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Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

As mentioned in a previous Covenant and Conversation, there was an ongoing debate between the sages as to whether the nazirite - whose laws are outlined in this week's parsha - was to be praised or not. Recall that the nazirite was someone who voluntarily, usually for a specified period, undertook a special form of holiness. This meant that he was forbidden to consume wine or any grape products, to have a haircut and to defile himself by contact with the dead.

Naziriteship was essentially a renunciation of desire. Why someone would choose to do this is not clear. It may be that wanted to protect himself against drunkenness or to cure himself of alcoholism. It could be that he wanted to experience a higher form of holiness. Forbidden as he was to have contact with the dead, even for a close relative, he was in this respect in the same position as the High Priest. Becoming a nazirite was one way in which a non-cohen could adopt cohen-like behaviour. Some sages argued that the juxtaposition of the law of the nazirite with that of the sotah, the woman suspected of adultery, hinted at the fact that there were people who became nazirites to protect themselves from sexual immorality. Alcohol suppresses inhibitions and increases sexual desire.

Be that as it may, there were mixed views on whether it was a good thing or a bad one to become a nazirite. On the one hand the Torah calls him "holy to God" (Num. 6: 8). On the other, at the completion of his period of abstinence, he is commanded to bring a sin offering (Num. 6: 13-14). From this, Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar Berebi, drew the following inference:

What is the meaning of the phrase (Num. 6: 11), and make atonement for him, because he sinned against the soul (usually translated as "by coming into contact with the dead"). Against which soul did he sin? We must conclude that it refers to denying himself the enjoyment of wine. From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life. It follows that one who keeps fasting is called a sinner. (Taanit 11a; Nedarim 10a)

Clearly R. Eliezer Hakappar is engaging in a polemic against asceticism in Jewish life. We do not know which groups he may have had in mind. Many of the early Christians were ascetics. So in some respects were the members of the Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls. Holy people in many faiths have chosen, in pursuit of spiritual purity, to withdraw from the world, its pleasures and temptations, fasting, afflicting themselves and living in caves, retreats or monasteries.

In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted self-denying practices - among them the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. It is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Hassidei Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among deeply pious, self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts would have been familiar with Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews toward the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were movements in the first centuries of the common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were dualists, holding that the true God was not the creator of the universe and could not be reached within the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. Hence holiness means withdrawing from the physical world, its pleasures, appetites and desires. The two best known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish tendencies in Christianity and Islam.

What is remarkable however is the position of Maimonides, who holds both views, positive and negative. In Hilkhot Deot, the Laws of Ethical Character, Maimonides adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer Hakappar: "A person may say: 'Desire,

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honour and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world, therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the other extreme.' As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing . . . This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way." (Hilkhot Deot 3:1)

Yet in the same book, the Mishneh Torah, he writes: "Whoever vows to God [to become a nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy . . . Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet" (Hilkhot Nezirut 10: 14). How does any writer come to adopt so self-contradictory a position - let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer is profound. According to Maimonides, there is not one model of the virtuous life, but two. He calls them respectively the way of the saint (Hassid) and the sage (Hakham).

The saint is a person of extremes. Maimonides defines hessed as extreme behaviour - good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires (Guide for the Perplexed III, 52). So, for example, "If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint (hassid)" (Hilkhot Deot 1: 5).

The sage is a completely different kind of person. He follows the "golden mean", the "middle way" of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. The sage avoids both miserliness and renunciation of wealth, hoarding or giving away all he has, and thus becomes neither stingy nor foolhardy but generous. He or she knows the twin dangers of too much and too little - excess and deficiency. The sage weighs conflicting pressures and avoids extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of morality to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. That is what makes Maimonides so acute a thinker. He realises that you can't have both - that they are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But what about the members of the saint's own family? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's fellow citizens? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what about the rule of law, and justice? Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. But you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society. They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path. They are seeking personal salvation rather than collective redemption.

It is this deep insight that led Maimonides to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the nazirite. The nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a hassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, a high ideal.

But it is not the way of the sage - and you need sages if you seek to perfect society. The reason the sage is not an extremist is because he or she realises that there are other people at stake. There are the members of one's own family; the others within one's own community; there are colleagues at work; there is a country to defend and a nation to help build. The sage knows it is dangerous, even morally self-indulgent, to leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For we are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; in society not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others. Hence, while from a personal perspective the nazirite is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a "sinner" who has to be bring an atonement offering.

Judaism makes room for individuals to escape from the temptations of the world. The supreme example is the nazirite. But this is an exception, not the norm. To be a chakham, a sage, is to have the courage to engage with the world, despite all the spiritual risks, and to help bring a fragment of the Divine presence into the shared spaces of our collective life. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And in the hand of the kohen shall be the bitter waters that bring about the curse." (Numbers 5:18) One of the strangest passages in the Bible is the law of the woman suspected of adultery which is recorded in this biblical portion. The text tells us that if a woman is suspected by her husband of having an affair with another man, and he warns her before two valid witnesses not to be alone in a secluded place with that particular individual, and nevertheless the woman is seen to have sequestered herself privately with that person, the woman becomes subject to an eerie sort of "trial" in order to establish her innocence.

The husband must bring his wife to the kohen together with an offering of barley flour. The kohen then takes sacred water mixed with earth from the floor of the Sanctuary and dissolves within this mixture a parchment scroll inscribed with the following curses which he recites to the shamed wife: "May the Lord render you as a curse and as an oath amidst your people when the Lord causes your thigh to collapse

and your stomach to distend. These waters which bring about a curse shall enter your insides to cause your stomach to distend and your thigh to collapse" (Numbers 5:21–22).

The accused woman responds "Amen, amen," after which she is given the bitter waters to drink. The kohen then takes the meal offering from the hand of the woman, waves it before God, and offers it up on the altar. The woman drinks the waters. If no symptoms of the curses occur, the woman is considered innocent and the couple can resume their marital relationship in peace (Numbers 4:11–31).

What is the significance of this entire procedure? It sounds almost like voodoo, or some sort of black magic, a kind of supernatural activity of the occult which does not appear to be in consonance with biblical rationality.

To be sure, this entire "trial by bitter waters" only lasted until the end of the First Temple period (70 CE). By the time of R. Yochanan b. Zakkai, the Talmudic sages insisted that the test was no longer efficacious because an increasing number of men were having extramarital affairs (Yerushalmi Sota 1:4). Their prooftext is the closing verse of this biblical chapter (Numbers 5:31) which reads, "The man shall be innocent of iniquity, then that woman shall bear her iniquity." The sages take this to mean that it is only when the man is innocent of sexual dalliance that we can condemn the woman for her sexual immorality. But even given that limitation, the entire procedure of the bitter waters smacks of barbaric primitivism which jars modern sensibilities!

An incident occurred in Efrat about a decade ago which gave me an insight into the meaning of this ritual. Due to the positive relationships we enjoy with the local Arab villages adjoining Efrat, I am often called upon to adjudicate disputes between Palestinians and Israelis, and sometimes even between Palestinians and Palestinians. In one particular instance, two Palestinian cousins from two separate Palestinian villages were suspected of having a sexual relationship. The modesty codes are quite strict within the Muslim Palestinian community, and so the family of the young woman was incensed at the rumors of her breach of morality; her brothers even spoke of killing the young woman for dishonoring her family. The family of the young man became terrified, convinced that an "honor" killing was likely to take place (as happens not infrequently in the Middle East). The couple convinced the families to come to me for arbitration and to abide by any ruling I would hand down. I interviewed the two cousins both separately and together, listened to the testimonies of witnesses, who had seen unseemly behavior but had not seen any actual sexual activity. Based on this lack of real evidence, I ruled that there was no legitimate proof that cohabitation had taken place. I insisted however that the two get married, which they did with alacrity. I even bestowed a blessing upon their union….

The Bible emerged from the matrix of the Middle East, where jealousy is rampant and women are often considered the chattel of their husbands. A jealous husband can easily persuade himself to harm the wife whom he suspects of adultery. I therefore believe that this trial of the bitter waters provided a marvelous psychological ploy to protect the women from a husband's jealous wrath. To the best of my knowledge, there is no record in the Talmud of a woman whose thighs actually collapsed or whose stomach became distended after drinking the bitter waters; hence, the unscathed woman would generally be declared innocent and her husband would take her back. And if her fear of the consequences resulted in a confession of guilt, then the marriage deserved to be terminated with the payment of a fine, to be made by the adulterous woman. In any case, a murder by a jealous husband or on behalf of family honor would always be avoided. Hence the "trial of the bitter waters" served as marvelous protection for the woman in a society only too ready to lay the blame upon her for a suspected act of immorality. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase* at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The count of the Jewish people as it appears in this week's parsha is always a difficult issue to appreciate and understand. What are we to learn from all of the detailed descriptions and seemingly exact numbers? The general lesson that every Jew counts – and is to be counted, is most apparent. But that lesson can be learned from a much more concise précis of the population of the Jews than the long description that appears in the parsha. I think that the messenger here is itself the message. By that I mean that the Torah wishes to express its relationship to the Jewish people simply by dwelling on an "unnecessary" lengthy detailed counting of its numbers. For those with whom we have a loving relationship, there are no unnecessary or superfluous acts or gestures. The rabbis compare this type of relationship, in a wry way, to one counting one's money.

For instance, the criterion for the speed and intensity of reciting the words of prayer is the rate of speed that one would use in counting valuable coins. The care in counting is itself the expression of the underlying attachment to what is being counted. I always note that people leaving the ATM cash dispenser invariably check the bills that they have received. This is not only an act of prudence; it is an act

of affection and importance. So, the count of the Jews in the parsha, even in its detail and length, is logical and makes perfect sense. Another understanding of this issue can be found in the description of the counters themselves and not only in the description of the ones counted. Moshe, Aharon, Elazar and Itamar are the leaders of the Jewish people. They are responsible for the physical and spiritual welfare of the Jewish people in its totality. Part of their task is to somehow know all of their millions of constituents – to have some sort of relationship and affinity to each individual Jew.

The leaders of Israel always saw themselves as being parents of all Jews. Some Jews crave affection and others need very tough love. The enormous diversity – twelve different tribes that are counted separately before being united in one total number of the whole people – of the Jewish people, is emphasized by the sheer individual counting of them. The responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people is a heavy burden for leaders to bear. But it is an unavoidable one that automatically comes with the posts of leadership. And the counters of the Jewish people are themselves the leaders of the people, aware at all times that the people rely upon their leadership and wisdom. And they must also be aware that each of those counted are somehow to be accommodated in their needs and development.

So, counting the Jewish people are not empty numbers to the leaders of Israel but rather, the list of challenges and opportunities presented before them. May both the counters and the counted of Israel in our day be great in numbers, spirit and accomplishments.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Nazir's Dilemma

Parashat Naso contains the mitzvah of the Nazir. We have previously discussed the laws of the Nazir, namely, not cutting his hair, not drinking wine or eating any part of the grape, and avoiding a corpse so that he will not become impure (tamei). The Nazir serves in this capacity for a period of thirty days, unless he had stated a different length of time longer than the thirty day minimum. When completing his period of nazirut service, he was required to end this time by undergoing a ritual of purification described by the Torah.

"This is the law of the Nazir: on the day his status as a Nazir is completed, he shall bring himself to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. He shall bring his offering to Hashem: one unblemished sheep in its first year as an olah-offering, one unblemished ewe in its first year as a sin-offering, and one unblemished ram as a peace-offering; a basket of unleavened loaves: loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers smeared with oil; and their meal-offerings and their libations. The Kohein shall bring [them] near before Hashem and perform the service of his sin-offering and his olah-offering. He shall make the ram a sacrifice of a peace-offering for Hashem with the basket of unleavened loaves, and the Kohein shall perform its meal-offering and its libation. The Nazir shall shave his Nazirite head at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; he shall take the hair of his Nazirite head and put in on the fire that is under the sacrifice of the peace-offering. The Kohein shall take the foreleg, cooked, of the ram, and one unleavened loaf from the basket and one unleavened wafer, and place them on the hands of the Nazir after he has shaved his Nazirite (hair). The Kohein shall wave them as a wave-service before Hashem; it shall be holy for the Kohein, aside from the breast of waving and the thigh of raising – afterward the Nazir may drink wine."

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term Nazir literally means "to keep aloof, to keep separate," and the Nazir was required to abstain (keep separate) from something that would normally be permitted. The Nazir must not come in contact with a dead body, he must avoid any product that comes from grapes (even the skin or the seeds), and he must refrain from cutting his hair or shaving. HaRav Hirsch explains that these are just "the external manifestations" of nazirut, but do not constitute the concept of his choice to become a Nazir. The term is also used for the vines which must be left to themselves in the seventh and Jubilee years. The nuance in understanding that this concept of the Nazir presents is not someone who separates himself but someone whom others must separate from. The Nazir separates himself to come together only with Hashem in his circle of isolation. "But this is no hermit-like isolation, no shutting oneself up in the wilderness, it is an isolation of one's mind and spirit with Hashem in the midst of the most active ordinary life."

HaRav Hirsch explains that the chatat (sin)-offering that the Nazir brings is usually brought before the olah-offering, as one must first be rid of his sin and then become closer to Hashem. First "turn away from evil," and secondly, "do good." Hirsch explains that here, no actual sin was committed by becoming a Nazir. The chatat-offering is "only the expression of the undertaking of future firmness in the avoidance of sinning." Hirsch states that the olah-offering is brought first, and is attached to the precautionary chatat-offering, which is brought immediately after the olah. Rav Hirsch explains that the offerings brought by the Kohanim on their inauguration followed the pattern of the chatat first, whereas at the inauguration of the Leviim, the olah preceded the chatat.

Abarbanel asks why the Nazir is required to

bring one of each of three different kinds of offerings (olah, chatat-sin, and sh'lamim-peace). He explains that these three types of offerings come to permit him to participate in the three areas of life which were restricted to him when he took upon himself the obligation of a Nazir. These three restrictions involved: (1) grapes, grape parts, and grape products, (2) shaving or cutting his hair, and (3) becoming impure because of a corpse. The chatat-offering comes to permit becoming impure from a corpse, the olah-offering comes to permit shaving, and the sh'lamim-offering comes to permit grapes. Abarbanel gives us the reasons for the different offerings of the Nazir when he has completed his period of nazirut. He must bring a sheep as an olah-offering to show that he desires to be close to Hashem even though he will no longer be a Nazir. He brings a ewe as a sin-offering because he is now abandoning his nezirut and returning to the temptations of gashmiyut, acquiring things for his personal needs. The Nazir brings a ram as a sh'lamim-offering to indicate that he is joyful that he was able to complete his period of nezirut. He brings a basket of unleavened bread as a gift-offering and their meal-offerings and libations to indicate the hope that Hashem will approve of his gift-offering. He brings the libations for the other offerings according to the Torah's requirements.

The Torah states that the Nazir (according to Rashi) "yavi oto, shall bring himself to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." The Hebrew words present us with a different possibility, "he shall bring it (the offering) to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that Rashi's interpretation appears to be superfluous, as anyone who comes before the Tent of Meeting will bring himself there. Rav Sorotzkin also wonders why Rashi's comment is not stated in the case of a Nazir who became impure by coming into contact with a corpse during his nazirut, or the case of anyone else who is m'chusar caparim, lacking the final step of the offering to become totally pure again, such as the zav or zava, who bring their offering to the Tent of Meeting. Rav Sorotzkin explains that the zav and zava are permitted to eat kodshim (holy food given only to the Kohein) after bringing the offerings to the Tent of Meeting. The Satan is not interested in their strivings to become more holy. The pure Nazir, however, would prefer to remain as a Nazir so that he could remain holy, as it allows him to be close to Hashem. But the Satan brings the Nazir to the Tent of Meeting because all his restrictions will now be void, and he can be tempted again by food and wine to sin once more.

The Nazir chose to become restricted and now becomes unrestricted. This new lack of restriction frees him from his service but opens him to the unfettered world that caused him so much trouble in the past that he chose restriction. The difference for him now is that he has become closer to Hashem. That closeness, hopefully, will shield him from the kind of temptation that caused him problems in the past.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Command the Children of Israel that they shall send from the camp every tzarua, every zav, and all impure by corpse." (Bamidbar 5:2) When Hashem's Shechina descended upon the Mishkan, the entire area was uplifted with holiness. The Jews at that time were commanded to ensure their encampment remained holy and pure. Just as the Kohanim were assigned tasks to keep the Levi'im from coming in contact with the vessels of the Mishkan, the Jews were assigned the task of keeping out those whose halachic status didn't befit the holiness of the camp.

There are Midrashic understandings that the specifically-afflicted individuals in the posuk correlate to certain sins, and it was up to all the Jewish People to stay away from these sins. The people afflicted had to be sent out of the camp as part of their rehabilitation, but it was not enough for the Kohanim or Levi'im, or even the policemen of the greater camp to enforce this. Rather, it was up to each individual to make sure they maintained an atmosphere of holiness.

While it might be tempting to look aside, and say, "Who am I to judge these people?" we are told that we are not allowed to look away. While we may correctly understand that it isn't our place to judge them, we should nevertheless not be accepting and tolerant of improper behavior. Even if we are not participating in it, it affects us when others do. That is why Hashem commanded that all the Children of Israel be given this task.

That said, it is notable that the people sent out of the camp by the whole nation have something else in common. They are all people who are impure for a period of seven days. This means that when they are sent out, it is not permanently, and not with disdain. Rather, we are to recognize that sending them out of the camp is part of their purification and healing process. We don't want to send them out because they will contaminate our camp, but because we want them to become pure and join the camp again soon.

The word 'shlichus,' sending out, connotes a mission. We send messengers to convey information, and we send people on missions with a task to complete. This is the type of sending we're referring to, that we urge them to leave the camp and embark on the journey to full return. We don't push them out, but push them to come back in. Of course, if they choose to remain as they are, we still make them leave the camp, because this is not an acceptable response.

Just as Aharon the Kohain would befriend sinners, and thereby cause them to want to be better,

so are we supposed to find ways to encourage others to better themselves. The priority is not on shunning them and making them feel bad, but on ensuring they understand the importance and power of their own holiness, so that our entire nation can be united in purity.

A wise Torah scholar explained a verse in Mishlei, and also how to deal with difficult people, at the same time.

The posuk (9:7) says, "Do not reprove a scoffer lest he come to hate you. Reprove a wise man and he will love you."

"This implies that you don't even bother to reprove a scoffer. But it's not true.

When you reprove someone, don't say, "You're a scoffer!" He'll just hate you. Instead, tell him, "You're too smart for such behavior!" He will love you, and your words will have the desired effect. The point isn't 'who,' but 'how.'" © 2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

"Lift up their heads"? Why not just say, "Count the people"? Because that is the goal of counting people, to say that they count, that they are special, unique, and knowing that tends to lift a person's spirit. After all, didn't God already know the total of the Jewish people before they were even counted? He could have just told Moshe the number to write down and we would not have been the wiser. Obviously, we are meant to learn something from the counting itself, which is to make people feel that they count.

Why were they down? They became that way ever since the incident with the golden calf, and the Divine retribution that stripped them of eternal life and the two spiritual crowns they had inherited when they said, "We will do, and we will understand" (Shemos 24:7). They knew it would be a long time until they would be returned, leaving us to live history on the level we have lived until now.

As short-lived as it was, it was a whole different level of Torah life. We had, through the giving of Torah, risen to a level of reality no one else had ever experienced, short of Adam HaRishon before his sin. Even the Forefathers, as great as they were, had yet to experience such a level of consciousness because it was not yet the time in history. But their descendants, as great as they weren't, had, and it was hard to go on after without it.

Something similar happened to Shaul HaMelech. While he still enjoyed the right to be king of the Jewish People, he had access to a more direct and intimate relationship with God. After he failed to kill every last Amaleki and lost the Malchus, he lost that connection and that left him melancholy, to say the least.

Such a level of connection to God basically ended for everyone when prophecy did around 313 BCE, over two thousand years ago. Even Ruach HaKodesh, which many claim to have had, or others have said they have had, is a far cry from actual prophecy. It certainly inspires and directs, and it can even give one a sense of Shechinah, but not like we were once able to enjoy.

In fact, if we can stop leveling criticism at the Torah world for just a few moments, we can instead be awed that anyone is living by Torah on any level today. Over three thousand years since the giving of Torah, over two thousand years without direction communication with God, and millennia of exile and persecution, should have put an end to Torah history long ago.

But it didn't. A core group of Torah Jews remain despite all the forces working against it. The casualties, spiritually and physically, have been huge and painful, but still, Torah communities have established themselves and even grown around the world, and especially in Eretz Yisroel, a testament to our supernatural existence.

But such a long and difficult history has, and understandably so, given rise to expressions, such as, "It is hard to be a Jew." We even question potential converts, asking why they would want to join a religion with so many demands and so few returns in this world. Other religions take the opposite approach.

Even the Talmud addresses the issue somewhat here:

"Onkelos bar Kalonikos, the son of Titus's sister, wanted to convert to Judaism. He went and raised Titus from the grave through necromancy, and said to him: 'Who is most important in that world where you are now?' Titus answered him: 'The Jewish people.' Onkelos asked him: 'Should I then attach myself to them here in this world?' Titus said to him: 'Their commandments are numerous, and you will not be able to fulfill them.'" (Gittin 56b)

Maybe Onkeles had a big advantage over the rest of us. For us, the World to Come is hearsay because we've never spoken to anyone who has gone. Onkeles got to confirm the worthiness of his sacrifice of this world for the next one, but what confirmation do we have, other than our emunah? Those without it have left Judaism for the obvious pleasures and breaks of this world.

But God puts leaders in every generation with the ability to uplift and motivate those with whom they have contact. God gives us people who can help us see the long-term good, and inspire us to be heroic in our devotion to a Torah way of life. And if you happen to be one of those gifted people, then realize how great a responsibility and opportunity you have in this role. There is nothing more heroic in God's eyes than inspiring others to be heroic in their adherence to Torah

and mitzvos.

So, the mitzvah to count the Levi'im in these parshios and the rest of the nation in ones before these is more about making things count than counting itself. It tells us to be aware of where others are holding, and to lift their spirits if they need it. It is about feeling unique and special and helping others to do this as well. This is essential not just so we can learn Torah and perform mitzvos properly, but so that we can continue to do so until the yetzer hara no longer has any power to stop us.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

There is a well-known axiom of life that has been attributed to the famous Greek philosopher Heraclitus: The only constant in life is change. Plato illustrated this point as, "You can never step into the same river twice." The water of a river is constantly flowing; therefore, no two steps into a river can ever be the same. Benjamin Franklin put it another way: "When you are finished changing you are finished."

As we go through life we are constantly buffeted by winds of change. This is why, I believe, part of the human condition is to establish for ourselves fixed points -- concepts that we see as unchanging truths -- that we can continually use to navigate ourselves to a place of safety in an ever-shifting world.

Ultimately, we also have a tendency to discard (and often discredit) valid philosophies that do not fall into our desired worldview. The philosophical divide of America's political parties -- a divide of Grand Canyon proportions -- is a prime example of this myopic vision. Politicians choose to believe what they want, while mostly ignoring what the American people actually believe (though serving their constituents should be one of their fixed points). Thus, the parties and political figures who purport to represent "the people" end up only representing themselves.

Reflecting on this manifest dissonance, I began to think about what it means to be self-centered. The general understanding of self-centeredness is that it describes a state of being, one wherein a person is totally preoccupied with his own selfish desires -- blithely ignoring (or not caring) about the needs of others. To the self-centered person the world revolves around him, and him alone.

But I have recently begun contemplating a somewhat different version of self-centeredness. I think we can also define a person who is self-centered as someone who always imagines himself to be in the center. That is, he sees himself as being in the "just" middle with anyone to the right being an evil fascist, and anyone to the left being a mindless progressive.

To some extent, we all do this. I am reminded of the late comic George Carlin who once observed, "Have you ever noticed that anyone who drives faster than you is a maniac, and anyone who drives slower than you is an idiot?"

The real depth of this insight is that the only people you ever really take notice of are those who pass you or those whom you pass -- you hardly ever pay attention to anyone else. This is because everyone else's existence is only relevant to you as it relates to your own self-centered universe. This is why those who are preoccupied with themselves end up living in tiny worlds; nobody else can really exist in them (and nobody would want to either).

While reviewing this week's Torah reading a similar thought occurred to me: as Jews, we too can fall prey to self-centeredness.

This week's Torah reading is called Naso, and it happens to be the longest portion in the Torah. The last seventy-two verses in Naso describe the gifts contributed by each tribe to the Mishkan (Tabernacle) 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 repetitive detail, each tribe's contributions. These seventy-two verses are a big part of the reason that this week's portion is the longest in the Torah.

(Here's a fascinating piece of trivia for you to consider: the longest portion in the Torah contains 176 verses, the longest chapter in Psalms contains 176 verses, and the longest tractate in the Babylonian Talmud ends on folio 176 -- coincidence? Obviously not, and we shall leave it as a discussion for another time.)

These repetitive verses are difficult to understand, after all, we know that the Torah doesn't even have an extra letter, so why would the Torah go to such great length to repeat each tribe's identical contribution?

Nachmanides (Naso 7:13) answers that the idea to bring an offering occurred to each tribal leader independently, and each one had his own specific reasoning for his contribution. In fact, the sages (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15) explain why each tribal head brought what he did. We learn from here an extraordinary lesson; the exact same act, done with a different intention, is an entirely different act.

But there is another aspect to these tribal gifts that I wish to explore. The famous medieval Biblical commentator known as Rashi explains the unique meaning that the gifts signified. He explains that the numerical value of the words "silver tray" is equivalent to 930, which corresponds to the number of years that Adam lived. The 130 shekalim that the tray weighed refers to the age that Adam was when he fathered to his son Seth (Genesis 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 20 years that preceded it when God informed him that a flood

was coming. The 70 shekalim weight of the basin refers to the 70 nations of the world who descended from Noah. All of these allusions to non-Jews during the inauguration of the Altar seem very strange. After all, this event was celebrating the Altar of our Mishkan; what does our Mishkan and our Altar have to do with the non-Jewish world?

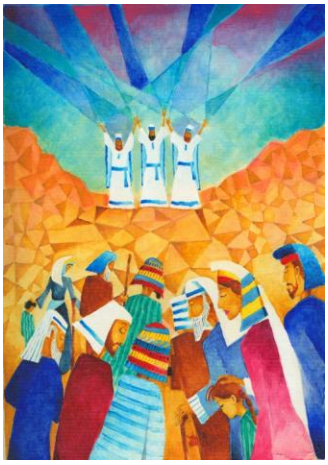
The great codifier of Jewish law known as Maimonides states, "we have a tradition that the place that the Altar was constructed (in the Holy Temple) was the place that Abraham built an altar and bound Isaac upon it. In addition, this was the very same place that Noah built his altar when he exited the ark, and this was the exact spot that the children of Adam, Cain, and Abel, brought their sacrifices. Lastly, it was the very spot that Adam was created from. Our Rabbis have thus taught 'Adam was created from the spot that he receives atonement'" (Beis Habechira 2:2).

Maimonides is teaching us something truly remarkable. All of mankind is connected to this specific place in the universe. The Jewish people tend to look at our Holy Temple and the Altar as things that are only for the Jewish nation. Our natural discomfort and distrust of the non-Jewish world, borne out of thousands of years of oppression and great suffering at their hands, sometimes makes it difficult to comprehend that the nations of the world also have a connection to the place of the Holy Temple.

To many, it is an anathema for us to contemplate that the other nations of the world are deeply connected to "our" Holy Temple and Altar. This is because for millennia the Jewish nation has been persecuted in almost every civilized area of the world. Yet somehow we conveniently forget that the terrible suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the various nations of the world was really just the Almighty punishing us for our wrongdoings; as the Torah had forewarned us would happen.

Of course, it goes without saying that much of that pain was inflicted by certain nations who 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 the suffering was because we failed to follow the Torah, and fulfill our primary responsibility of bringing the awareness of God into this world. This is the job that our forefather Abraham took upon himself, and it's precisely why he is considered the first Jew. He went on a crusade to make sure that people were aware of the Almighty's existence and that it is to Him that we owe our fealty.



It is the responsibility of the Jewish nation to bring the presence of the Almighty into this world and to make the rest of the world aware of His immanence. This is readily evident in the words of our prophets and in our own daily prayers. The Jewish people are not the final purpose of creation, rather we are a means to the end and it is our responsibility to see that the purpose of creation is realized.

After all, the Jewish people are barely a quarter of one percent of the world's population -- it would be the height of self-centeredness to actually believe that we should solely focus on ourselves because we are the entirety of the Almighty's purpose in creating the world. Our mission is to manifest the presence of the Almighty into this world. The Holy Temple -- may it be speedily rebuilt -- is the nexus of this in this world.

The Altar is the place where all of mankind connects with God and is empowered to serve God through sacrifices. Thus, it is no small wonder that the main religions of the western world all feel intensely connected to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in particular.

We must remember that we are caretakers appointed by God and it is our responsibility to make sure that the entire world is aware of the Almighty and give everyone a place to worship and connect to Him. That is our fixed point. It's not only about us -- it's about connecting the Almighty with all of His children.

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Naso lists the commandment of confessing our sins as part of our Teshuva (repentance) (5:6-7). However, when the Rambam (Maimonides) lists the 613 commandments, this commandment of confession doesn't appear. Why isn't such a seemingly crucial commandment included, according to the Rambam?

Rabbi Twerski quotes the Nesivot Shalom, who explains that not confessing to a sin is in essence perpetuating the sin itself. It's wrong to assume that the act is already done, because if we don't regret it, we're continuously guilty of it. This understanding has far-reaching implications in our lives. If we ever did something wrong, it's not enough to just put it behind us and move on. Rather, we must (1) confront our actions; or (2) decide if it was proper or not. If it wasn't proper, we need to (3) apologize for it, and (4) pledge to never do it again. Amazingly (but not surprisingly), this very formula works for business relationships, as well as personal relationships between family, friends and even with our inner selves. When we learn to face and embrace our past, we will have learned to deal with our future!