

D'var Torah
Kol Sasson
Parshat Naso
May 18, 2013

Shabbat Shalom.

It's a special privilege for me to deliver the D'var Torah today for a variety of reasons. First, on a personal note, it turns out that Parshat Naso is becoming a bit of a family d'var torah tradition. Micah gave his first ever D'var Torah yesterday at school so we got to study it a little bit together. And two years ago, Joelle and I studied it together in preparation for her D'var Torah at the CJHS graduation.

Second, on a broad communal level, even though we had about 23 hours of Chol to catch up on life, I'm sure that we are all still feeling a residual connection to Shavuot.

And third, on more Kol Sasson communal level, this is the first D'var Torah since our Tikkun Lail Shavuot. I thought this year's tikkun was our best yet with fantastic teachers in Rebecca, Allana and Jane doing three separate but obviously coordinated topics. So, it is my honor to follow in those footsteps.

Parshat Naso is easily divided into three sections with the opening section broken up into several smaller parts. First are a variety of duties for various Levi'im and a census of the Levi'im in preparation for their Temple service. Then comes the law to separate anyone with tzara'as from the camp and the commandment of a making guilt offering for any sins of dishonesty. The section then moves into the discussion of the Isha Sotah and wraps up with the laws of a Nazarite.

It's a big section so the question is what brings it all together? They are all examples of people or groups being separated out from the rest of the community. The Levi'im are a tribe apart. As we will see later in the parsha, they are even sometimes completely excluded (and replaced with Ephraim and Menasseh) when we count to 12 tribes.

Separating people with tzara'as is an example of placing the needs of the community ABOVE the needs of the individual.

The guilt offering is a forced public apology whenever a man or woman is dishonest against another or against Gd even if that person has died. The law leaves no loopholes and teaches that sometimes you need a consequence to actions to ensure the sustainability of community.

It is in the section of the Nazir that we see the strongest example of the Torah valuing community. A Nazarite is, by definition, someone who voluntarily chooses to separate themselves from the community. Becoming a Nazarite is presumably a highly esteemed choice because it is done in service to HaShem. The entire Nazarite process is designed to ensure ritual purity in that service.

And yet, when the Nazarite vow is completed, among the various offerings that that Nazir offers is a sin offering. The question is, what sin could a Nazir possibly have committed while they were in such pure service to HaShem. The answer, of course, is that their sin was to cut themselves off from the community.

Parshat Naso concludes with the renumeration of the offerings from each tribal leader at the time of the dedication of the mishkan, the tabernacle. We get a little hint of what is to come when the offerings arrive in 6 wagons rather than 12. According to the sforno, this is evidence of the feelings of fraternity between the tribes and was, in itself, enough to merit the Divine Presence.

But, of course, the big lesson in these offerings is that every tribe gives exactly the same things in exactly the same quantities. Rashi's commentary, in an uncharacteristic move, breaks away from the p'shat and gives different reasons for each person's gift. But I prefer this morning to stick with the more basic explanation that this obviously rehearsed choreography is a display of unity and equality with no one trying to raise themselves above anyone else.

The middle section of the parsha, and the one that ties it all together, is the Birkat HaKohanim, the priestly blessing. While we often use this prayer for private intimate moments like blessing our children each Shabbat, when we read it in the parsha, or when we experienced it during Musaf on Shavuot, we are reminded that this is fundamentally a communal blessing. It is a reward that we receive when we stand together as a community.

If you'll indulge me just a little more, I'd like to tie all of this back into the lessons that many of us learned during our Tikkun Leil Shavuot.

Rebecca Minkus Lieberman opened the night with a text study asking why we sometimes refer to Gd as HaMakom, literally translated as "the place." She brought us through a variety of sources to illustrate that sacredness can be sometimes tied directly to location so that HaMakom, that place in itself, can be holy. There can be a holiness in space that calls upon Gd to exist.

Rebecca went on to teach that early rabbinic authorities redefined holiness so that we find Gd in any place. We no longer need to rely upon HaMakom, be it the Temple Mount or a place called Beit El, to create that connection. I believe that one example of

how true that is can be found in a former bank vault, converted into a library, and then transformed into a sanctuary.

Allana Gleisher-Bloom taught the dichotomy of the Akivan view of the divine vs. the Ishmalelian view of the divine. We learned that for Rabbi Akiva and his students there is Gd, and there is man. For Akiva, the Torah is absolute and of Gd. Rabbi Ishmael, on the other hand, and if I understand it correctly, believes more in a partnership between Gd and man. He believed that the Torah is divine, but there are other sources of divine truth including our powers of reasoning and interpretation.

This is not a dichotomy to be resolved. It's a clearly case of eilu v'eilu, this is true and that is true, in how we approach Gd. I think that what we can take away is that in a healthy community like ours, we need to carry both perspectives as we struggle with our relationship with HaShem.

Jane Shapiro led us in a discussion of the First Commandment, "Anochi Kadonai Elohecha," I am the Lord your Gd. She shared with us a midrash that when HaShem appeared to the Children of Israel, each person saw Gd with a different face. That is to say, the experience of Revelation was intensely personal and unique to each of the 600,000 Jews standing at Sinai. In other words, not only do we all approach Gd differently, so too does Gd approach us differently.

So, in trying to sum all of this up, I think we can learn a lot from Parshat Naso and from our Shavuot experience about how we ought to behave as a sacred Kol Sasson community.

We need to value and to nurture our community. As we continue to grow and thrive, with new guests every week and new members every month, we need to remain vigilant and diligent to maintain our good will towards one another, and to treat each one equally. While we may sometimes need to place the community above an individual, we must welcome those who have separated themselves back into our midst.

We must remember that Kol Sasson is a sacred space only because we make it that way. And that while each of us may approach our Judaism in slightly different ways, we know that it is in the struggle itself that we sometimes find the most meaning.

Only by doing all of this, will be we be worthy to continue to receive the Birkat HaKohanim and find what we each seek in our individual and our collective relationships with HaShem and with one another.

Shabbat Shalom.