

With 176 verses, Parashah Naso is the Torah's longest parashah. At first glance, its minutiae seem unnecessarily pedantic. Why reiterate laws about isolating ritually unclean people, transgression and restitution, and ownership of holy offerings? Why introduce laws for the *sotah* and the *nazir*? And why must the nearly identical offerings of each tribe be mentioned individually? Let's begin with its length. In Jewish tradition the number 176 alludes to the concept of totality in Torah learning. There are 176 folios in Bava Batra, the longest Tractate in the Talmud, and Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the TaNaKh, has 176 verses divided into 22 8-verse sections with each section correlating to one of the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet ($22 \times 8 = 176$). The number 22 signifies completeness in the natural realm, and the number 8 represents spiritual completeness. For example, the Torah teaches that circumcision occurs on the 8th day of life and newborn animals must stay with their mothers for 7 days before being offered. Parashat Naso is almost always read on the Shabbat immediately following Shavuot, beginning the process of transforming the euphoria of Sinai into a Torah-based infrastructure for daily life. The episodes it contains all deal with creating, repairing, and protecting peace, the foundation of the entire Torah. When we quote Proverbs 3:17-18 when we return the Torah to the Ark after reading from it, we are echoing this principle: "... its [the Torah's] ways are ways of pleasantness and peace. It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and those who draw near are fortunate." The structure of our parashah can be visualized as a *mishkan* of peace, with its outer frame safeguarding collective peace and its inner chamber personal peace. In the outer frame, each branch of the priestly families has specifically assigned duties for serving in the *mishkan*. This promotes peace through clear boundaries and dignified roles and ensures that the holiest objects will be carried without conflict. Repeating every tribal leader's offerings promotes peace by emphasizing equality, shared responsibility, and mutual respect. These measures guard against the potentially destructive resentment that occurs when people feel they are not being duly acknowledged. At the threshold of the inner chamber, the laws for removing impurity from the camp, for making restitution after wrongdoing, and for correct appropriation of holy offerings promote peace between humans and between humans and HaShem by safeguarding moral and spiritual integrity. Before we can heal relationships (*sotah*), we must remove dangers to the community. And before we can heal the individual, we must take steps to prevent potential or repair harm (*nazir*). The trial of the *sotah*, a sort of ancient lie detector test, promotes domestic peace (*shalom bayit*). In the innermost core, the laws for the *nazir*, someone who dedicates all or a part of his or her life to HaShem, promote inner peace (*shalom hanefesh*), without which interpersonal peace is impossible. Immediately following this discussion HaShem gives Moses the words of the *birkat kohanim*, the threefold priestly blessing, instructing him to teach them to Aaron and his sons. It is noteworthy that neither the priests nor the worship leaders of today's synagogues have the authority to bless the people themselves. They are only 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 belief that shamans and oracles had ultimate power to bless and curse. Indeed, Bilaam, sent by the Moabite king Balak to curse Israel, can only exclaim "*mah tov u ohalecha Jakob*." There is a limit to our human power. The three blessings themselves carry a profound message, in form as well as in content. There are three words in the first part, five in the second, and seven in the third, in a progression which Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom calls a "rising crescendo." This is the divine peace that comes from acknowledging the sanctity of our covenant. Rashi teaches that the first verse 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. 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 individual and extends outward in ever-widening circles to embrace the entire universe. Peace 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 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) Parashah Naso is about establishing measures to ensure peace in the community, in the home, in the individual, and in the world. Its themes spiral inward from camp (assigned duties of the priestly clans / tribal offerings) to home (removing impurity, repair and restoration, *sotah*), from home to heart and soul (*nazir*), from heart and soul to HaShem (Moses receives the Priestly Blessing), and back out again for Aaron to bless the camp and all its inhabitants. Its detailed repetitions teach us that no effort should be spared toward achieving and maintaining peace, and it hinges upon acknowledging and valuing the uniqueness of every human being. In its short coda, Moses enters the innermost chamber of the *mishkan* to receive HaShem's instructions for the people, making it clear that revelation did not stop at Sinai. Our Torah is an ongoing dialogue between HaShem and us, and it is our covenantal duty to continue to make it relevant in our daily lives.

Shabbat shalom!