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The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet

*A collection of Divrei Torah
from around the Internet*

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Parshat Naso
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Latest time for Kriyat Shma – 9:10

SMALL TALK

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week's parsha contains a number of exciting episodes. It details the sordid tale of the adulterous women, her fate and that of her illicit adulterer. It illustrates the rules and regulations of the nazir, one who has abstained from worldly pleasures by eschewing wine in addition to leaving his hair unshorn.

However, tucked away in the midst of the controversial episodes are the priestly blessings -- five verses that shine an encouraging light in the midst of a difficult portion. Those verses contain the priestly blessings that are well known to many of us. "May Hashem bless you and keep you. May Hashem shine his countenance on you and be gracious to you. May Hashem lift his countenance upon you and establish you in peace. (Numbers 6:24-26)"

Less celebrated, however, are the verses that appear immediately before and after the actual blessings. "Thus shall you bless the children of Israel, speak to them." What is the importance - even the meaning -- of the extra words, "speak to them"? After Hashem charges the priests with the actual verses of blessing, He ends with an additional command. "Place My name upon the children of Israel and I shall bless them." Again, the verse leaves us wondering - of course, it is Hashem that will bless them but what does His name have to do with it? Didn't He just prescribe the formula? Why aren't the three verses enough to spur G-d's blessings?

A few months after moving into our house, a lovely young Israeli couple with two young children moved next door to us. After conversing with them, my wife and I realized that in Israel they had not been the least bit observant of Jewish tradition. They had not even observed Yom Kippur, let alone kept Shabbat or kosher. It seemed that the reason they moved to America because Israel was becoming too Jewish for them. My wife and I felt a responsibility to bring these fine people closer to the Torah, yet we also did not feel comfortable telling them about laws that they must have known about, but chose not to observe. Fortunately in our neighborhood lived the great Rosh Yeshiva who brought thousands of people close to Torah, Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld, of blessed memory. I explained our situation to him and basically asked him, "Rebbe, what do you in order to make someone frum (religious)?" He smiled and put his large hand on my shoulder. "Do absolutely nothing!" I stood shocked and confused as he continued. "Be a mensch: Never miss a 'good morning' or a 'good afternoon'. Make sure your lawn is neat and your children are well behaved. And just be friendly." Then he quoted the words of our sages, 'make sure that the name of Hashem is cherished through you.' He paused, looked me in the eye, and proclaimed confidently, "follow that advice and you will not have to do a thing. They will get closer to the Torah." We followed his advice. We invited them for meals, and our children played together. I talked politics with him while my wife discussed gardening with her. We spoke about everything -- except religion. I was therefore shocked, when, in October, our neighbors asked us where the closest synagogue was. They decided to go to shul for Yom Kippur. I was even more surprised when days later they asked for my help in building a Sukkah. I am sad to relate that recently we lost some very good neighbors. After 5 years of living in the US, they decided to move back to Israel. America was becoming too goyish (gentile) for them.

Before it enumerates the actual blessings, the Torah teaches us the true way to bless Jews - speak to them. The words, "speak to them" may be more important than the actual blessing. The saintly Chofetz Chaim charged my wife's grandfather Rabbi Laizer Levin, who was Rabbi of Detroit for 50 years, with a simple message. "Laizer, gei rehd tzoo Yidden." (Reb Laizer go and speak to Jews.) And the actual priestly blessings do not end much differently. "Place My name upon the children of Israel and I shall bless them." (Numbers 6:27). When Hashem's name is placed upon His nation, then blessing is sure to follow.

A smile, a hello, a Good Shabbos, or Shabbat Shalom may be the key to forging a different attitude to an otherwise skeptical Jew. To paraphrase a man who reached great heights, "One small word to man can produce giants for mankind." The true blessing does not come from theological incantations; it comes from the simple smiles of the heart.

Do Your Thing

By Rabbi Raymond Beyda

"And Moshe counted them – according to the word of G-d – as he was commanded." (3:15)

After the census of the tribes was completed Hashem commanded Moshe to do a count of the elite tribe of Levi. In this case the infants from 30 days old and up were included, whereas with the other tribes only males from 20 years to 60 years old were included.

This created a problem for a man like Moshe who feared any violation of proper modesty. The Midrash relates (as quoted by Rashi zt'l), a conversation between Moshe and Hashem.

"How can I enter the tent to count the infants when women who recently gave birth are living? It is not the modest way of our Torah."

"You go to the entrance of the tent – and I will contribute my part", was the answer from our Creator.

And so Moshe did as he was told and when he stood by the doorway a Heavenly voice rang out and informed him the number of eligible members of that household.

Miraculous assistance from Heaven!

The question is: If Hashem was going to tell Moshe the number why send him on the tedious mission of going from tent to tent to count? Why not just give him the tally?

The answer is that Hashem wanted to teach Moshe an important principle in service to Him. When a difficult task – or even one that seems impossible – confronts a person one should not give up and walk away. Instead a person should do all that he can and pray that Hashem will do the rest.

When the daughter of Par-oh went to bathe by the river and saw a basket floating on the water she stretched out her arm to pull the basket to safety. The floating basket was much too far for her to reach and yet she tried to reach it. The impossible became possible when Hashem stretched her arm the distance necessary to retrieve Moshe the baby in the basket. She did all that was humanly possible and then Heavenly assistance – and quite miraculous assistance at that – kicked in to complete the task.

You might find it difficult to learn Torah, or perhaps extending your budget to include charity seems impossible. Maybe you have an idea for a chesed institution or an educational venture for those in need. Don't assume it is impossible. Start the process. Do your thing. Add some prayer and watch it happen. All Hashem expects is that you do your thing. If you do to the maximum – He will do His.

Giving is Receiving

By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Naso. The parsha begins with the counting {Naso} of the Bnei Levi {the sons of Levi} and the assigning of the Mishkan-related tasks to be performed by them. Our parsha then moves on to many diverse topics.

"V'ish es kodoshov lo yiyeh {and a man's 'holy things' shall be his} [5:10]" What is meant by these 'holy things'? Rashi explains that the Torah has enumerated many gifts that must be given to the Kohanim {Priests} and the Leviim {Levites}. One might mistakenly think that since these gifts are coming to those individuals, they can forcefully take them. The Torah therefore clearly states that "a man's 'holy things' shall be his." Although he is obligated to give these things to the Kohanim or Leviim, they are his inasmuch as he decides which specific Kohen or Levi to present it to.

Rashi then offers an additional explanation based on the Medrash. One is obligated to give maaser {tithe} to the Levi. (In a strict sense this refers to agricultural produce but the Shulchan Orech {Code of Jewish Law} rules that a person must give one tenth of all types of earnings to charity.) The passuk {verse} is teaching that one who withholds his maaser and doesn't disburse of it properly will ultimately find that his field is only producing one tenth (maaser) of what it had been producing. "And a man's 'holy things,'" that are wrongly withheld, "shall be his"--that tithe amount will become the sum total of all he'll have.

The Tosafos [Taanis 9A] tells of such a situation which actually occurred. There was a wealthy man whose field would annually yield one thousand 'koor' {a certain measurement}. He would unfailingly take one tenth of the produce, one hundred koor, and give it to the Leviim. As he got older and neared his death, he summoned his son. "My son," he said to him, "I want you to know that this field produces one thousand koor each year. Be sure to tithe one hundred koor each year as I used to do." He breathed his last breath and left this world.

The son took over and, as his father had said, the field produced one thousand koor the first year. Following his father's instructions, he tithed one hundred koor. On the second year, the son felt that one hundred koor was much too much to give away. He decided to keep the entire thousand koor of that year's produce for himself.

To his great dismay, the next year was a dismal year and the entire field only yielded one hundred koor. As he was sitting dejected in his house, his relatives, who had heard the entire story, came over to visit him. They explained to him that when the field had first come to him, the arrangement was that he was the owner and Hashem was the 'Kohen' who received the ten percent for the poor. When he held back Hashem's portion, Hashem 'confiscated' the field making Himself the owner and turning the son into the 'Kohen'. The field therefore only gave him the ten percent that he as the 'Kohen' deserved.

Hashem gives each person a sum of which ninety percent is meant for his usage and ten percent is meant to be disbursed to charities. If one recognizes that and proves himself to be a dependable vehicle through which the charities will receive that which is meant for them, then Hashem will continue to channel that money through him. The Mishna [Avos 4:1] teaches: Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion. One who is happy with the ninety percent that is his portion and acts accordingly will continue to receive that full amount and be wealthy. However, one who isn't satisfied with that portion and therefore dips into the ten percent that was never meant for him, such a person will find that Hashem will choose another 'clearing house' for His funds.

I was recently studying this Mishna with a student who has had a difficult life. He was wondering how he, a product of a broken home with a very difficult financial situation, could really be happy with his portion.

I tried to present him with a different way of viewing his situation. I asked him what would make him really happy--what would he consider to be a remarkable gift for which he'd really thank Hashem. "Winning the lottery," was his quick answer. (At this point I had him exactly where I wanted him.) "One million? Five million?" I asked him. "One hundred million," was his dead-pan response. "For such a gift you'd really owe Hashem big time, really appreciate what you have and have no complaints?" I asked him. He readily agreed.

I then asked him if he'd rather: 1) have a hundred million dollars but be blind, deaf, mute and paralyzed from the neck down or, 2) have his present health along with his present family and financial situation. Once we ruled out the possibility of using fifty million to heal his health problems leaving him with the other fifty to burn, he agreed that he'd rather be in his present situation.

"In other words," I said to him, "you agree that the gifts of vision, speech, hearing and mobility that Hashem has given you are worth more than one hundred million dollars! Meaning, Hashem has already given you gifts worth far more than the most amazing gift you were able to imagine." Although he maintained that he'd still rather have his present health plus the hundred million, the point was clearly seen.

The Ruach Chaim offers an additional insight into this Mishna. "Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion.[Avos 4:1]" He explains that a person who views his wealth properly--who has humility in his wealth and doesn't see himself as being any higher or better than those who have less than he--such a person will make sure to use that wealth in order to help others. He will recognize that his true portion, the portion that will be his for eternity and that can never be stolen, lost or devalued, is only the wealth that he gives away for tzedakah {charity}. Not only does he recognize that that is his true portion but he's happy with that portion. He feels blessed that he's been chosen to be Hashem's conduit for those funds and he's happy that he con-du-it (sorry). Such a person is truly wealthy. Perhaps not in Wall Street terms but certainly in Jewish terms. He's got the wealth that will stand by him for eternity.

With this, we've been afforded another glimpse at our original passuk: "V'ish es kodoshov lo yihyeh {and a man's 'holy things' shall be his}.[5:10]" A man's holy things--that which he uses for holiness, for charitable causes--that alone shall be his.

“Take a census of the sons of Gershon, of them too, following their fathers’houses, according to their families” (4:22)

Why was Gershon listed after Kehas if their birth order was the other way around? The Tzror HaMor answers that Kehas is listed first as a mark of respect for the Torah which was housed in the Aron that was carried by Kehas. Because of their close proximity to the Aron, the people of Kehas had to walk barefoot through the desert, just as Moshe Rabbeinu had to remove his shoes in Hashem’s presence at the burning bush. Because they respected the Torah, they earned a place of honor at the head of the tribe of Levi. The Tzror HaMor further notes that the name Kehas is derived from the word “kahal,” “assembly,” because the family of Kehas gathered people to teach Torah. He notes that Shlomo HaMelech was also called Koholes, which comes from the same root, for this reason. The job of the rabbi is not just to teach, but to gather the people and recruit them in order to increase the study of Torah. The teacher’s job is to figure out how to get people together, to reach out to them and bring Torah to the masses.

“Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them” (6:23)

Rabbeinu Bachya approvingly cites the opinion of the Ri, one of the most prominent Tosafists, that an unmarried Kohen may not recite Birkas Kohanim because he is incomplete without a wife and thus inappropriate to serve as a conduit for blessing on behalf of the people. Another possible reason for Ri’s opinion is because an unmarried person lacks joy in his life and is not sufficiently happy to bless other people. However, when the Rashba was asked this question, he said that he had never heard nor seen this opinion practiced and permitted unmarried Kohanim to participate in Birkas Kohanim. As we know, the Shulchan Aruch follows the opinion of the Rashba. However, the necessity for the Kohen to be in a joyous state of mind is used by the Rema as a justification for the Ashkenazic custom (outside of Eretz Yisrael) that Kohanim only recite Birkas Kohanim on Yom Tov. He writes that on weekdays people are occupied with their financial concerns and perhaps even on Shabbos they are thinking about these things. This prevents the Kohanim from reaching the necessary level of joy to convey their blessings. But everyone is joyful on Yom Tov, making it the only time of year that the Kohanim are able to have the right mindset for blessing the people.

“They shall place My name on upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them” (6:27)

What is the purpose of the Kohanim giving a blessing if Hashem is capable of giving a blessing Himself? Additionally, why is Hashem’s name repeated in each of the three blessings? The answer is that we need the Kohanim to remind us where the blessing actually comes from. The Kohanim give three blessings, each one of which mentions that Hashem should bless us. If the blessings would come on their own, we would not recognize as easily that the blessings come from Hashem. We might attribute them to our own strength and talents. When the Kohanim bless us, we understand that all of our blessings come directly from Hashem. It is interesting to note that the Kohanim bless the people in a singular form rather than a plural form. This teaches us that in order for Hashem’s blessing to take effect, we must be united as one. Only if we have internal peace can we merit peaceful relations with the nations around us, as well as all of the other blessings contained in Birkas Kohanim.

“The one who brought his offering on the first day was Nachshon the son of Aminadav of the tribe of Yehuda” (7:12)

Rabbeinu Bachya notes that there are two differences between the way that the Torah introduces Nachshon and the way that the other nesi’im are introduced: Nachshon is not given the title of “nasi” and his offerings begin with the word “vekarbano,” with a “vav” at the beginning, indicating a connection to something earlier. The reason for these differences is because the tribe of Yehuda was first in many things: traveling, camps of tribes, royalty, as well as these sacrifices. All of this might go to Nachshon’s head and lead him to be proud of his status. To prevent this from happening, the Torah removes his title and places the “vav” in front of his korban to give it the appearance of being secondary to some other offerings. Hashem altered the words of the Torah just to help Nachshon not succumb to pride. We also see this idea in the restrictions that the Torah places on a Jewish king, many of which are designed to prevent him from becoming too haughty. It behooves each person to figure out what he can do in his own life to ensure that his successes do not go to his head.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Dilemma of Nisanel ben Tzuar

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Naso is the longest parsha in the Torah, containing 176 verses. (It is interesting to note that the longest tractate in Talmud -- Bava Basra -- also has 176 blatt (folios, two-sided pages), and the longest chapter in Tanach, the Bible -- Tehillim (Psalms) 119 -- also has 176 verses.) When I was a young child, I remember feeling bad for the Bar Mitzvah boy who had to read Parshas Naso. The truth of the matter is that in terms of being a Ba'al Koreh [(Public) Torah reader], Parshas Naso is a rather simple parsha, because a large part of it is basically repetition.

The end of the Parsha contains the recitation of the various sacrifices offered by the Princes of each of the Tribes on consecutive days in honor of the dedication of the Mishkan. The Torah tells us the exact offering of every single Prince. However, as it turns out, every Prince brought exactly the same offering. For 12 Princes (Nesiim), one after the other, the Torah tells us verbatim the same thing. So the Bar Mitzvah boy doesn't have to learn so many new pesukim, after all.

There is a fascinating Medrash on this portion of the Nesiim. The Medrash relates that the Nasi from Yehudah, which was the first tribe to make an offering, had it easy. He could offer whatever he desired. The second Nasi -- Nisanel ben Tzuar of the Tribe of Yissachar -- was faced with a dilemma: what was he going to bring?

We can compare this dilemma to the following situation: There will be 12 Bar Mitzvahs in shul, one week after the other. The first Bar Mitzvah serves a fruit cup, a quarter of a chicken, a piece of kugle, some carrots, and some chocolate cake for dessert. That is Bar Mitzvah -- Week 1.

The next week is Bar Mitzvah, Week 2. What does he serve?

"I should serve the same chicken, the same kugle? That makes no sense! I'm not an imitator. That is not me. I'll do it differently. I'll serve chicken cutlets and broccoli..." The person will plan how to make each course a little different, a little better.

The poor third guy has already seen the chicken and the chicken cutlets. What can he do? He obviously must serve beef!

We can readily understand that by the time we get to Bar Mitzvah number 12, he really needs to outdo himself...

The Medrash says that this is what went through the mind of Nisanel ben Tzuar: If I try to do different than the Tribe of Yehudah, if I try to 'one-up' Nachshon ben Aminadav, then the Nasi after me and the Nasi after him will face a spiral of escalating sacrifices, escalating costs, until day 12. Imagine what the Nasi will have to bring by then!

Nisanel ben Tzuar reasoned as follows: We know our own nature. Everyone will argue that his offering was better. This will lead to Lashon Hara and hatred and jealousy. We know our nature.

So, Nisanel ben Tzuar did a tremendous thing. He brought exactly the same offering. He set the tone -- everyone is the same.

What was G-d's response? The Medrash says an unbelievable thing...

There is an inviolate rule that a Public Offering can override Shabbos prohibitions, but a Private Offering cannot. No individual offering is ever brought on the Sabbath. If that is true, the sequence of offerings of the Princes should have been suspended on Shabbos, since they were Private Offerings. In this case, however, G-d allowed the offering to be brought even on Shabbos because it was like a Public Offering.

Since all of the offerings were brought exactly like one another to maintain the sense of community (Tzibur), peace, and unity -- this was a Korban Yachid (Private Offering) that was infused with the spirit of a Korban Tzibur (Public Offering). It was a Korban Yachid that was brought to keep the Tzibur intact. G-d said -- as it were -- "For Me, this is considered a Communal Offering".

There is a great ethical lesson here. This teaches us the importance of communal unity and the importance of communal peace. We see what G-d's response is to one who does things to promote such peace, unity, and harmony. A person that keeps a Tzibur together is one who brings merit to the masses in a most distinguished fashion and who merits many wonderful things for himself as well.

Individual Talents

By Rabbi Mordechai Wollenberg

The Torah tells of twelve sets of gifts brought as offerings by each of the twelve tribes in honor of the dedication of the Tabernacle. Although the Torah does not waste words, and although each tribe seemingly brought the same gift, the Torah repeats word for word the exact order of their donation - "Reuben gave..., Shimon gave..., etc.", rather than simply saying "Reuben, Shimon,... and Benjamin each gave..."

Each of the items symbolized different things to different tribes, relating to that tribe's role. In this sense, each tribe brought a different flavor to their gifts.

All of the tribes conform to the same divine guidelines, all follow the same Torah, yet each one carries out those very same deeds with their own personal approach.

We often see tension between conformity and creativity, between tradition and innovation. People ask why Judaism has to be so rigid and conforming. Where is creativity? On the one hand we need the foundation stones of our Jewish tradition; on the other, we need an outlet for our creativity, to personalize, to nurture our own individual talents.

This Torah tells us that this is not a contradiction. The entire nation, including individuals of every conceivable character and calling, can do the very same deed, down to every last detail, yet each person provides a unique flavor. Two people may do exactly the same thing in a very different manner.

In the same manner, we can live in a civilized society, governed by ethical and moral precepts, yet still thrive as individuals. We can follow Torah and carry out its commandments, yet still remain true to our sense of individuality. No matter how conformist Judaism (or society, for that matter) may seem, there is always room for personal expression. It does not, however, have to involve rebellion or non-conformity. On the contrary, the greatest personal expression comes from different individuals who are following the same framework yet show diversity and individuality within that framework.

We were blessed with the framework of Torah, of Jewish teachings and practices. Let us endeavor to enjoy and celebrate our Judaism, in the traditions of our predecessors, yet with our own individual flavor -- to keep it going for the next generation.

On Becoming A Leader

By Rabbi Mendy Wolf

In this week's parsha, nearly ninety psukim are devoted to the gifts given by the Nissiem, the leaders from each of the twelve tribes. There is a message both for those graduating from school as well as for the rest of us as to how to go about becoming a leader in our own right.

The celebrated Israeli military leader and politician, Moshe Dayan, was once stopped by a police officer for a speeding violation. "Dayan?" asked the officer in surprise when he saw who he had stopped. "Come on, you should be more of a role model!" Responded Dayan, "Look, I have only one eye. Do you want me to keep it on the speedometer, or on the road?"

In truth, we are all leaders, sitting in the driver's seat of our lives; we set goals for ourselves, and then try to navigate the road to our destination in the best way possible. But from time to time, it's important to stop and ask ourselves--what kind of drivers are we? As we journey to achieve, do we get lost in the road rush, or do we remain role models for the rest of society?

Indeed, as Dayan pointed out, there are two components to the drive: focusing on where we are headed, and ensuring that we get there in the right way. Though the goal beckons, the path we take to reach it is of equal importance, for ultimately it is the fine balance of these two that allows for a truly successful ride.

So as you journey through life and keep your eye on the road ahead, remember to also take a moment to pause before you act; evaluate your pace--your means of achieving--and seek to remain a role model for your fellow drivers, upholding your beliefs and influencing those around you in a positive way.

Let's endeavor to be true leaders--those that are recognizable no matter how wild the highways of life become!