

Parsha Naso

By

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When a congregant has the honor of delivering a D'var Torah, he or she is not only teaching words of Torah but perhaps more importantly is learning as well. For those of us who have had this privilege, many hours of study are required to choose an appropriate topic that will be meaningful and understandable and add some new information that will be enlightening.

At 176 verses, Naso is the longest of the parshiot. The parsha seems on the face of it, to be a heterogeneous collection of utterly unrelated items. First there is the account of the Levitical families of Gershon and Merari and their tasks in carrying parts of the Tabernacle when the Israelites journeyed. Then, after two brief laws about removing unclean people from the camp and about restitution, there comes the strange ordeal of the Sotah, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery. Next comes the law of the Nazarite, the person who voluntarily and usually for a fixed period took upon himself special holiness restrictions, among them the renunciation of wine and grape products, of haircuts, and of defilement by contact with a dead body.

This is followed, again seemingly with no connection, by one of the oldest prayers in the world still in continuous use: the priestly blessings. Then, with inexplicable repetitiousness, comes the account of the gifts brought by the princes of each tribe at the dedication of the Tabernacle, a series of long paragraphs repeated no less than 12 times, since each prince brought an identical offering.

Why does the Torah spend so much time describing an event that could have been stated far more briefly by naming the princes and then simply generically telling us that each brought a silver dish, a silver basin and so on? The question that overshadows all others though, is: what is the logic of this apparently disconnected series?

To answer this: I have reviewed interpretations of parshah Naso by the following scholars: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Aish.com, the orthodox interpretation of the parsha, the 15th Century Spanish Jewish commentator Rabbi Isaac Arama, Rabbi Isaac Abrabanel, Maimonides and commentaries on a closer reading of the three sentences of the Priestly blessings. As Rabbi Sacks suggests, perhaps the answer lies in the last word of the priestly blessing: shalom, peace. In a long analysis the 15th century Spanish Jewish commentator, Rabbi Isaac Arama in his famous text, *AKEDAT YITZCHAK*, The Binding of Isaac, explains that the word *shalom* does not mean merely, the absence of war or strife. It means completeness, perfection, the harmonious working of a complex system, integrated diversity, and a state in which everything is in its proper place and all is at one with the physical and ethical laws governing the universe. To quote from this scholarly text, from chapter 74, "Peace is the thread of grace issuing from Him, may He be exalted, stringing together all beings, supernal, intermediate, and lower. It underlies and sustains the reality and unique existence of each."

Similarly, in his commentary on Avot 2:12, Abrabanel, the brilliant Portuguese Biblical commentator, writes "That is why G-d is called peace, because it is He who binds the world together and orders all things according to their particular character and posture. For when things are in their proper order, peace will reign."

As Rabbi Sacks comments, “this is a concept of peace dependent on the vision of Genesis 1, in which G-d brings order out of *tohu va-vohu*, chaos, creating a world in which each object and life form has its place.” Peace exists where each element in the system is valued as a vital part of the system as a whole and where there is no discord between them. The various provisions of parshat Naso are all about bringing peace in this sense.

The most obvious case is that of the Sotah, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery. What struck the sages most forcibly about the ritual of the Sotah is the fact that it involved obliterating the name of G-d, something strictly forbidden under other circumstances. The officiating priest recited a curse including G-d’s name, wrote it on a parchment scroll, and then dissolved the writing into specially prepared water. The sages inferred from this that G-d was willing renounce His own honor, allowing His name to be effaced “in order to make peace between husband and wife” by clearing an innocent woman from suspicion. Though this ordeal was eventually abolished by Rabbi Jochanon ben Zakkai after the destruction of the second Temple, the law served as a reminder as to how to protect domestic peace in the Jewish scale of values.

The passage relating to the Levitical families of Gershon and Merari signals that they were given a role of honor in transporting items of the Tabernacle during the people’s journeys through the wilderness. Evidently they were satisfied with honor, unlike the family of Kohath, detailed at the end of last week’s parsha, one of whose members, Korach, eventually instigated a rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

Likewise, the long account of the offerings of the princes of the twelve tribes is a dramatic way of indicating that each was considered important enough to merit its own passage in the Torah.

By giving the Levitical families and the princes of the tribes their share of honor and attention, the Torah is telling us how important it is to preserve the harmony of the nation by honoring all.

According to Rabbi Sacks, the case of the Nazarite is in some ways the most interesting. There is an internal conflict within Judaism between, on the one hand, a strong emphasis on the equal dignity of everyone in the eyes of G-d, and the existence of a religious elite in the form of the tribe of Levi in general and the *cohanim*, the priests, in particular. It seems that the law of the Nazarite was a way of opening up the possibility to non-*Cohanim* of a special sanctity close to, though not precisely identical with, that of the *Cohanim* themselves. This too is a way of avoiding the damaging resentments that can occur when people find themselves excluded by birth from certain forms of status within the community.

As I review these ideas in parsha Naso, this brief analysis binds the laws of this parsha in making special efforts to preserve and restore PEACE between people. Peace is easily damaged and hard to repair.

Much of the rest of the book of Bamidbar is a set of variations on the theme of internal dissension and strife. So has Jewish history been on the whole. Naso tells us to go the extra mile in bringing peace between husband and wife, between leaders of the community, and among lay people who aspire to a more-than-usual state of sanctity.

It is no accident therefore that the priestly blessings end - as do the vast majority of Jewish prayers - with a prayer for peace. Peace, said the rabbis is one of the names of G-d himself, and Maimonides writes that the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world (Laws of Hanukah 4:14). Naso is a

series of practical lessons in how to ensure, as far as possible, that everyone feels recognized and respected, and that suspicion is diffused and dissolved. We have to work for peace as well as pray for it.

As you may know the Priestly blessings form one of the oldest prayers that have been recorded in the history of the Jewish people, verified by the miniature writing of ancient amulets discovered in 1979 by the archaeologist Gabriel Barkay in an excavation of a late Iron Age tomb at the funerary site of Ketef Hinnom outside of Jerusalem. These date back to the eighth-sixth centuries BCE and containing blessings similar to Numbers 6:24-26.

These three blessings start with 3 Hebrew words, followed by 5 words and ending with 7 words. They can be summarized by protection in the first verse, grace in the second verse, and peace as the last word in the third verse. As Rabbi Sacks brilliantly suggests; “if you seek to understand a people, look at their prayers. The Jewish people did not ask for wealth or power. They did not hunger after empire. They had no desire to conquer or convert the world. They asked for protection. The right to live true to themselves without fear; for grace, the ability to be an agent for good to others; and most importantly peace, the fullness of being in which each of us brings our individual gifts to the common good. That is all our ancestors prayed for, and it is still all we need.”

Shabbat Shalom.