

On the surface, our Parashah seems to be a collection of unrelated topics, but it contains one word whose root ties it all together: *shalom*, the last word of the Priestly Blessing, which suddenly appears, seemingly out of nowhere and acts as a bridge between these diverse themes and the individual offerings of the tribal chieftains as the Mishkan is being dedicated.

שָׁלוֹם peace. The root שלם builds words that mean *whole, completed, perfected, to pay, to refund, to compensate* – and of course, *peace*, which is actually the result of putting all these terms into play.

We often think of peace simply as the absence of war, but this notion is dangerously naïve. Peace is a dynamic, complex balancing act. In the words of Hubert H. Humphrey, my former Senator, Vice President of the USA under Lyndon Johnson, and Presidential candidate against Richard Nixon, “Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not 'happen,' it requires work.”

And our Parashah is all about work: The sacred work in the Mishkan, the work of making sure the camp remains free of contagious disease, the work of maintaining *shalom bayit*, or domestic peace when a husband suspects his wife of infidelity, and the work required of the *Nazir*, a non-Cohen who wishes to dedicate his or her life, or a portion thereof, to sacred service. The rules governing all of this work are conceived to optimize conditions for peace.

Like Parashah Bamidbar, our Parashah opens with a command to “lift the head” – i.e. to take a census, this time of the Gershonites, whose work for the Mishkan involves carrying, another meaning of the versatile root נשא, which in Parashah Bamidbar took the form of *se’u (et rosh)* and appears here as *naso (et rosh)*. It ends with the tribal chieftains bringing their offerings, each by name, as part of the dedication ceremonies. These two eloquent demonstrations of the importance of each individual serve to frame other measures designed to ensure that the needs of the individual and the needs of the group are balanced for the sake of peace.

Now we can understand the connection between these diverse topics: In order to honor all three Levite families equally and avoid strife, duties are explicitly assigned. In order to ensure that people remain healthy, rules are devised to quarantine those who are ill (something we are learning again during this pandemic). In order to keep a marriage healthy, trust must be established. (The measures taken here were eventually abolished, but domestic peace remains a high Jewish ideal.) To maintain a healthy relationship between those whose religious power is inherited (Cohanim) and those who aspire to some form of religious sanctity the position of the *nazir* is created. Finally, to equally honor the tribal chieftains and their tribes, a section is devoted to each of them in turn, calling them by the name of their tribe and by their individual names, even though they bring identical offerings. At first glance, this appears to be unnecessary repetition, but it further illustrates the principle of *se’u* or *naso et rosh*: Each individual must be regarded as a unique and irreplaceable part of the whole. Recognizing and upholding this ideal is a powerful tool for maintaining peace. Thus the Priestly Blessing is also an appeal to us to uphold our part of our eternal covenant and work with HaShem toward peace. “May HaShem bless you and watch over you. May HaShem cause His countenance to shine toward to and favor you. May HaShem raise (once again the root נשא) His countenance toward you and grant you peace.”

Yes, peace requires work. It is a balancing act that engages our full, and unbiased attention. May we all find the strength to do this work, especially now, during this difficult time.

Shabbat shalom!