousy to be one of the more abominable character traits. We find in Pirkei Avos (4:28) Rabbi Elazar

HaKappar said: "Jealousy, lust, and the [pursuit of] honor remove a person from the world." Though the Sotah process is much more civilized and enlightened than other common practices in those times (or even than the pervasive present day practice of "honor killings"), conceding to a husband's jealousy seems to be contrary to Jewish values. In fact, we seemingly find a Torah prohibition against being jealous in a pretty prominent place; Thou shall not be envious of your friend's home, wife, slaves, etc. - is the last of the Ten Commandments! Yet, according to one opinion in the Talmud, it is a mitzvah for a husband to begin this process. Why are we allowing a husband to give in to his jealousy?

In order to understand the concept of Sotah, it is important to recognize the distinction between envy and jealousy. Envy is that overwhelming desire for what someone else has. Envy is prohibited at all times. As Ibn Ezra points out in his comment on thou shall not be envious (Shemos 20:14), this prohibition applies even when one pays an exorbitant amount of money to coerce the other person to sell what he doesn't really want to sell. The only antidote to envy is to know who you are and to understand that what someone else has is right for them and most likely not for you. The Ibn Ezra (ibid) gives the example: "this is similar to the notion that a common villager does not desire to marry the princess daughter of the king." He knows she isn't right for him.

Jealousy, on the other hand, is the overpowering feeling that comes with the realization that someone is trying to take something that is rightfully yours. In other words, jealousy is the primal instinct to protect what is yours. Jealousy can be experienced in many different situations; someone trying to take your love interest, or your client, or even your car. It is acceptable to be jealous in any of these situations. After all, you are reacting to the fact that someone is improperly trying to take something from you. Of course, jealousy can also be derived from a figment of one's imagination and own insecurity. While we allow a husband to act in a jealous manner, his wife still has to have gone into seclusion in the presence of two witnesses. In other words, his feelings have to be confirmed by facts in the real world, not just in a jealous fantasy.

Perhaps the most prevalent issues of both envy and jealousy occur in family dynamics. The role of a parent is to give each child a feeling that they have a special place in their hearts, a place that no one can ever take away from them. This gives the child a sense of security as to their place in the family, and alleviates many jealousies. Perhaps as important, a parent must make sure every child is actualized and feels accomplished in their area of specialty. After all, if Hashem saw fit to create them, there is something special and unique about them. Once children are comfortable with themselves and happy with who they are, they won't desire what others have.

Brotherhood of Man

On the second day Nesanel ben Tzu'ar the leader of Yissachar brought his offering; one silver tray that weighed one hundred and thirty (shekolim), one silver bowl that weighed seventy shekalim (7:18-19).

This week's parsha discusses in seemingly very repetitive detail (see accompanying Did You Know column) the very specific gifts that the head of each tribe contributed to the Mishkan on the day of the inauguration of the altar. On this verse, Rashi comments that numerical value of the words "silver tray" is equivalent to 930, which corresponds to the amount of years that Adam lived. The one hundred and thirty shekalim that the tray weighed refers to the age that Adam was when he fathered to his son Seth (Bereishis 5:3). The numerical value of "one silver bowl" is equal to 520, which was the age when Noah fathered his children (500) and the twenty years that preceded it when Hashem informed him that a flood was coming. The seventy shekalim weight of the tray refers to the seventy nations of the world who descended from Noah.

All of these allusions to non Jews during the inauguration of the altar seems very strange. This event was celebrating the altar of our Mishkan; what does our altar have to do with the non Jewish world?

Maimonides (Yad Hilchos Beis Habechira 2:2) states, "we have a tradition that the place that the altar was constructed (in the temple) was the place that Avraham built an altar and bound Yitzchak upon it; this

was the place that Noah built his altar when he exited the ark; this was the exact spot that the children of Adam, Kayin and Hevel, brought their sacrifices; and was the very spot that Adam was created from. Our Rabbis have taught 'Adam was created from the spot that he receives atonement.'"

Maimonides is teaching us something truly remarkable. All of mankind is connected to this specific place in the universe. We tend to look at our Beis Hamikdash as being something that is only for the Jewish people. Our natural discomfort and distrust of the non Jewish world, borne out of thousands of years of oppression and suffering at their hands, makes it difficult to comprehend that they too have a connection to the place of our Beis Hamikdash, our capital, our home.

Yet, we conveniently forget that the terrible suffering at their hands was really just Hashem punishing us for our wrongdoings. It goes without saying that many of them enjoyed the process of torturing and killing us a little too much. But we must never lose sight of the fact that we brought these painful retributions on ourselves. All of it was because we failed in our primary responsibility of bringing the awareness of Hashem into this world. This is the job that Avraham Avinu took upon himself and why he is considered the first Jew. He went on a crusade to make sure that people were aware of Hashem and understood that we owed Him our fealty.

The place of the altar is the place where all of mankind connects with Hashem and is empowered to serve Hashem through sacrifices. In fact, it is our responsibility to make sure that the entire world is aware of Hashem and is able to connect to Him. It is no wonder, then, that the main religions of the western world all feel intensely connected to Yerushalayim. We must remember that as caretakers appointed by Hashem, it is our responsibility to give the entire world a place to worship Hashem and connect to Him.

Did You Know...

At the end of this week's parsha, we find seventy-two verses describing the gifts bestowed on the Mishkan by each tribe on the day of the inauguration of the altar. Oddly enough, even though each tribe brought exactly the same offering, the Torah saw fit to recount in detail each tribe's contributions (making this the longest parsha in the Torah).

This is difficult to understand; we know that the Torah doesn't even have an extra letter. Why would the Torah go to such great length just to repeat each tribe's identical contribution?

Ramban (Nasso 7:13) answers that the idea to bring an offering occurred to each leader independently and each one had his own specific reasoning for his contribution. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15) explains why each Nasi brought what he did. We learn from here a remarkable lesson; the same act with a different intention is an entirely different act. A few examples are listed below; for a complete list see the aforementioned Midrash.

Nachshon ben Aminadov (Tribe Yehuda) brought his first, and brought his offering regarding monarchy; as the Jewish kings come from Yehuda. For example, he offered a silver bowl corresponding to the world, which is like a ball, and it weighed seventy shekels since Shlomo and Mashiach will one day rule over the seventy nations of the world.

Nesanel ben Tzu'ar (Tribe Issachar) brought his offering regarding the knowledge of Torah, as that is what Issachar represented. For example, he brought his silver bowl corresponding to the Torah, which is referenced as bread and the lechem hapanim, which were referred to as bowls (Shemos 25:29).

Eliab ben Helon (Tribe Zevulan) brought his offering regarding his commerce that he did to support Issachar. For example, he brought his silver bowl, symbolizing the sea, which is shaped like a dish.

Elizur ben Shedeur (Tribe Reuven) brought his offering corresponding to Reuven. That is, he brought a silver basin, alluding to when Reuven convinced the brothers to cast Yosef into the pit.

Eliasaph ben Deuel (Tribe Gad) brought his offering as an allusion to the Exodus from Egypt. For example, the silver weighed 130 shekalim referencing the age of Yocheved, the mother of Moshe, who was 130 when Moshe was born.

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For the week ending 30 May 2020 / 7 Sivan 5780

Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com

Parsha Insights

The Problem Of Slippers

“The Children of Yisrael will encamp, each person by his banner, according to the insignia of their fathers' household, at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting they will encamp.” (2:1)

Ryan Ramsey was the captain of the nuclear submarine HMS Turbulent between 2008 and 2011 and once spent 286 days at sea without seeing the sky. He shared an 84 meter steel tube with 130 people. In the middle of the total lock-down, the BBC screened an interesting interview with him. Two of his tips resonated with me. The first was to be careful to attend to one's personal appearance. It's all too easy in a time of lock-down to let one's personal grooming slip, which can lead to a general decline. For an observant Jew this translates as not davening in your slippers. Man is created b'tzelem Elokim, and he preserves that tzelem by preserving tzurat ha'adam.

The other tip he had was to maintain a routine. Shigra – or routine – is a double-edged blade. One of the great Rabbis of a previous generation (please let me know who it was), when visiting his son in his Yeshiva, would first of all go and check his son's bedroom rather than go and see how his son was learning in the Beit Midrash (study hall).

Personal order is both a barometer and a cause of application and organization. It also accelerates time. The monotony of living in a submarine or locked up at home is reduced by routine – hours become links between set activities – hours become days. Days become months. It's exactly that same difficulty we find when we try to remember a specific day three years ago that helps us deal with monotony. It's a G-d-given amnesia that helps the mind deal with boredom. I have no problem whatsoever remembering the day of my wedding, or my son's first haircut, but try me on a specific day two months ago!

A slave's life is very monotonous, but it's also very regular. In one sense, it's very relaxing. You just keep doing the same thing every day without thinking. When the Jewish People left Egypt and experienced the most memorable event of any life time – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – they were challenged by an event that could easily destabilize them. And a few million people wandering around an uncharted desert after the comfort and stability of the fleshpots of Egypt could have been a disaster waiting to happen.

“The Children of Yisrael shall encamp, each man by his banner according to the insignia of their fathers' household, at a distance surrounding the Tent of Meeting shall they encamp.” (2:1)

This week's Torah portion goes into great detail about the precise location and the job of each one of the priestly tribes. There is a hint here that order and routine are fundamentals of both sanity and the ability to serve our Creator appropriately — and that starts with not wearing slippers for davening.

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Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message - Naso 5780-2020

The Ordeal of the Sotah — Barbaric or Enlightened?

(Revised and Updated from Parashat Naso 5761-2001)

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's Torah portion, Naso, with 176 verses, is the longest parasha of the Torah, and always follows the festival of Shavuot. Coincidentally, the longest chapter in the Book of Psalms, chapter 119, also contains 176 verses, and the longest tractate of the Talmud, Baba Batra, consists of 176 folios (2-sided pages), as well. On this Shabbat, the first Shabbat after celebrating Shavuot and the receiving of the Torah, the Jewish people show their great love and passion for Torah by extending their Torah reading, demonstrating their unwillingness to bring the study of Torah to an end.

Parashat Naso has many interesting and important themes, but certainly one of the most controversial topics in the entire Torah is the topic of the

סוֹתָהּ "Sotah," the woman who is suspected of being unfaithful to her husband.

At first blush, this portion seems quite similar to the parallel laws found in the Code of Hammurabi, which read:

If the finger is pointed at the wife of a citizen on account of another man, but she has not been caught lying with another man, for her husband's sake—she shall throw herself into the river.

In our Torah portion, if a woman is suspected of being unfaithful to her husband, but hasn't been caught in the act, the woman doesn't drown herself, but, instead, is brought by her jealous husband to the Kohain, the priest, to the Tabernacle. A special sacrifice, symbolic of her straying, is brought for her, and she is forced to drink holy water from an earthen bowl, containing dust from the Tabernacle floor and the scrapings of ink that have been scraped from the writings on a parchment scroll containing a terrible curse. If the woman were guilty of adultery, she would die from the drink. If innocent, she would live and become pregnant. All this seems very similar to the barbaric trials and ordeals of medieval times, to which women were subjected to prove their guilt or innocence.

But, truth is, that the test of the Sotah, when properly understood, is hardly barbaric at all. To the contrary, it is quite enlightened when studied in the light of the Talmudic commentaries and the Jewish legal codes, and is intended to greatly benefit the suspected adulteress.

The Talmud points out that the Torah verses indicate that the husband's accusations of his wife's infidelity are not groundless or contrived. The verses imply, and the Talmud amplifies, that the woman had been seen by witnesses in a compromising position (secluding herself with another man behind closed doors) even after her husband had taken legal action to warn his wife not to be associated with the suspected paramour. What this implies, is not necessarily the woman's guilt, but that the marriage was already in trouble, and that the woman had definitely given her husband ample and legitimate reason for suspicion. The real question is, can this marriage be saved?

In light of modern psychology, we know that suspicion of infidelity is one of the most corrosive, and destructive elements in a marriage. In fact, once suspicion has entered into the marital relationship, it is so pernicious that it can hardly ever be eliminated. While some husbands or wives might forgive a spouse's indiscretions, the suspicion usually lingers, and often festers, and, in most instances, a meaningful subsequent relationship becomes virtually impossible.

The Torah, through the ritual of Sotah, provides a Heavenly mandated method to heal the suspicion, and to provide the couple that wishes to repair their relationship the ability to start afresh without the taint of suspicion, since G-d Himself testifies that the woman is guiltless.

In fact, argue the rabbis, only a guiltless woman who wishes to save her marriage, would go through the ritual, either because of her love for her children, or because she realizes that she had, indeed, misled her husband. On the other hand, a woman, guilty or not, even after she had been accused, could choose not to subject herself to the ordeal, by opting out of the marriage and declaring that she wants a divorce. Since there is no concrete evidence that she has ever committed adultery, even a guilty woman is not punished. That is why a guilty woman would never go through the ritual, even though the whole test might very well be a Divine "psychosomatic" examination, resulting in true physical manifestations.

The Talmud tells us that, remarkably, the innocent woman who was subjected to the ordeal will not emerge from the trial tainted or degraded. In fact, she will emerge blessed, and will become a source of pride for the community, since her chastity has been confirmed by G-d.

What about the man? The Talmud tells us that if the accusing husband had been guilty of any infidelity, this ritual would not work on his wife. And, if the woman were guilty, and would die from the Sotah drink, her paramour, her lover, would somehow die as well. But, on the other hand, there is no comparable test for men suspected of being unfaithful since men are not given the benefit of the doubt, as are woman.

We today, live in a very complex and confused environment, with much too much improper and immoral behavior. Almost 50% of American

marriages terminate in divorce, for one reason or another, and an even higher percentage of second marriages fail. Once suspicion sets in, there is little recourse to rebuild the trust that has been shattered. Once faithfulness has been questioned, in most cases, it is, almost always, downhill.

Should we pray for the restoration of the Sotah ritual? Well, I don't know, since it only functioned in a chaste society, and ours is certainly not worthy. But, I do believe that the many fascinating truths and insights that are to be found in the complex ritual of Sotah are worthy of examination and consideration. Surely, we should not be quick to ridicule, condemn, and dismiss the lessons to be gleaned from the ritual of the Sotah.

May you be blessed.

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The Sanctity of Jewish Marriage

Rabbi Hershel Schachter

The Gemorah (Kiddushin 2b) tells us that the phrase "hari at m'kudeshet li" that we use under the chuppah is not a biblical expression at all, rather it is a rabbinical formulation. However, the commentaries on the Gemorah (Gilyonei ha'Shas by Rav Yosef Engel, Kiddushin 41a) point out that the concept behind the expression is in fact biblical. Specifically, we assume that when a Jewish couple gets married, an element of keddusha is introduced into their lives. The Gemorah (Sotah 17a) points out that in the Hebrew language the word "ish" has a letter "yud" and the word "isha" has a letter "hay", and combined these two letters spell out the name of Hashem (yud - hay.) The Gemorah also tells us that when a couple has shalom bayis, "shechinah sh'ruyah bei'neyem" - there will be an element of keddusha in their lives.

When the Torah tells us the laws of the sotah in Parshas Nosh, the verb that is chosen and repeated three times in the posuk is "v'nitme'ah." Why should that verb have been chosen to connote ruining a marriage? The Avnei Nezer explains the choice of this verb by quoting a section from the Kuzari in which the king of the Kuzarim asked the rabbi, "if you Orthodox Jews follow everything that it says in the Torah, why don't you go to mikva every time you come in contact with tumah as prescribed in the Torah?" The rabbi responded that the laws of tumah are only relevant when you are dealing with keddusha. For example, the Beis Hamikdash has keddusha and one who is tomei may not enter; korbonos, maaser sheini, and terumah have keddusha and one who is tomei may not eat them. But we live so far away from the Beis Hamikdash - we have no terumah and no korbonos, and nothing of keddusha to speak of, and therefore we don't have to go to mikvah. Tumah is only an issue when it is in contradiction to keddusha; if one is nowhere near aspects of keddusha, then the tumah is irrelevant.

Based on that comment of the Kuzari, the Avnei Nezer (Even Hoezer, 240,5) explains that the Torah seems to be assuming that every Jewish marriage contains an element of keddusha. When dealing with a sotah, i.e. a marriage that was ruined, the Chumash can use the word "v'nit'meah" exactly for the reason of the Kuzari, i.e. that tumah is a contradiction to keddusha. This interpretation of the posuk is not merely agadata - it is a halachic reality that the Avnei Nezer uses to explain some halachos in that Gemorah.

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Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

Dvar Torah: Nasso

What does the Torah say about good parenting?

The term Nasso, which is the title of this week's Parsha, has three separate meanings. Nasso means to count. It also means to carry and Nasso means to raise or elevate.

I believe that, encapsulated in this one single word, we have three Torah-true keys to good parenting.

First of all, each child needs to know that he or she counts in our eyes. That we do not view children in comparison to other children but rather, each child is special in his or her own right. Each child is unique and we value and appreciate each person's talents, abilities and potential.

Secondly, we need to ‘carry’ our children. Of course, where ‘babes in arms’ and infants are concerned, we literally carry them. But this should extend well beyond that time – even into adulthood – because our children need to know that we are there to help them. We want them to move forward independently – encouraged and inspired by our teachings. We want them to carve out a destiny for themselves but they should also know that if ever they falter we’ll be there to steady them. We’re not going to impose anything on them, however if ever they turn to us we will be there to assist, to carry them through the great challenge of life.

Thirdly and perhaps most significantly of all, we need to ensure our children to know that there is an opportunity to lead an elevated form of existence. Children today are searching for meaning. They want to have a purpose in life, they are looking for deep satisfaction and a sense of fulfillment – and we’re exceptionally fortunate that we can place in their hands, a legacy of Torah. Thanks to our Torah roots we can provide our children with the key to happiness and meaning, to joy and deep fulfillment. Thanks to Torah teachings, they will be rooted in tradition and at the same time able to elevate themselves spiritually, to lead a noble and wonderful existence.

So let us always remember the word *Nasso*. And thanks to a *Nasso* styled life, let us enable our children always to feel important, always to know we are there to support them and also to appreciate how fortunate they are to lead an elevated form of existence.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Mirvis is the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. He was formerly Chief Rabbi of Ireland.

Drasha Parshas Naso - Possessive Nouns

Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya

There is a seemingly mysterious, if not cryptic, set of verses in this week’s portion. “And every portion from any of the holies that the Children of Israel bring to the Kohen shall be his. A man’s holies shall be his, and what a man gives to the Kohen shall be his.” (Numbers 5:9-10)

The posuk prompts so many homiletic and Midrashic interpretations. Even after Rashi, the Master of Torah explanation, clarifies a simple meaning to the verse, he affirms that “there are varying interpretation from Midrashic sources.” Obviously Rashi foreshadows a need for deeper interpretation.

To that end I will lend my take. What does the Torah mean that “a man’s holies shall be his”? How are holies, his? And what are holies anyway?

After all, when one dedicates items to the Temple, they are no longer his holies, they belong to the Temple. A plaque may afford recognition, but it surely is not a certificate of title. If the verse is referring to holy items owned by an individual, then it seems redundant as well. A man’s possessions are of course his!

About five years ago, we had the honor of having Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware deliver a commencement address at our Yeshiva’s graduation. The senator, who was at the time Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, was a guest of his good friend and well-known philanthropist, Joel Boyarsky, a member of our local community and dear friend of our school.

After the ceremony, I had the privilege of riding together with the Senator in Mr. Boyarsky’s stretch limousine, a fully apportioned vehicle that was truly befitting its prestigious passengers, among them many dignitaries and businessmen, who frequented its inner chambers.

As we rode for a while, discussing everything from politics to Israel, and issues surrounding Jewish education, something in the back corner of the limousine caught the corner of my eye.

There was a tefillin zeckel, a velvet case that hold sacred Jewish phylacteries tucked away in the corner of the back windshield. Protruding from the corner of the purple-velvet case were the retzuos, the sacred straps that bind a people to their rituals.

I was both amazed and perplexed at the same time. Mr. Boyarsky, as I knew him, was not a very observant Jew. I was not even sure if he kept kosher. Yet the tefillin were right there, almost displayed in open view,

in the same limousine in which he closed multi-million dollar deals with prominent businessmen, and discussed sensitive issues with the most prominent statesman.

A few weeks later, I visited Mr. Boyarsky in his office. It was there that I popped the question.

“I don’t get it. As far as I understand, you are not observant, and your car is hardly a home to Rabbis. But yet you keep your tefillin in your car, in open view for everyone to see? Why?”

His terse answer remains with me until today. “When I travel I take my things. Those tefillin are my things.”

The Torah issues a profound decree that defines not only what we have, but who we are. Those of us who understand that life as fulfilling as it may appear, how succulent the courses that it serves may taste, is but a fleeting moment in the grand scale of endless eternity. Who are we and what do we have.

I saw a bumper sticker that seemed to have survived the NASDAQ plunge the other week, “The guy with the most toys at the end wins.” Wins what? What are the toys?

The Torah tells us that after all the innings are pitched and the crowd walks from the packed stadium, we only have one thing. We have our holies. They are ours. Cars break. Computers crash. Satellites explode. Fortunes diminish and fame is as good as yesterday’s newspaper.

Only the holy things that we do, only our acts of spirituality, whether manifested in relationships with our fellow man or with our Creator, remain. Those holies are ours! They will always belong to us. That is what we travel with and that is what we take along. In this world and the next.

Good Shabbos

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Naso: Holy Men in Holy Land

Ben-Tzion Spitz

We Jews have a secret weapon in our struggle with the Arabs; we have no place to go. - Golda Meir

This week’s Torah reading introduces us to the laws of the Nazir (Nazirite). The Nazir is prohibited from drinking wine or consuming grape products, from cutting his hair and from become ritually impure from any contact with the dead. The underlying motivation of a Nazir is to achieve a greater level of holiness, of sanctity, of closeness to God.

There are several biblical personalities that were Nazirs or whom the Sages believe were Nazirs from hints in the text. One of the most famous ones was Samson. Two others were the prophet Samuel as well as King David’s rebellious son, Absalom.

The Meshech Chochma on Numbers 6:21 digs deeper into some aspects of the significance of being a Nazir, based on what we know of the biblical ones, specifically as it relates to the land of Israel.

Something to bear in mind is, that after the biblical period, the Sages, among numerous decrees they instituted, established that the land outside of Israel has the status of ritually impure land. That means that a Jew who was otherwise ritually pure, just by stepping foot outside the land of Israel became ritually contaminated. Any Jew coming to Israel from outside it had to go through a ritual purification process.

What is interesting is that even before this enactment, we see that the prophet Samuel never left the land of Israel. He was a mighty savior of the people, vanquishing the Philistines who encroached on Israel’s borders. The Meshech Chochma intimates that when the people asked Samuel to provide them with a king, they wanted a king who would venture and fight beyond their borders.

The Meshech Chochma goes on to say that a Nazir can only be in Israel, that the institution of being a Nazir doesn’t function outside of Israel and that if a person did take on a vow of a Nazir outside of Israel, even nowadays in our post-Temple era where the level of required ritual purity can’t be achieved, they are nonetheless forced to go to Israel.

There is a certain level of proximity to God, that can only be undertaken, achieved, and sustained in Israel.

May we all have the merit of being in Israel soon.

Dedication - To the SpaceX Falcon 9, Crew Dragon launch.

Shabbat Shalom

Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network

Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Naso

פרשת נשא תש"פ

איש או אשה כי יפליא לגדר נזיר

A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazarite vow of abstinence. (6:2)

Why does the Torah juxtapose the incident/*parshah* of the *nazir* upon the incident/*parshah* of the *sotah*, wayward wife? One who sees a *sotah* in her degradation should prohibit wine to himself by taking a Nazarite vow (*Rashi*). The *sotah* had opted to follow her sensual passion, allowing her pursuit of pleasure to take precedence over her commitment to G-d. One who falls under the grasp of wine can, likewise, fall victim to temptation. A *nazir* is prohibited to drink wine.

A well-known story tells about a dedicated Jew who refused to eat the non-kosher food that was standard fare in the Nazi extermination camps. Nothing enraged the Nazi fiends more than a Jew who still believed in Hashem and observed His *mitzvos*. How could anyone still believe in a benevolent G-d after that which all these wretched Jews had experienced? It was not enough for the Nazi to murder Jews – he had to break them emotionally, as well as spiritually. One day, a Nazi grabbed ahold of the Jew and told him in no uncertain terms, “If you refuse to eat the meat, I will kill you!”

The man staunchly refused. The Nazi began to beat him mercilessly, until a puddle of blood surrounded his body. He gave him up for dead. The man, however, was very much alive, and his friends came to assist him and take him back to the barracks. How surprised they were to notice that when the Nazi had returned to see if the Jew had eaten the meat, he had beaten the wrong man. Indeed, the man that he had beaten almost dead was an avowed atheist who thrived on eating non-kosher meat and had done so throughout his life! Why did he suddenly risk his life for kosher food?

The man explained that when he was beaten for refusing to eat *treif* meat, it suddenly became clear to him that eating non-kosher food was wrong. Thus, he bravely refused. When a person is up against the wall – when he stands between a rock and a hard place – his depth of understanding achieves greater acuity and his level of commitment can soar from uncommitted to simple, to *tzaddik*, righteous, status in minutes. The Jew who has lived a life of religious abandon, to whom *mitzvos* had meant nothing, was transformed into a believer when he saw how much the Nazi hated *mitzvos*. Furthermore, crisis catalyzes unparalleled achievement. Perhaps the most precious *mitzvos* in history were: the *matzos* baked in the Nazi bunkers; the *Chanukah* candles lit in the camps; the kosher scraps of food from the garbage; the *Tefillin* smuggled in to the camps and worn at the risk of one’s life. Simple Jews became *kedoshim* and reached unbelievable heights.

This is a great story which presents a powerful lesson, but I have always been troubled by it. What really made the atheist change his stripes? Was it the beating he received for refusing to eat *treif*? This was a man who did not believe in Hashem, an individual to whom sin and punishment were shams. If one does not believe in G-d, sin and punishment are not realities to which one ascribes. What suddenly made the man wake up from his self-imposed slumber?

The atheist never thought much of Hashem’s *mitzvos* – neither positive nor prohibitive. True, they cause reward and punishment, but he never had really observed the reward, and punishment did not impress him because he felt he could get around it. It was not until he saw how much the Nazi hated the *mitzvah*, and to what extent he was

prepared to punish someone who adhered to it, that he deduced its sublime nature.

This explanation gives us a window of understanding to explain the juxtaposition of the *nazir* upon the incident of the *sotah*, wayward wife. *Chazal* teach that one who observes the *sotah* in her degradation should separate himself from wine, because wine causes inebriation which, when a person’s defenses are down, can be the catalyst for prohibited/illicit relationships. One would think that when a person sees a woman’s stomach explode as punishment for her moral debasement, the scenario would be a sufficient deterrent from sin; sadly, it is not enough. Punishment in its own right is something we convince ourselves is circumventable. This is especially true when we would like to believe that the prohibited activity is not really that egregious. Punishment has another purpose: it defines the activity. When one realizes that what he/she is about to do carries with it an enormous, bitter punishment, then the realization dawns on him that this activity is of a seriously evil nature.

A person can go throughout life having convinced himself that Divine guidance does not exist, Divine punishment is not real – everything is by chance – until one day he sees how a vicious murderer is prepared to destroy him with his bare hands just for adhering to a *mitzvah*. He now realizes the significance of the *mitzvah* and that the world is not ownerless. There is a G-d of Creation Who is also the G-d of History. The life he has lived until now has been a self-induced sham. It is sad when we require a lesson from the outside world in order to realize how fortunate we are to have the verities of the Torah and the guidance of Hashem to steer us free of life’s obstacles.

Let us take this a step further. When redeeming a *bechor*, first-born son, the father gives the *Kohen* five *shekalim*. Likewise, we find the value of five *shekalim* required to redeem the overage of 273 firstborn *bechorim* that were replaced by the *Leviim*, following the sin of the Golden Calf in which the *bechorim* sinned, resulting in the forfeiture of their serving in the *Mishkan*. (There were 273 more *bechorim* than *Leviim*. Thus, these 273 *bechorim* had to be redeemed. The price set for their redemption was five *shekalim*.) How was the “five *shekalim*” amount derived? It certainly was not an arbitrary number. *Rashi* illuminates us with an intriguing commentary: “This was the price for the sale of Yosef (when his brothers sold him to the *Yishmaelim*/*Midyanim*), twenty pieces of silver which equals five silver *shekalim*.” What is the connection between the sale of Yosef and the redemption of the *bechorim*?

Reb Yitzchak (Irving) *Bunim*, זל, offers an insightful and practical explanation. The firstborn who were to serve Hashem in the *Mishkan* were designated to be His holy servants. They erred with the Golden Calf. As a result, it was necessary to replace them through a process of redemption (because they were *kadosh*, sanctified, to Hashem). When we redeem an *eved* Hashem, a servant of Hashem, the Torah instructs us not to sell him short. He should not be worth less to you than that which the pagan traders who purchased Yosef were willing to pay for a Jewish servant. Hashem says: “Pay for a servant of Mine at least what those heathens paid for a Jewish lad.” We apply the gentile evaluation of a Jew as the baseline for redemption. (Obviously, there is much more to this number, but, according to *Rashi/Chazal*, it was determined in accordance with the sale of Yosef – who was Rachel *Imeinu’s* *bechor*.)

Reb Bunim continues with a fascinating lesson (which coincides with our earlier thesis). It was calculated in the past (fifty years ago, numbers have certainly changed since then) that, on an average, it cost almost \$1200 to give an American pupil an education in the public school system. Thus, city, state and federal government bore the responsibility of approximately \$10,000 to put a student through elementary school. We can tag on another \$6,000 for high school. A minimum of \$16,000 just to prepare an American student for college. At that time, public college tuition was about \$15,000 for an education leading to a bachelor’s degree. In summation: the government is prepared to spend \$31,000 to educate a Jewish boy in their system. (Today the cost is far more.) Now, how much is it worth to us *Yidden* to

develop a Jewish boy into a *ben Torah*? Hashem tells us in no uncertain terms: “Do not sell My servant short. Do not pay less for My Jewish child than what the others are prepared to pay for him!” In other words, support for Torah institutions is not arbitrary. The secular world has set a premium which they are willing to spend on our children. Can we ignore our sacred obligation to counteract what the world is willing to spend to draw our children towards a secular lifestyle?

Reb Bunim relates that he shared with *Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, the report of a conference of missionaries who posited that it cost them upwards of \$50,000 to convert one Jew to their “true faith.” This is what they were willing to spend to kidnap a Jewish soul. How much is it worth to destroy a Jewish life; or better said: How much is it worth to us to save a Jewish soul—at least \$50,000 (fifty years ago).

When *Rav Aharon* heard this, he moaned, “*Oy!* A *Yiddishe neshamah*, soul.” He was actually in pain to hear the extent to which the heathens were prepared to go to destroy a *Yiddishe neshamah*. He understood that the Jewish *neshamah* was up against a formidable enemy.

כי נזר אלקיו על ראשו

For the crown of his G-d in upon his head. (6:7)

Because he wears the crown of G-d upon his head, a *nazir* has specific laws concerning his lifestyle, i.e. where he may go, what areas he may frequent, what he may consume. He is dedicated to Hashem, having chosen to live on an elevated spiritual plane. While some may consider his choice a bit extremist in nature, he is motivated by a profound desire to achieve spiritual ascendancy. A *nazir* is an adult who has made a choice. Children and young adults do not necessarily have the ability or wherewithal to assume such a positive life change, so they often “go with the flow,” living life in accordance with the environment their parents have chosen for them. I say parents, because, indeed, they are the ones who make the choices by which their children will live, at least until said children are old enough – or adult enough – to make the correct choice.

Economics often plays a critical role concerning where parents choose to live, the school/*yeshivah* they select for their children to attend, or the environment in which they are raised. In some situations, parents make a choice, often against extreme odds, to provide for their children the best education, the finest tutors, an environment that is conducive to spiritual/moral growth, that will alter their child’s spiritual trajectory. This does not mean that those parents who are unwilling or unable to sacrifice for their child’s spiritual growth are doing something wrong or careless; it just means that the other parent who is willing and able to sacrifice is doing something extremely constructive.

Children – even when they grow up and become adults – often do not realize (and more often do not acknowledge) their parents’ sacrifices. Some are so busy blaming everyone for their personal failures, that they do not allow themselves the insight to see/think where they might have been had their parents not sacrificed for them. Then there are those who do realize – and do acknowledge – and never forget that who they are and what they have become is firmly-rooted in their parents’ sacrifice. The following story, which is well-known to some, and should be to others, is a powerful lesson in sacrifice and *hakoras hatov*, gratitude.

Horav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner, zl, was a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, *posek*, *halachic* arbiter, and *Rav* without peer. He merited to live over a century – a life fully devoted to Torah and its dissemination. His son related that one *Shabbos*, following the *seudah*, meal, he asked his grandmother what merit she had to have a child (like his father) that illuminated the Torah world with his brilliance and encyclopedic knowledge.

His grandmother replied, “It is no secret that I was blessed with an extraordinarily sweet, yet powerful, voice. Word soon got out in Austria [they lived in Vienna] that my school was home to a girl who had a voice without peer in the entire country. My principal called for me one day and asked me to audition for a man, who happened to be a representative of the state opera. He had heard about my voice and was willing to offer me a leading role in the opera. I replied that observant

Jewish girls do not sing in the presence of men. The principal countered that this man had the ability and power to alter the present economic status of my family forever. I remained committed to my upbringing and refused to sing. When he saw how obstinate I was, he passed along his offer through the Austrian minister of education.

“Word spread to the newspapers concerning Rosa/Rachel Schiff who refused to audition for the National Opera, despite the most lucrative offers imaginable. Indeed, the publicity generated an incredible *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of the Name of the Almighty. My father, *Rav Ben Tzion Schiff*, was a close *talmid*, student, of the saintly *Chafetz Chaim*, and, whenever the sage visited Vienna for medical purposes, my father would visit with his *Rebbe*. One day (I was eighteen years old at the time), my father made an appointment to visit with him. He brought me along, together with my mother. It was his intention to ask the *Chafetz Chaim* to bless me with a suitable *shidduch*, matrimonial match. My father went into the room where the *Chafetz Chaim* was, with the intention of informing him about my refusal to join the National Opera and my request for a *brachah*, blessing.

“The holy sage was ‘up on the times’ and asked my father about a girl named Schiff who had made a tremendous *Kiddush Hashem* by refusing to compromise her *Yiddishkeit*. My father was visibly shaken, and he replied, ‘Yes, she is my daughter.’ The *Chafetz Chaim* manifest a wondrous smile as his entire countenance became illuminated. At that moment, my father felt it was *shaas ha’kosher*, a propitious time, to ask for a blessing on my behalf: ‘*Rebbe*, I came here specifically to petition the *Rebbe’s* blessing for my daughter, who is now entering the *shidduchim* phase of her life.’”

The *Chafetz Chaim* responded, “As reward for your daughter’s *Kiddush Shem Shomayim*, she should merit an excellent *shidduch* (husband) and, not only that, but from her womb shall emerge a child that will illuminate the entire world!”

Now we know the rest of the story.

ביום השני הקריב נתנאל בן צוער נשיא יששכר ביום השלישי נשיא לבני זבולון אליאב בן הלן ביום הרביעי נשיא לבני ראובן אליצור בן שדיאור

On the second day, Nesanel ben Tzuar offered the leader of Yissachar (7:18). On the third day, the leader of the children of Zevulun, Eliav ben Cheilon (7:24). On the fourth day, the leader of the children of Reuven, Elitzur ben Shedeiur. (7:30)

Noticeably, the tribe/*Nasi*/Prince of Yissachar preceded the tribe of Reuven, who was Yaakov *Avinu’s* *bechor*, firstborn. Furthermore, Zevulun also preceded Reuven. The *Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh* explains that Yissachar preceded Reuven because he was the *ben Torah*, of the tribe that devoted itself to fulltime commitment to Torah study. Since Zevulun was his honorary partner, supporting him while he was engaged in commerce, he was placed near Yissachar in sequence. We see from the *Ohr HaChaim* that not only does Torah study take primacy over every other endeavor and achievement, one who supports Torah study, albeit himself not actively engaged in learning, receives due credit on an equal keel.

In its commentary to *Mishlei* (9, *remez* 944) concerning the *pasuk*, *Chachmos nashim bansah beisah*, the *Yalkut Shemoni* says, “The wise among women, each builds her own house” (*Mishlei* 14:1). When the *Yalkut* teaches, *bansah beisah*, “builds her own house,” this refers to the Torah, to teach you that whoever acquires Torah, acquires for himself a house in the World-to-Come. It does not say, one who studies Torah; rather, it says, one who acquires Torah. We derive from here that, just like in our temporal world, a person can build a house either by physically performing all of the necessary labor or by hiring a contractor to build a house for him. One can either personally study Torah, and thereby build his “house” in *Olam Habba*, or he can “commission” the building of his house by supporting a scholar and enabling him to learn Torah (*Shem Olam15*, quoted by *Nifleosecha Asichah*).

The wife of a distinguished *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, *presented Horav Shmuel Primo, zl*, with a *halachic* query. (Indeed, this query was also presented to the *Chida*.) Apparently, her husband had entered into a contract with a “Zevulun,” a good friend who spent his days engaged in various forms of commerce. He did well, but, as a result, he missed out

on the opportunity to engage in Torah study in the way he longed to. He offered to support his friend the scholar in return for a portion of his reward in *Olam Habba*. This was the classic Yissachar/Zevulun partnership. The *ishah tzadeikes*, righteous woman, was concerned that as a result of her husband's partnership, she would forfeit (or at least lose part of) the portion of *Olam Habba* reserved for her due to her support of her husband.

Maharsha Primo replied that she has no reason to be anxious. She will receive her just reward, and her husband and his partner will split their reward. Veritably, a wife's reward is different than the reward shared by the Zevulun who supports her husband. The wife was carrying the yoke of responsibility for their home, thus allowing her husband to study Torah unabated and untroubled. Thus, she deserves to have a complete reward, not a shared reward. The Torah supporter, however, purchased his portion; therefore, he divides the reward accordingly. Indeed, the women who relieve their husbands from their daily responsibilities are earning an incredible reward – one that eludes even Zevulun.

On the other hand, the Torah supporter does have his own unique form of the reward. The *Chafetz Chaim* would relate that when *Horav Chaim Volozhiner* was fund-raising for his *yeshiva*, he promised a certain philanthropist that he would learn *Mishnayos* in his memory. *Rav Chaim* would study *Mishnayos* in memory of this man. One time, *Rav Chaim* had difficulty understanding a *Mishnah*. (We must underscore that *Rav Chaim*'s lack of understanding was quite different than ours.) He dozed off and, in a dream, the *neshamah* of the philanthropist appeared and explained the *Mishnah* to him. When *Rav Chaim* woke up, he told his *talmidim*, students, what had occurred. He then added his own caveat. We see from here that not only do Torah supporters share equally in their partners' learning, but they also merit to learn and understand the Torah (learned by their partner) in *Olam Habba*! This is why the *neshamah* of the philanthropist was able to explain the *Mishnah* to *Rav Chaim*.

Va'ani Tefillah

שַׁאֲתָה הוּא אֱלֹהֵינוּ – She'Atah Hu Elokeinu. For it is You, Who are Hashem, our G-d.

Horav Shimon Schwab, ז"ל, offers a meaningful explanation of these words. We thank Hashem for informing us that He exists. (This was evident at the Revelation on *Har Sinai*, when He gave us the Torah. As in all revealed messages, however, one can only see when his eyes are open. Sadly, many people choose to keep their eyes closed and their heads in the ground.) Had Hashem not done so, we would not know. The *Rav* compares this to a fish swimming in a tank, who knows nothing of the outside world. To the fish, the tank is its entire world. Thus, the first thing for which we bless Hashem is His revealing Himself to us. This idea is to be derived from the first *pasuk* in the Torah: "*Bereishis bara Elokim – es ha'Shomayim v'es ha'aretz.*" After the word *Elokim*, there is an *esnachta*, cantillation mark, which is similar to a comma, thus dividing the *pasuk* into two parts. The first part of the *pasuk* informs us that Hashem is the Creator – before Him there was nothing, absolutely nothing. Unless one believes this all important verity, the rest of the Book has no real significance.

*Sponsored in loving memory of our dear father and zaidy on his yahrzeit
Rabbi Shlomo Silberberg*

הרב שלמה בן נתן ז"ל נפ' י"ד סיון תשל"ט ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.

Mrs. Mimi Solomon and Family

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Birkas Kohanim

Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Why is this brocha different?

"Why is the brocha for duchening so different from all the other brochos we recite before we perform mitzvos?"

Question #2: Hoarse kohein

"If a kohein is suffering from laryngitis, can he observe the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim?"

Question #3: The chazzan duchening

"If the chazzan is a kohein, may he duchen?"

Answer:

For the next several weeks, the Jewish communities of Eretz Yisroel and of chutz la'aretz are reading different parshiyos, and I am choosing topics that are applicable to both areas. This week I chose the topic of duchening, partly because I have not sent an article on the topic in many years, and because the mitzvah is in parshas Naso, and kohanim feature significantly both in parshas Naso and in parshas Beha'aloscha. Since I have discussed this topic in the past, this article will deal with issues not previously mentioned, and, therefore, not already on the website RabbiKaganoff.com.

First of all, I should explain the various names of this beautiful mitzvah. Ashkenazim usually refer to the mitzvah colloquially as duchening. The word "duchen" means a platform, and refers to the raised area in front of the aron hakodesh, on which the kohanim traditionally stand when they recite these blessings. However, in many shullen today, there is no platform in front of the aron hakodesh, and, even when there is, in many shullen there are more kohanim than there is room on the duchen. In all these instances, the mitzvah is performed with the kohanim standing on the floor alongside or in front of the aron hakodesh, literally "with their backs to the wall" facing the people.

There are at least two other ways of referring to this mitzvah. One way of referring to the mitzvah is Birkas Kohanim, which is very descriptive of the mitzvah. I will use this term throughout this article in order to avoid confusion.

Nesi'as kapayim

The Mishnah and the Shulchan Aruch call this mitzvah by yet a third term, nesi'as kapayim, which means literally "raising the palms," a description of the position in which the kohanim hold their hands while reciting these blessings. According to accepted halacha, the kohanim raise their hands to shoulder level, and each kohein holds his hands together. (There are some mekubalim who raise their hands directly overhead while reciting the Birkas Kohanim [Divrei Shalom 128:2]. However, this is a very uncommon practice.) Based on a midrash, the Tur rules that while he recites the Birkas Kohanim, the kohein should hold his hands in a way that there are five spaces between his fingers. This is done by pressing, on each hand, the index finger to the middle finger and the small finger to the ring finger. This creates two openings -- one between the middle finger and the ring finger on each hand. Another two openings are created between the index finger and thumb on each hand. The fifth opening is between the thumbs. There are various ways for a kohein to position his fingers, such that he has a space between his thumbs. I know of several different methods, and I have never found an authoritative source that states that one way is preferable to any other. Most kohanim, myself included, follow the way that they were taught by their father.

By the way, the Gra is reputed to have held that the kohanim should not hold their hands in this position, but with all their fingers spread apart.

An unusual brocha

Immediately prior to beginning the brocha, the kohanim recite a birkas hamitzvah, as we do prior to performing most mitzvos. The text of the brocha is: Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam asher kideshanu bikedushaso shel Aharon, ve'tzivanu levereich es amo Yisroel be'avahav. "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aharon, and commanded us to bless His people, Yisroel, with love."

Two aspects of this brocha are different from the standard structure of brochos that we recite prior to fulfilling mitzvos. The first change is that, instead of the usual structure that we say, asher kideshanu bemitzvosav ve'tzivanu, "Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us," the kohanim leave out the reference to "His mitzvos" and instead say "Who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aharon." The second change is that the kohanim not only describe the mitzvah they are performing -- that Hashem "commanded us to bless his people Yisroel" -- but they also add a qualitative description "with love."

The fact that the kohanim make reference to Aharon's sanctity is, itself, not unusual. It is simply atypical for us to recite or hear this brocha since, unfortunately in our contemporary world, we have no other mitzvos for which we use this text. However, when we are again all tehorim and when we have a Beis Hamikdash, every time a kohein performs a mitzvah that only a kohein can perform, such as eating terumah, korbanos or challah, donning the bigdei kehunah in the Beis Hamikdash (Artzos Hachayim, Eretz Yehudah 18:1, page 81b), or performing the mitzvos of offering korbanos, he recites a brocha that includes this reference. Unfortunately, since we are all tamei and we have no Beis Hamikdash, a kohein cannot perform these mitzvos today, and therefore we do not recite this structure of brocha at any other time.

"With love"

The second detail in this brocha that is highly unusual is the statement that the mitzvah is performed be'avahav, "with love." No other mitzvah includes this detail in its brocha, and, in general, the brochos recited prior to performing mitzvos do not include details about how the mitzvos are performed. For example, the brocha prior to kindling the Shabbos or Chanukah lights says, simply, lehadlik neir shel Shabbos or lehadlik neir shel Chanukah, and does not add that we do so "with wicks and oil." Similarly, note that the brocha recited before we pick up and shake the lulav and esrog does not even mention the esrog, aravos and hadasim, and says, simply, al netilas lulav. Again, the brocha for

washing our hands is simply *al netilas yadayim*, without mentioning any of the important details of the mitzvah. Yet, the brocha recited prior to Birkas Kohanim includes the word *be'ahavah*, with love. Why is this so?

Let us examine the original passage of the Gemara (Sotah 39a) that teaches us about the text of this brocha: "The disciples of Rabbi Elazar ben Shammai (who was a kohein) asked him, 'Because of what practices of yours did you merit longevity?' He answered them, 'I never used a shul as a shortcut; I never stepped over the heads of the holy nation (Rashi explains this to mean that he never walked over people who were sitting on the floor in the Beis Hamedrash, as was common in his day -- either he arrived before everyone else did, or he sat outside); and I never performed *nesias kapayim* without first reciting a brocha.'"

The Gemara then asks, "What brocha is recited prior to Birkas Kohanim? Answered Rabbi Zeira, quoting Rav Chisda, *asher kideshanu bikedushaso shel Aharon, ve'tzivanu levarezich es amo Yisroel be'ahavah.*"

Thus, the text of the brocha that we recite prior to Birkas Kohanim is exactly the way the Gemara records it, and that the word "*be'ahavah*" is part of the original text. Why is this required?

The Be'er Sheva, a European gadol of the late 16th-early 17th century, already asks this question. To quote him (in his commentary, Sotah 39a): "Where is it mentioned or even hinted in the Torah that the kohein must fulfill this mitzvah 'with love?' The answer is that when the Torah commanded the kohanim concerning this mitzvah, it says *Emor lahem*, 'Recite this blessing to the Jewish people,' spelling the word *emor* with a *vov*, the full spelling of the word, although it is usually spelled without a *vov*. Both the Midrash Tanchuma and the Midrash Rabbah explain that there is an important reason why this word is spelled 'full.' 'The Holy One, blessed is He, said to the kohanim that they should bless the Jewish people not because they are ordered to do so, and they want to complete the minimum requirement of that "order," as if it were "forced labor" and, therefore, they say it swiftly. On the contrary, they should bless the Jews with much focus and the desire that the brochos all be effective -- with full love and full heart.'"

We see from this Gemara that this aspect of the mitzvah -- the kohanim blessing the people because they want to and not because it is required -- was so important to Chazal that they alluded to the idea in the text of the brocha, something we never find elsewhere!

Brochos cause longevity

There are several puzzling questions germane to this small passage of Gemara quoted above. What was unique about Rabbi Elazar's three practices that he singled them out as being the spiritual causes of his longevity? The commentaries explain that each of these three acts were personal *chumros* that Rabbi Elazar, himself one of the last talmidim of Rabbi Akiva and a rebbe of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, practiced (Keren Orah, Meromei Sadeh et al). Since our topic is Birkas Kohanim, we will address only that practice: What was unique about Rabbi Elazar's practice of reciting a brocha before performing the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim? Didn't every kohein do the same? So, why did the other kohanim not achieve the longevity that he did?

The Keren Orah commentary notes that the amora, Rav Zeira, is quoted as the source for the brocha on Birkas Kohanim, implying that the brocha on this mitzvah was not yet standardized until his time, and he lived well over a hundred years after Rabbi Elazar's passing. This implies that a brocha on this mitzvah was not necessarily recited during the era of the *tanna'im* and early *amora'im*. (The Keren Orah suggests this might be because Birkas Kohanim itself is a blessing, and that we do not make a brocha on a brocha, similar to the mitzvos of *birkas hamazon* or *birkas haTorah*.) Rabbi Elazar was so enthusiastic about blessing the people that he insisted on reciting a brocha before its performance. This strong desire to bless people was rewarded by his having many extra years to continue blessing them (Maharal).

Notwithstanding that the mitzvah is such a beautiful one, technically, the kohein is required to recite the Birkas Kohanim only when he is asked to do so, during the repetition of the *shemoneh esrei*. We will see shortly what this means in practice.

Hoarse kohein

At this point, we will discuss the second of our opening questions: "If a kohein is suffering from laryngitis, can he fulfill the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim?"

Let us examine this question thoroughly, starting from its sources in the Gemara: "One *beraisa* teaches: *Koh sevarchu* ('this is how you should bless'): face to face... therefore the *posuk* says *Emor lahem* (say to them), as a person talks to his friend. Another *beraisa* teaches: *Koh sevarchu*, in a loud voice. Or perhaps *Koh sevarchu* means it can be said quietly; therefore, the *posuk* says *Emor lahem*, as a person talks to his friend" (Sotah 38a).

The passage that we quoted derives two different laws from the words of the *posuk Koh sevarchu* and *Emor lahem*. First, that the audience receiving the kohanim's brocha should be facing them during the Birkas Kohanim. (In error, some people turn around while the kohanim recite Birkas Kohanim, in order to make sure that they do not look at the kohanim's hands during the Birkas Kohanim.) The second is that the kohein should recite the brochos loud enough

that the people can hear him. Although there are kohanim who shout the words of the Birkas Kohanim, the continuation of the Gemara explains that *bekol ram*, in a loud voice, means simply loud enough for the people to hear the kohein. However, someone whose voice is so hoarse that people cannot hear him is not permitted to recite Birkas Kohanim; he should leave the sanctuary part of the shul, before the chazzan recites the word *retzei* in his repetition of *shemoneh esrei* (Mishnah Berurah 128:53).

Why *retzei*?

Why should the kohein leave the shul before *retzei*?

Some mitzvos *aseh*, such as donning *tefillin* daily, making *kiddush*, or hearing *shofar*, are inherent requirements. There isn't any way to avoid being obligated to fulfill these mitzvos. On the other hand, there are mitzvos whose requirement is dependent on circumstances. For example, someone who does not live in a house is not obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of *mezuzah*. Living in a house, which most of us do, creates the obligation to install a *mezuzah* on its door posts. Someone who lives in a house and fails to place a *mezuzah* on the required doorposts violates a mitzvas *aseh*.

Similarly, the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim is not an inherent requirement for the kohein. However, when someone asks the kohein or implies to him that he should perform the Birkas Kohanim, the kohein is now required to do so, and, should he fail to, he will violate a mitzvas *aseh*.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 128:2) rules that a kohein who remains in shul is required to recite Birkas Kohanim if (1) he hears the chazzan say the word *kohanim*, (2) someone tells him to ascend the *duchen*, or (3) someone tells him to wash his hands (in preparation for the Birkas Kohanim). These three actions summon the kohanim to perform the mitzvah, and that is why they create a requirement on the kohein. A kohein who is weak such that it is difficult for him to raise his arms to recite the Birkas Kohanim, should exit the shul before the chazzan says the word *kohanim* (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 128:4 and Mishnah Berurah). The Magen Avraham and the Elyah Rabbah conclude that it is preferred if he exits before the chazzan begins the word *retzei*. The Shulchan Aruch mentions that the custom is for any kohein who is not reciting Birkas Kohanim to remain outside until the Birkas Kohanim is completed.

Washing hands

The Shulchan Aruch we quoted above rules that telling a kohein to wash his hands creates the same obligation to recite Birkas Kohanim as directly summoning him to recite the Birkas Kohanim. Why is that so?

This is because the Gemara rules that "any kohein who did not wash his hands should not perform *nesias kapayim*." The Rambam (Hilchos Tefillah Uvirkas Kohanim 15:5) rules that the washing before Birkas Kohanim is similar to what the kohanim do prior to performing the service in the Beis Hamikdash. For this reason, he rules that their hands should be washed until their wrists. We rule that this is done even on Yom Kippur, notwithstanding that, otherwise, we are not permitted to wash this much on Yom Kippur (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 128:6). Several *acharonim* rule that since the washing as preparation for Birkas Kohanim is because it is considered a form of *avodah*, there are other requirements, including washing with a cup, with clear water and with at least a *revi'is* (about three ounces) of water (see Magen Avraham, Yeshuos Yaakov, Shulchan Shelomoh and Mishnah Berurah).

In many *shullen*, a sink is installed near the *duchen*, so that the kohanim can wash immediately before Birkas Kohanim. Others have a practice that water and a basin are brought to the front of the shul for this purpose. These customs have a source in *rishonim* and *poskim* and should definitely be encouraged. *Tosafos* (Sotah 39a s.v. Kol) concludes that the kohein should wash his hands immediately before ascending the *duchen*. He rules that the kohein should wash his hands within twenty-two *amos*, a distance of less than forty feet, of the *duchen*. The Magen Avrohom (128:9) rules according to this *Tosafos*, and adds that, according to *Tosafos*, since the kohanim wash their hands before *retzei*, the chazzan should recite the brocha of *retzei* rapidly. In his opinion, the time that transpires after the kohein washes his hands should be less time than it takes to walk twenty-two *amos*, and, therefore, *retzei* should be recited as quickly as possible. The *Biur Halacha* (128:6 s.v. *Chozrim*) adds that the kohanim should not converse between washing their hands and reciting Birkas Kohanim, because this constitutes a *hefsek*.

The chazzan *duchening*

At this point, let us examine the third of our opening questions: "If the chazzan is a kohein, may he *duchen*?"

This question is the subject of a dispute between the Shulchan Aruch and the Pri Chodosh. According to the Shulchan Aruch, if the chazzan is a kohein, he should not recite Birkas Kohanim, unless he is the only kohein. The reason he should not recite Birkas Kohanim is out of concern that he might get confused and not remember the conclusion of the *davening*, when he returns to his role as chazzan. The Pri Chodosh disagrees, concluding that this concern was only when the chazzan led the services from memory, which, although very common in an earlier era, is today quite uncommon. If the kohein-chazzan is using a *siddur*,

which should assure that the Birkas Kohanim will not confuse him from continuing the davening correctly, he can recite Birkas Kohanim.

In chutz la'aretz, the accepted practice in this halacha follows the Shulchan Aruch, whereas in Eretz Yisroel, customs vary in different locales. In Yerushalayim and most other places, the accepted practice follows the Pri Chodosh, and the chazzan performs Birkas Kohanim.

Conclusion

As a kohein myself, I find duchening to be one of the most beautiful mitzvos. We are indeed so fortunate to have a commandment to bless our fellow Jews, the children of Our Creator. All the more so, the nusach of the bracha is to bless His nation Israel with love. The blessings of a kohein must flow from a heart full of love for the Jews that he is privileged to bless.

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Parshas Naso : Distinctly Different

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

The term is one that I first heard back in high school. There are times that I find it helpful, and there are times I find myself resistant to using it. The term is "Judeo-Christian."

I understand that this term was first used back in the early-19th century to refer to the fact that the roots of the religion of Christianity are to be found in the Jewish religion and culture. Much later the term came to be used as it is commonly used nowadays; namely, as a way of referring to the mores, beliefs, and ethical norms which our religion has in common with Christianity.

Long before my career in the rabbinate, in fact even quite early in my childhood, I was acquainted with Christians and fascinated by both the differences and similarities between our faiths and our lifestyles. I may have shared with readers of this column my family's exposure to a devout Irish Catholic family. When my siblings and I were quite young, we spent our summers in a cottage in Rockaway Beach that was owned by an elderly Catholic couple. We became familiar with their entire family and indeed my mother, whose *yahrzeit* we commemorated just a few days ago, maintained a lifelong correspondence with the couple's daughter, Mrs. Eleanor McElroy.

Much more recently, I have been representing the Orthodox Union in a regular forum in which leaders of the Jewish community meet with their counterparts in the Catholic community to work on various social issues in which we have common interests. Following the guidelines of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik regarding interreligious dialogue, we carefully avoid discussing theological matters, and confine our discussions to ways in which we can cooperate in achieving various shared goals.

Often, we encounter striking similarities in the problems that we face; for example, difficulties in funding our respective parochial schools. Then, we speak the same language. But quite frequently, we discover that even when we use the same terminology, we are referring to very different experiences. Indeed, these differences frequently make it almost impossible for us to understand each other. In a recent such forum, for example, the Catholic group, having read so much about the "Charedim" and their involvement in Israeli politics, asked me to define for them just who the Charedim were. I tried my best to do so, but they remained confounded as how a group of fervently pious believers in the literal meaning of the Bible could be anti-Zionist in their politics.

Just as the Catholic group had difficulty understanding such Jewish phenomena, so the members of our Jewish group found some Christian religious concepts practices alien, and even unacceptable. Thus, in one of our conversations, one of the Catholic clergymen wished aloud that he could retreat from the pressures of contemporary society and spend the rest of his years in a monastery. I was just one of our group who immediately protested that for us Jews there were no monasteries, and that we did not see the monastic life as a positive religious alternative.

The response of members of the Catholic group to that remark finally bring us to this week's Torah portion, Parshat Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89). "How can you not view monasticism positively? After all, the practice has biblical roots, in the Hebrew Bible," they insisted.

They were referring to the following verses in this week's parsha: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying...If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a Nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord, he shall abstain from wine...He may not eat anything that is obtained from the grape vine... No razor shall touch his head...He shall not go in where there is a dead person" (Numbers 6:1-7).

Of course, any one of the Jewish members of the group could easily have referred to the numerous opinions, already recorded in the Talmud, as to the non-desirability of the practice of nezirut. There are certainly forceful statements against taking the Nazirite vow, and even those who consider it a sin.

But I found myself taking a different tack in this discussion. "It is wrong to equate the Nazir with the monk" I said. "Granted, the Nazir must be guided by certain very stringent prohibitions. But he does not absent himself from society. He is neither a hermit, nor a member of some ascetic sect. This is very different from one who undertakes monastic vows, as I understand them."

One of my companions rallied to my side after reaching for a volume of the set of encyclopedias, which was in easy reach in the library where the meeting was taking place. He read out this definition of "monasticism:"

"It is an institutionalized religious practice whose members live by a rule that requires works that goes beyond those of the laity...The monastic is commonly celibate and universally ascetic, and separates himself from society either by living as a hermit or by joining a community of others who profess similar intentions."

Another good friend simply consulted his pocket dictionary which stated: "The word 'monasticism' is derived from the Greek *monachos*, which means 'living alone.'"

Our Jewish group, which consisted of several diverse individuals who regularly disagree vociferously with each other, were united in our response to the Catholic gentlemen on that day. The Nazirite was not a monk, certainly not in the common understanding of that term.

The interreligious group did not persist in this particular discussion. Afterwards, however, some of us from the Jewish group continued our discussion over coffee. We were struck by the fact that three individuals are understood by our tradition as having been Nazirites, or at least partial Nazirites. They include the heroic warrior Samson, the prophet Samuel, and Absalom, the son of David who rebelled against his father. No question about it: these men were not celibate, not hermits, and not men who refrained from the legitimate pleasures of life. Quite the contrary, they played active roles in the life of the Jewish people, albeit each in very different ways.

The distinct difference between our Torah's concept of the Nazirite and the Christian concept of the monastic is perhaps best expressed in a passage in the third chapter of Maimonides' *Hilchot De'ot*, which I will allow myself to paraphrase:

"Lest a person mislead himself into thinking that since envy, lust, and vainglory are such negatives, I will therefore separate myself from them; forcefully distance myself from them to the extreme; eat no meat and drink no wine; practice celibacy; shun a finely furnished home; desist from wearing attractive clothing, and instead don sackcloth and coarse wool, and similar such ascetic practices. Let him be aware that this is the manner of Gentile priests!

"Let me make clear that a person who pursues such a path is a sinner. Even the Nazirite, who merely refrains from products of the vine, requires atonement. How much more so the one who deprives himself of the many pleasures of life, which are not prohibited by the Torah. He is simply misguided."

Almost nine hundred years ago, Maimonides recognized the distinct difference between the concept of holiness as practiced by the Gentile priests whom he knew and the model of holiness which is held up to us by our Torah. The Nazirite, in Maimonides' view, is not the paradigm of holiness. The truly holy man must not refrain from living a normal family life, must share in the joys and woes of his friends and neighbors, and must exercise the leadership skills with which he has been uniquely blessed.

It is doubtful, given the sacrificial Temple rituals which conclude the Nazirite's term and which are detailed in this week's parsha, that one can practically be a Nazirite nowadays. But the lessons of this week's Torah portion are clear: there are guidelines for those who wish to be holier than the rest of us. But those guidelines rule out separating oneself from family and community.

In this regard, we cannot speak of a common Judeo-Christian norm. The Jewish norm and the Christian norm are distinctly different.

לע"נ

שרה משה בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה