

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l**

### Covenant & Conversation

**T**his week's sedra begins with a continuation of the census begun in last week's -- the act that gives the entire book its English name: the book of "Numbers." Two things, though, are puzzling. The first is the very act of numbering the people. Jewish tradition conveys two quite different, apparently contradictory, attitudes toward the taking of a census.

Rashi notes that this is not the first time the people had been counted. Their number ("about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children") had already been given as they prepared to leave Egypt (Ex. 12:37). A more precise calculation had been made when the adult males each gave a half shekel toward the building of the sanctuary (yielding a total of 603,550; Ex. 38:26). Now a third count was taking place. Why the repeated calculations? Rashi's answer is simple and moving: Because they (the children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the sanctuary), He counted them again. (Rashi to Bamidbar 1:1)

For Rashi, the counting of the people was an act of Divine love. Yet this is not the impression we receive elsewhere. To the contrary, the Torah sees the taking of a census as profoundly dangerous: "Then God said to Moses, 'When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each must give to God a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them.'" (Ex. 30:11-12).

Centuries later, when King David counted the people, there was a moment of Divine anger, during which 70,000 died. It seems hard to reconcile the idea of counting as an act of love with the fact that counting involves great risk.

The second source of perplexity is the phrase the Torah uses to describe the act of counting: *naso/se'u et rosh*, literally, "lift the head." There are many verbs available in classical Hebrew to indicate the act of counting: *limnot*, *lifkod*, *lispur*, *lachshov*. Why, in the books of Exodus and Numbers, does the Torah resort to the strange circumlocution, "lift the heads" of the Israelites?

To understand the revolution the Hebrew Bible brought to the world, we have first to enter imaginatively into the consequences for humanity of the birth of civilization. In the earliest hunter-gatherer societies, people lived together in small groups. There were, as yet, no cities, no states, no large concentrations of population. The Torah attributes the building of the first city to Cain (Gen. 4:17). Cities emerged with the birth of agriculture -- in the fertile alluvial plain in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates, and the well-irrigated Nile delta. Twice in the book of Bereishit the Torah sketches a portrait of urban culture: first, the Tower of Babel, second, the Egypt to which Joseph is brought as a slave. They are both highly critical accounts. In Babel, human life was cheap (when the Tower was being built, said the sages, if a person fell and died, no one noticed. If a brick fell, they wept). In Egypt, entire populations -- among them, eventually, the children of Israel -- could be pressed into service as a labour force to build pyramids, temples and monuments, many of which still stand today.

The birth of agriculture and the growth of towns had huge social implications. For the first time, surplus wealth was possible and could be stored in the form of money (initially, precious metals such as silver and gold). So too, as populations expanded and the division of labour became more elaborate, social stratification began. Inequality -- deep, pervasive and systemic -- became one of the universal features of the earliest societies. At the top was the king, emperor or Pharaoh, seen as no less than a god or child of the gods, who held a massive concentration of power. Below him (or her) were the various ranks of privilege: court circles, military chiefs, administrators and priests. The mass of the people -- poor, illiterate, expendable -- was significant, whether as an army or a construction force, as a mass, by sheer weight of numbers. Hence the significance of censuses in the ancient world (and in this respect, little has changed from then to now). Size meant strength, military or economic. Population counts gave rulers information about the size of the army they could muster, or of the income they could raise by taxation.

The religion of Israel is a sustained protest against this view -- military, political and economic -- of the human situation. At this distance in time it is hard fully to appreciate the breathtaking novelty, the transformative potential, of the cluster of ideas generated by a single revelation -- that the human

person as such, man or woman, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, is the image of God and therefore of non-negotiable, unquantifiable value. We are each equally in the image of God, therefore we stand equal in the presence of God. Much of Torah, Jewish history and the development of Western civilization is about the slow translation of this idea into institutions, social structures and ethical codes.

It should now be clear why the taking of a census is fraught with spiritual risk. The numbering of a people is the most potent symbol of mankind-in-the-mass, of a society in which the individual is not valued in and for him -- or herself but as part of a totality whose power lies in numbers. That is precisely what Israel is not. The God of Israel, who is the God of all mankind, sets His special love on a people whose strength has nothing to do with numbers, a people that never sets itself to become an empire, that is never commanded to wage holy war in order to convert populations, that was and remains tiny in both absolute terms and relative to the empires with which it was and is surrounded, standing as it does at the vulnerable crossroad between three continents.

Both questions with which we began are now answered. There is a difference between a human census and one commanded by God. David's was a human census. Israel's second king had laid the foundations of a nation. He had waged successful wars, united the tribes and established Jerusalem as his capital. Shortly after his death, Israel reached its zenith as a power in the Middle East. Under Solomon, through strategic alliances, it became a centre of trade and scholarship. The Temple was built. It must have seemed at the time as if, after many centuries of wandering and war, Israel had become a power to rival any other. It was a shortlived, cruelly-shattered illusion. Almost immediately after Solomon's reign, the kingdom split in two, and from then on its this-worldly fate was sealed. A history of defeats, exiles and destructions began, which has no parallel in the annals of any other nation. The Hebrew Bible is not wrong in seeing the starting-point of this decline in the moment at which David acted like any other king and ordered a census of the people.

A Divine census is utterly different. It has nothing to do with strength-in-numbers. It has to do, instead, with conveying to every member of the nation that he or she counts; that every person, family, household is held precious by God; that distinctions between great and small, ruler and ruled, leader and led, are irrelevant; that we are each God's image and the object of His love. A Divine census is, as Rashi says, a gesture of endearment. That is why it cannot be described by the usual verbs of counting -- limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov. Only the phrase naso/se'u et rosh, "lift the head", does justice to this kind of enumeration, in which those entrusted with the task are commanded to "lift the head" of those they count, making every individual stand tall in the knowledge that they are loved, cherished, held

special by God, and not merely a number, a cipher, among the thousands and millions.

There is a wonderful verse in Psalm 147 which we say every morning in our prayers: "He counts the number of the stars and calls them each by name." A name is a marker of uniqueness. Collective nouns group things together; proper names distinguish them as individuals. Only what we value, do we name (One of the most chilling acts of dehumanisation in the extermination camps of Nazi Germany was that those who entered were never addressed by their names. Instead they were given, inscribed on their skin, a number). God gives even the stars their names, all the more so human beings -- on whom He has set His image. God counts to signal to us that each of us counts, for what we are as individuals, not en masse. He "lifts our head" in the most profound way known to mankind, by assuring each of us of His special, enduring, unquantifiable love.

That is the nature of the census in the book of Numbers. As the Israelites prepared to become a society with the sanctuary -- visible home of the Divine presence -- at its centre, they had to be reminded that they were to become the pioneers of a new and revolutionary social order, whose most famous definition was given by the prophet Zechariah as the Israelites prepared to rebuild the ruined temple: "Not by might, nor by strength, but by My spirit, says the Lord." *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

#### RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

## Shabbat Shalom

“**A**ll the days of the Nazarite which he consecrated himself to God, he shall be holy. He shall let the hair of his head grow and no razor shall come upon his head.” (Numbers 6:5) We have already investigated the special religious laws and restrictions – paralleling the privileges – pertaining to the kohanim who are from the tribe of Levi and are direct descendants of Aaron, in our commentary on Vayikra (the book of Leviticus). However, the Torah is sensitive to the need within some standard Israelites to assume an extra dimension of holiness, to the possibility that individuals from tribes other than Levi might wish to pursue a more consecrated, spiritual, and even ascetic lifestyle. In order to allow their drive to be realized in formal (halakhic) terms, our Torah reading introduces the possibility of the Nazarite. Three elements comprise the Nazarite vow, which could be assumed by any Israelite for a minimum of thirty days: the prohibition against drinking wine, the prohibition against coming into contact with the dead, and the prohibition against cutting one's hair.

It is interesting to note that two of these three prohibitions, the prohibitions against drinking wine and coming in contact with the dead, correspond to the very

demands the Torah places upon the priesthood. A priest may not partake in Temple service if he has drunk wine, and he is restricted from any contact with the dead with the exception of his immediate family. (The Nazirite is not permitted exceptions, apparently because he is generally a Nazirite only for thirty days whereas the priesthood lasts throughout the priest's lifetime. Similarly, the Nazirite may not drink wine at all – not even Sabbath and festival kiddush wine, whereas the kohen is only precluded from wine before – or during – his ministering in the Sanctuary and before rendering a religio-legal ruling.)

Here the similarity ends; it is only the Nazirite who cannot cut a single hair from his head. And after the conclusion of his period of the Nazirite vow, his entire head must be shaven, and all of the hair is then burned. In the words of the Bible, the Nazirite must “shave his head in front of the Tent of Meeting, and then shall take the hair...and place it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering” (Numbers 6:18). What strikes us about this command is that the burning of the hair seems to share the altar with the other sacrifices that the Nazirite is required to bring: burnt-offering, sin-offering, peace-offering, and meal-offering. Why dramatize in this manner the significance and centrality of the Nazirite's hair? Once the period of the vow ends, all the prohibitions against drinking wine and attending funerals are removed; there are no ceremonies for the lifting of these restrictions in any way. The sole exception is the burning of his hair under the peace offering.

Furthermore, the other restrictions – which also pertain to the kohen – are understandable. A consecrated individual must stay away from wine; it can play havoc with our emotions and desires, removing the ability to make rational decisions. And one who strives for sanctity must avoid contact with a corpse: involvement with death can often lead to depression and melancholia which prevents interpersonal activity and may even bring about alienation from God. But what is the symbolism of hair? And why let it grow long in the first place only to have it eventually burnt?

We can begin to understand the special symbolism of the hair when we take note of Rashi's comment that the reason why the laws of the Nazirite immediately follow the laws of the “suspected adulteress” (sota) is the psychological affinity between these two states: after someone sees the suspected adulteress in her shame, he will remove himself from wine, often the cause of transgression.

But in addition to the evil which can possibly emanate from wine, transgression can likewise come from uncontrolled hair. The Bible continues to describe the punishment of the sota: “And the priest shall stand the [unfaithful] woman before God and uncover her hair.”

Rashi here comments that the purpose of uncovering her hair was to shame her, pointing out that a married woman whose hair is uncovered is disgraced.

After all, the Mishna rules that a married woman cannot appear in public with her hair uncovered, covered hair being a time-honored symbol of the marital state (Ketubot 72b). Indeed, the Talmudic discussion on the Mishna deduces that a married woman is biblically commanded to cover her hair from the fact that the unfaithful wife's hair had to be uncovered. To this day, observant Jewish women who are married are expected to wear a head covering at least in public. Apparently an important and even erotic aspect of a woman's femininity is believed to be bound up in her hair and, once she is married, that hair is to be reserved for her husband.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that as halakha developed, married men were likewise expected to cover their hair; one sage even refused to see a budding Talmudic scholar because he did not cover his head of hair, a sure sign that he was still single and therefore subject to immoral urgings (see Kiddushin 39). The biblical story of Samson, perhaps the most difficult and problematic of the biblical Nazirites, views his hair as the source and symbol of enhanced virility, physical as well as sexual. And it may be logically assumed that in biblical times a woman seeking to commit adultery would remove her marital hair covering, allowing her hair to fall freely and loosely, when engaging in unbecoming conduct with men other than her husband.

If there exist any doubts as to the sexual symbolism of the hair, the following two citations prove this point conclusively: The Talmud records that the High Priest Simon the Righteous had never eaten from the guilt-offering of a Nazirite, apparently because he believed it sinful to assume unnecessary prohibitions. He made an exception, however, when he met a striking young man, beautiful of eyes, goodly of appearance, his locks arranged in curls.

“I said to him: ‘My son, why do you wish to destroy such beautiful hair [in becoming a Nazirite]?’ He said to me: ‘I was a shepherd.... When I went to draw water from the well, I saw my own reflection and the evil inclination quickly threatened to overcome me and exile me from the world. I said to him [to this narcissistic impulse of self-love]: Empty-headed one, why do you assume pride in a world which is not yours, where you will eventually become worms and maggots? I swear that I will shave you off for the sake of heaven....’ And Simon the Righteous kissed the young man on his head, saying ‘May Nazirites such as you multiply in Israel.’” (Nazir 4a)

Moreover, additional evidence of the sexual nature of hair and its symbolism can be found in a fascinating responsum dealing with conversion. We know that prior to a conversion there are three conditions necessary to effectuate the conversion for males: circumcision, immersion in a ritual bath (mikveh), and acceptance of Torah's commandments. Circumcision, the excision of the penile foreskin, symbolizes the relinquishing of a gentile past prior to entering the

covenant of Abraham; immersion in the mikveh symbolizes the rebirth of a new being into the nationality of Israel; and the acceptance of the commandments is the commitment to a new lifestyle and ideological religious framework.

Obviously, for women, there are only two necessary steps to the conversion process, ritual immersion and acceptance of commandments. But then how do women express their rejection of a formerly “no-holds-barred” gentile lifestyle? Professor Mordechai Friedman, in his work on the Cairo Genizah, Jewish Polygamy in the Middle Ages, cites a responsum from approximately a thousand years ago, discussing the petition of two sisters to convert to Judaism. They are instructed to remove (shave off) their hair and ritually immerse themselves after accepting the commandments. At least according to this view, the removal or shaving of the hair for women parallels removal of the foreskin for males; both connote sexual eroticism.

It would therefore seem that from very ancient times hair for men and women has been a symbol of physicality and of the sexual impulse. This is perhaps because of the beauty attributed to the hair and/or because hair, if allowed to grow unchecked, becomes unkempt and wild, similar to the evil impulse.

The very possibility of “Nazirite-by-choice” confirms the biblical acceptance of “different strokes for different folks” in the religious realm, although the Nazirite state is not really encouraged. Most individuals are urged not to become Nazirites; those who take the vow must bring a sin-offering at the end of the period of their vow, presumably because they have denied themselves permissible enjoyments. Apparently, only in extreme instances of narcissism can this “extra ascetic religiosity” be tolerated. And Nazirut is usually limited to thirty days. And, at the end of the day, the Nazirite must not use his heightened religiosity as a means of incurring positions of leadership for himself, as a badge of religious one-upmanship. He must take the hair and place it under the peace offering, as a sacrifice to God. In effect, he is taking his virility and sexual libido and dedicating it, sublimating it, into a higher service to God. *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](http://bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar). © 2026 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

**RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ**

## Migdal Ohr

**"O**n the second day approached Nesanel ben Tzuar, Prince of Yissachar.” (Bamidbar 7:18) Parshas Naso, which begins with “lifting up” the Levite family of Gershon, shares the word root with Nasi, the word for prince. Our Parsha fittingly, then,

contains the record of the princely gifts brought by the leaders of each tribe for the dedication of the Mishkan. One by one, day by day, each prince stepped forward to represent his tribe and show their love and dedication to Hashem. Curiously, each prince brought the identical offering. Instead of trying to be unique and different, they each brought what had been brought on the first day.

That day, Nachshon ben Aminadav, the prince of Yehuda, brought his offering. When it came time for the second day's offering, as Rashi tells us, the prince of Reuven came to Moshe. “Though you passed over me for my brother Yehuda, now it is my turn to present.” Moshe told him that Hashem had commanded the princes to bring their gifts in the order they encamped in the desert, and after Yehuda would come Yissachar.

Then Rashi tells us there were two reasons Yissachar merited to be second. First of all, they were a tribe of Torah scholars, as we find in Divrei HaYamim that they understood the calendar, which takes much deliberation and study. Secondly, he merited to go second because he was the one who gave the other princes the suggestion that they bring the same korbanos as Nachshon.

Many point out that Nesanel was faced with a quandary. What should he bring as HIS offering? Realizing that if he brought something different, it would lead to a spiraling bout of “one-upmanship,” as each prince tried to differentiate himself and outdo those who came before him. Therefore, he chose to bring the exact same korban as had been brought the day before, by the prince of Yehuda.

What would differentiate it, would be the intentions he had, and, in fact, his very person. Two people, doing the same act, appear before Hashem as two very distinct events, and Nesanel understood this. We each stand before Hashem as individuals, regardless of whether millions of others are doing the same thing. We are not compared to them, only to our best selves.

Nesanel understood this and had the courage to make this tacit declaration because his tribe was steeped in Torah. They saw things on a deeper level than others did. And, because of this connection and understanding of Torah, his act was able to inform the acts of the other princes, as they saw the wisdom of his offering and took the lesson from him.

As we step away from Shavuot, this is a powerful reminder that Torah is something to take with us into every part of our lives. Its wisdom guides us in practical ways that bring peace of mind and body. Moving forward, if we let the Torah illuminate our paths, we will find our journey pleasant and pleasing, and reach destinations we might otherwise have missed.

*R' Elchonon Wasserman HY"D had a boyhood friend who became a successful attorney. He visited the friend many years later, when fundraising for his Yeshiva. The attorney said to him: "You know, when we*

were in school, it was clear you had a much better head than I did. If you'd used that intellect to go into law, you'd have been even more successful than me."

R' Elchonon replied, "Let me ask you a question: Two trains are sitting on the tracks at the station. One is older and has bare wooden benches while the other is brand new with plush velvet seats and all the amenities. Which train do you take?"

"Why," exclaimed the man, "of course you take the new, luxurious one!"

"Actually," smiled R' Elchonon, "It depends on which way you're heading." © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

### **RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT" L**

## **Wein Online**

The term that the Torah uses for counting the Levite family of Gershon is *nasso* – to raise and lift up. The word can also mean to carry and bear a burden. It can also mean to lead. When such words appear in the Torah with multiple, differing meanings – and Hebrew is replete with so many of them – the commentators remark that all of the possible meanings of that word are nuanced and meant to be part of the verse of the Torah itself.

I think this insight is especially pertinent regarding the word *nasso* as it appears in this week's parsha. The family of Gershon, as is the tribe of Levi generally, is quite small in number but nevertheless laden with great responsibilities. It can use its paucity in numbers as an excuse for shirking its responsibilities and for refusing to perform the holy tasks assigned to it. But since it is meant to assume a leadership role in Jewish society, it is bidden to rise to the occasion.

There is no question that this role of leadership will be burdensome and frustrating. Yet it is enjoined at the beginning of its public service to bear up under the yoke of the Jewish people and to serve as the leaders, role models and mentors of the generations of the Jewish people. The Levites are not to shirk their duties and role but rather are to proudly lift themselves up to a higher level of Torah dedication and service to all of Israel. All of this is implicit in the word *nasso* that introduces this week's parsha to our attention.

Rambam, in a famous statement from his *Mishne Torah*, states, in effect, that all human beings who enter this world can reach the spiritual status of being a Levite. One must devote one's self to the service of God and of man, practice compassion and goodness and be satisfied and not too over ambitious with one's physical lot in life, in order to aspire to such a status. The Levites were the bearers of the Torah both literally and figuratively. Rambam indicates that they avoided the petty foolishness in daily life and instead concentrated on the holy and noble task to which God assigned them.

The tasks and goals of the Levites were clearly delineated for them by the Torah. And even in our time

when the service of the Temple is not yet present within Jewish society, the uniqueness of the role of the Levites in our midst has been preserved. At the time of the Golden Calf, when all of Israel was threatened with physical destruction and spiritual annihilation, it was the tribe of Levi that redressed the situation.

In the difficult times and circumstances that surround us today, we are also in need of potential Levites who will rise to the occasion and its challenges. One cannot alter one's genealogy but one's spiritual aspirations to become a Levite have no limits or restraints. © 2013 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)

### **RABBI DAVID LEVIN**

## **Blessing of the Kohanim**

One of the most important sections within Parashat Naso is the Priestly Blessing. This is a blessing which is recited at different times based on the location of a community or the tradition of the congregation. Askenazic communities outside of Israel, have the Kohanim recite this blessing only on holidays and only during the additional morning prayer of Musaf. Many Sephardic communities as well as all communities within Israel have the Kohanim recite this blessing every morning during the Shacharit and Musaf services. Only Kohanim may recite the blessing, though the person leading the service reads each word aloud as a prompt to the Kohanim.

The Torah states: "Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Speak to Aharon and to his sons saying, So shall you bless the Children of Israel, say to them: "May Hashem bless you and guard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance toward you and endow you with grace. May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you." They shall place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them."

Rashi has several comments on the instructions given to the Kohanim concerning the way in which they were to give over the blessing with which they had been charged. Rashi explains that the words "amor lahem, say to them" indicates that the Kohanim were to bless the people and also be careful that all of the people should hear. Perhaps that is the reason that the Kohanim recited the blessing while standing on a raised platform (the *duchan*) at the front of the congregation. Rashi also points out that the word "amor, say" was written "in full," which means that the word contained all four letters even though it could have been written using only three letters. The reason that the word was written in full was because it then indicated that Hashem wished to tell the Kohanim, "do not bless them in haste and distraction, but rather, with concentration and with a

whole heart.”

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that, “it is not the authority to bless the Children of Israel which is here conferred to the (sons of Aharon), but a duty which is given to them to perform. The blessing of the Priests does not flow from their well-wishing, their benevolence, but it is part and parcel of their service to the Sanctuary.” This duty carried with it several requirements: (1) Since the Kohein was not the one giving the blessing, but instead acted as a conduit of Hashem’s blessing, the Kohein covered his head with the tallit (prayer shawl) and extended the tallit over his hands while raising both hands and spreading the fingers to form the letter, shin, standing for shem, name, as in the name of Hashem (the Name), and the Spirit of Hashem flowed through their hands onto the people, (2) the congregation does not directly look at the Kohanim or at their hands, as the Kohanim are conduits of Hashem, and this would be like looking directly at Hashem, (3) the Kohein must not have a grudge or dislike for anyone he is blessing, as he might make it appear that Hashem had a conflict with the person being blessed.

Each of the three blessings carried with it a unique understanding. The first blessing, “May Hashem bless you and guard you,” refers to one’s possessions. Rashi explains that a person who gives a gift cannot be responsible for that gift once it has been received. A thief, a flood, or a fire could destroy that gift and make it as if it had never been given. Hashem not only has the power to bless one with His gifts, but He will also guard that gift so that one will have use of its benefits. The second blessing, “May Hashem illuminate His countenance toward you and endow you with grace,” is explained by HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin to mean that “chein, grace” is a function of one’s inner and outer actions and appearances. A person can find favor in one man’s eyes but may not in another’s; there is no disputing tastes. But if that grace is a gift from Hashem, then all who view him will sense that grace. The third blessing, “May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you,” is explained by the Ramban. He quotes Rabbi Natan who explains that this is referring to the Kingdom of David: “So shall they put My Great Name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them, for it is I that speaketh, behold, here I am, and peace.”

The Ramban also explains that these blessings (especially His Great Name) were recited differently depending on whether they were recited in the Temple or at another location. “In the Sanctuary, [the priests pronounced the blessing] using the Divine Name [i.e. the Tetragrammaton], but in the provinces by a substitute Name (Yud, Kay, Vav, Kay). In the Sanctuary they pronounced it as a single blessing, but in the provinces, [it was pronounced] as three blessings” [the people responding ‘Amen’ to each of the three verses which comprise the priestly blessing], for the Sanctuary was

singled out by being pronounced with the Proper Name of Hashem.” This is the custom today; the Kohanim recite the blessings as three separate blessings, and the congregation answers Amen after each.

Abarbanel explains that the three statements of the blessings correspond to the three groups within Israel, the Kohanim, Leviim, and the Yisraelim. The first blessing corresponds to the general population, the Yisraelim. “Hashem safeguards the lives of those who safeguard His commandments.” The second blessing refers to the Leviim. “Their blessing is to receive the illumination of Hashem’s countenance, which implies that as a result of the blessing they acquire knowledge, wisdom, and graciousness.” The third blessing refers to the Kohanim, “who lift their hands toward Hashem when they bless the people .... They also receive a blessing of peace to prevent any conflict among the Kohanim.” Even though the Kohanim have the responsibility to bless the people, “Aharon and his descendants do not have independent power to influence the well-being of the nation; they can only implore Hashem through their prayers to do so.”

Not every synagogue is blessed to have a Kohein as a regular member. When a Kohein is not present, or as in places outside of the Land of Israel where this blessing is only recited by the Kohein on festivals, the person who leads the morning service reads a paragraph describing and including the blessings, but without facing the congregation or spreading his raised hands underneath his tallit. As a Levite, it has always been my privilege to wash the hands of the Kohein before he blesses the congregation in Hashem’s Name. May we soon see the rebuilding of the Temple and the resumption of this beautiful blessing recited once again in Hashem’s house. © 2026 Rabbi D. Levin

#### **RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

**O**ne day, a man and his young son went grocery shopping, but as soon as they walked in the child began to throw a temper tantrum. As they went down the aisles the child screamed, threw items in and out of the cart, and was generally disruptive. Despite the scene his son was causing, the father was cool, calm, and collected; slowly and soothingly alternating between, “Don’t worry Donald, it’ll be alright,” “Control yourself Donald, we’re almost finished,” and “We’ll be home soon Donald.”

A nearby mother was very impressed with the father’s self-control and wanted to express her admiration for such calm parenting. “Sir, I’m amazed that you are able to be so calm! It’s not every day I see such patient and gracious parenting.” She bent down to the boy and said, “What’s wrong Donald? Maybe I can help.”

The father interrupted her, “You misunderstood; my son’s name is Henry. My name is Donald.”

This week's Torah portion has some remarkable lessons on self-control and controlling personalities. We find a few seemingly distinct and unrelated laws next to one another, which our sages tell us are, in fact, directly connected. The Torah begins with the obligation of giving terumah to members of the priestly caste; "All the sacred gifts that the Israelites present to the Cohen shall become his property. The gifts remain the property of the owner until he gives them to the Cohen. Once they are given to the Cohen they become his property" (Numbers 5:9-10).

The great medieval commentator Rashi (ad loc) explains that while the gifts ultimately belong to the Cohanim (plural for Cohen) – unlike the IRS – they are not entitled to seize their gifts; they must wait until the owner gives it to them.

The very next section in the Torah reading relates the laws of a sotah – a suspected adulteress (see Numbers 5:11-30). There are some general misconceptions regarding these laws so I will give it a bit of elaboration. The entire concept of a sotah begins when a man suspects his wife of being unfaithful and cautions her in front of witnesses to not go into a situation of seclusion with her suspected paramour.

If it is established through witnesses that she ignored his exhortation and went into seclusion with this person then she may become subject to a ritual that involves her drinking the "waters of a sotah" (a concoction of water prepared by a Cohen from a bit of dirt from the Temple compound, a bitter herb, and the rubbed-off dried ink of the text of the Torah's description of the sotah ritual, which also includes God's ineffable name).

If the woman denies that she was unfaithful in seclusion she may voluntarily participate in the sotah ritual and drink the waters. If she is in fact guilty of being unfaithful, she and her paramour will suffer a very public and very gruesome death – a punishment meted out by heaven. (If she is innocent, she will be blessed with healthy children.)

However, instead of initiating the sotah ritual she may, of course, simply choose to dissolve her marriage and forfeit the financial support promised her. The husband is compelled to grant her a divorce and she suffers no other penalty.

Thus, the sotah ritual is not intended to punish the woman if she is guilty. Rather, its real purpose is to absolve her if she is innocent, and preserve love and trust in her marriage. In other words, the entire point of the sotah ritual is to restore her relationship with her husband – who has every reason to be suspicious of his wife's fidelity since she secluded herself with another man even after being cautioned not to do so.

The sotah ritual can be publicly demeaning, even if she is innocent. Her willingness to go through the process to prove her fidelity is a sign of true love and commitment to her husband. After her exoneration, her

husband's jealousy will dissipate and he will see what she was willing to endure to be with him. This entire process allows husband and wife to resume their marriage in trust, love, and renewed commitment to one another.

The Talmudic maxim associated with the sotah law is, "So high is the value of peace between a man and his wife that the Torah commands that the ineffable name of the Almighty may be written and erased into the [sotah] water."

Rashi (in his commentary on 5:12) quotes the sages who ask; why was the section of sotah laws juxtaposed to the laws of giving the terumah to a Cohen? To teach us that someone who withholds the gifts he rightfully owes to the Cohen will ultimately be compelled to turn to the Cohen to perform the sotah ritual on his wife.

Rabbi Judah Loew (1526-1609), also known as the maharal, in his well-known work *Gur Aryeh* (which is primarily a commentary on Rashi) asks two fascinating questions: There are any number of reasons why a person may find himself in the position of needing a Cohen (e.g. the laws of tzora'at require a Cohen's active involvement); why are the sotah laws specifically appended to the laws withholding priestly gifts?

Why does the Torah introduce the laws of sotah with the words; "If any man's wife goes astray"? Why doesn't the Torah simply begin with "when a married woman goes astray." Why bother to introduce the husband at all?

A careful reading of Rashi illuminates the reasoning: Rashi doesn't say that the man refuses to give the Cohen the priestly gifts, rather Rashi says that the man withholds the gifts from the Cohen. This is a critical point. Essentially, a landowner has the obligation to distribute the priestly gifts to the Cohen. Thus, someone who withholds them is trying to exert a measure of influence over the Cohen; to make him come and beg for something that, in reality, he is entitled to receive and it is something for which he should not have to beg. Why would someone behave in such a manner?

Once when I was in synagogue I remember seeing a needy person approach someone to ask for a few dollars. The man pulled out a five-dollar bill from his pocket and asked if the beggar had change. He nodded in the affirmative and asked him how much change he wanted. The man said, "Give me five singles." The beggar gave him five singles, at which point the man handed him back two.

I wondered to myself why hadn't the man just asked for three dollars in change? Why did he need to get five singles back and then hand him two dollars? I then realized that's how a controlling personality behaves; he wanted to be in control of the entire transaction of giving charity. He wanted to take back his five singles so that he could be the one doing the act of charity. Even though the end result was the same (either

way the beggar ended up with two dollars), he needed to feel like a giver by emphasizing that he was giving two dollars and not just receiving three dollars in change.

This is how a person with a controlling personality acts and this is why the landowner is withholding the gifts from the Cohanim even though he is obligated to give it to them. Making the Cohen come to him to ask for what is rightfully his is done to send a clear message about who is in charge. The Torah juxtaposes these two sections to teach us that they are interrelated. A controlling person doesn't just behave this way in business, he behaves like this in all aspects of his life including his personal life.

The reason a woman would go into seclusion – even after being warned by her husband not to – is a reaction to the controlling personality of her husband. How does she do this? By demonstrating her independence. She is rebelling against his overbearing and controlling personality. In other words, she is communicating to her husband, "You're not the boss of me!"

This also explains why the Torah begins with "any man's wife goes astray;" the Torah is explaining the root cause of her disloyalty. Even if she never sinned by being intimate with another man, ignoring her husband's warning was a message she was intentionally sending to her husband. Obviously, this was already a fractured relationship and one in which each party was vying for some sort of control.

Moses' brother Aaron was the prototypical Cohen – according to our sages he made it his life's mission to mend rifts between friends, and in particular between husbands and wives. In fact, when he died the Torah says that all the women mourned him as well (which it doesn't say when Moses died). The sages teach that it was because Aaron had focused on making sure that there was harmony in the home. This is why a controlling personality needs a Cohen to mend the fissures of the relationship. © 2026 Rabbi Y. Zweig & [shabbatshalom.org](http://shabbatshalom.org)

### **RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN**

## **Reb Yeruchem**

"All the days of his abstinence he is holy to Hashem." (Bamidbar 6:8) Hashem concluded His offer of the Torah to the Bnei Yisrael with the following: "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words that you shall speak to the Bnei Yisrael." (Shemos 19:6) Rashi comments: "These are the words' -- no less, and no more." What is Rashi trying to tell us? Surely, he is not simply praising HKBH -- "Boy, He did a good job with that one!"

Before we explain Rashi, we will have to turn to a more general question that has long plagued many of us. If midos tovot/developing good character is so important, why does the Torah say so precious little

about it? I once heard the Alter of Kelm address the question with a mashal. Imagine that you have a really bad blockage in a bathroom sink. (The Alter's mashal used a tailor, not a plumber, but would be less effective today than when he employed it. [YA]) Not being the do-it-yourself type, you call a plumber. You then take a pipe wrench in hand, and begin to explain. "What you have to do is open the jaws to fit around this section of pipe. Then close the jaws around it, while holding the wrench in your left hand. When tight, loosen the pipe by turning it clockwise, and then..."

The plumber interrupts. "Why are you telling me this? I'm a plumber. That's what I do! I know my tools and how to use them. Why are you speaking to me as if I'm an attorney? Just tell me what job you want done, and I'll do it!"

Similarly, explained the Alter, Hashem made a job offer to Klal Yisrael: You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. No less, and no more.

When Klal Yisrael agreed to accept the job, they understood what tools of the trade would be needed. They realized that to be priests and to be holy required certain achievements. Artisans of this craft needed to be free of anger, free of hubris, free of a host of bad midos. All those were part of the minimum skill set necessary to practice the holy nation role. No less, and no more.

The gemara (Nedarim 9b) tells of the dim view Shimon HaTzadik had of those who became nezirim. Yet one nazir won his warm approval. He was a simple shepherd boy, who apparently had never looked in a mirror. One day, however, he chased down a missing sheep to a watering hole. As he bent down to grab the animal, he found himself facing his reflection. He was taken aback by how good looking he was! Immediately, though, he recoiled. Addressing the yetzer hora directly, he said, "Rasha! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours, and attempt to drive me from this world?!" He vowed to become a nazir, and therefore to have to shear off his long attractive hair.

Shimon HaTzadik kissed him on the head. "May there be many more like you!" Shimon HaTzadik praised the shepherd, because he -- unlike so many others -- genuinely got it. He understood that the essence of nezirus is that which is stated in our pasuk: to be holy to Hashem. It is not perushus/abstinence per se; it is not virtue-signaling. It is to accept open himself the job of becoming holy. No less, and no more.

The restrictions of nezirus are just tools of the trade. (Based on Daas Torah by Rav Yeruchem Levovitz zt"l, Bamidbar pgs. 38-41) © 2022 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and [torah.org](http://torah.org)

