

Parashah Naso is the Torah's longest parashah, mainly because of its many repetitions. People who are used to getting their information through headlines and short soundbites would no doubt consider its minutiae boring, pedantic, and quite unnecessary. Why all this repetitive detail? And hasn't some of this been covered before – things like segregating people who are “unclean,” confessing transgression and making restitution, and ownership of the people's holy offerings? On the surface, yes. But a detailed reading reveals some profound and timeless teachings.

First, let us define the word *naso*. The root נשׁו is the basis of words for carrying/bearing, bringing and taking, delivering (a speech/prayer), suffering/tolerating, marrying, raising/lifting up, carrying away, lofty/exalted, moving/ portable, ruler/prince, tribute, utterance, oracle, and uprising. In all its permutations it takes up nearly 5 pages in my dictionary of biblical Hebrew. And it features prominently in the parashah that carries its name. Note the underlined words.

The duties of the Gershonite families include carrying the various components of the *mishkan*. These are laid out in exquisite detail, with each individual assigned a specific task. Later and in equal detail, the chieftans of each tribe present their offerings, which are largely identical, but with some small, interesting differences which a close reading will reveal. These episodes, as well as the seemingly unrelated discussions regarding the *nazir* and the *sotah* all have to do with establishing and maintaining peace, a daunting task even for someone with the leadership qualities of Moses.

Amongst and within the tribes the potential for envy was enormous. Assigning individual duties for service in the *mishkan* and mentioning each tribe and its gifts individually was an essential prophylactic measure against the inevitable resentment that besets us humans when we feel we are not being duly acknowledged. As we will see a few weeks from now, Korach felt slighted anyway, and instigated an uprising. Other measures for fostering peace include temporarily segregating people who may pose a physical or spiritual danger to the group and reiterating the laws for dealing with transgression. Here, repetition serves to instill a sense of justice, another vital component of peace. The enigmatic laws of the *sotah*, the suspected adulteress, help promote *shalom bayit* – domestic peace. In a sort of primitive lie detector test similar to King Salomon's test to find the infant's true mother, the accused wife who readily drinks the sacred water mixed with some earth from the floor and a bit of parchment is likely to be innocent, while the guilty one would be apt to simply confess rather than risk the bodily harm she believes would befall her should she drink. Because jealousy, like envy, is highly destructive it is crucial to take measures to prevent it. This also pertains to the *nazir*, someone who

dedicates all or a part of his or her life to HaShem, and is on a near-equal footing with the priests during this time. Being a nazir offers a way for the importance of a person not of the priestly families to be elevated – an ancient form of equal opportunity. Immediately following this discussion HaShem gives Moses the words known as the *birkat kohanim*, the threefold priestly blessing, instructing him to teach them to Aaron and his sons. However, neither the *kohanim* of the Temple nor the worship leaders of the synagogue carry the authority to bless the people themselves. They are mere emissaries, whose raised hands symbolize HaShem's blessing: “They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.” (6:27) This was a radical departure from the prevailing understanding that shamans and oracles had ultimate power to bless and curse. Later we will read about Bilaam, who is sent by the Moabite king Balak to curse Israel, but is rendered so powerless that he can only say “*mah tovu ohalecha Jakob.*” There is a limit to our human power. The 3 blessings themselves carry a profound message, in form as well as in content. There are 3 words in the first part, 5 in the second, and 7 in the third, in a progression which Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom calls a “rising crescendo.”

Rashi teaches that the first part is for material wealth and its protection; the second for wellbeing, success, and mutual favor in our relationships with others; and the third for peace. Here, Rashi explains “May HaShem raise His countenance toward you” means that HaShem should suppress His anger. Our behavior has often widened the chasm between us and HaShem, causing Him to turn away. Peace is the ultimate reward for doing our part to maintain order and harmony within and amongst the complex structures of our earthly home. It begins with each of us as individuals and extends outward in ever-widening circles to embrace the entire universe. Peace is not static; it is an ongoing process that requires continual work and dedication to sustain its fragile balance. No wonder so many of our prayers end with a plea for peace. In the words of the Rambam (Maimonides), “Great indeed is peace, forasmuch as the purpose for which the whole of the Torah was given is to bring peace upon the world ...” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Chanukah 4:14) So, to cut a long story short, Parashah Naso is about establishing measures to ensure peace – in the home, in the community, and in the world. Its detailed repetitions teach us that no effort should be spared toward achieving and maintaining peace, and it starts and ends with acknowledging and valuing the uniqueness of every human being.

Shabbat shalom!