

D'var Torah for the May 22nd 2018 Congregational Meeting

By Rabbi Rachel Bearman

This week's Torah portion, Naso, contains a collection of seemingly disparate episodes. The portion begins with a census and the subsequent calculation and assignment of duties. It continues with a list of ways to make ritually unclean people clean again and then details exactly how a priest was meant to intervene in dramatic moments familial strife. The portion then goes on to explain the extra ritual responsibilities that accompany the life of a nazirite. And finally, in the last chapter of the *parashah*, Moses consecrates the tabernacle, the chieftains of the tribes bring offerings to celebrate, and then God has a conversation with Moses in the newly dedicated space.

On first glance, the various narrative elements of this week's *parashah* might seem unrelated. But, upon further study, it becomes clear that everything fits neatly within the category of "congregational life."

Naso's collection of stories and instructions teaches us that whether our congregation is wandering in the desert or nestled in the woods of Connecticut, we can expect that the time and energy of the community's leadership and membership will be spent on specific tasks which include:

- Completing mundane activities like taking a census or compiling registration packets
- Encountering dramatic moments- both of grief and joy- where extreme emotions take us on wild rides, and we look to our community and our tradition to keep us from becoming unmoored
- And fulfilling ritual obligations even as we lift up possibilities for further ritual engagement

We are reminded when we read the words of Naso that belonging to a community means that we take on the responsibility of entwining our lives with the lives of other people- a process which is sometimes messy but is always meaningful.

I do not think that it is coincidence that the final element of this portion, arguably the most well known element of this portion, is found within this portrait of congregational life.

In the 22nd through 26th verses of the 6th chapter of the Book of Numbers, we read, "Adonai spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them, 'Adonai bless you and protect you! Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you! Adonai bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!"

This moment of transcendence, this moment of extreme blessing, does not come to us while we are standing on the top of a mountain but instead as we are standing in the middle of the mess, the mundanity, the emotional rollercoaster, and the ritual responsibilities of congregational life.

It's placement reminds us that we miss so much, that we miss too much, if we wait for moments of tranquility to begin looking for God and transcendent experiences. The placement of this benediction teaches us that one aspect of belonging to and leading a congregation is accepting the responsibility to look for transcendence even as we deal with a chaotic reality.

This past year has been filled with everything that Naso includes- hard, hard work, emotional highs and lows, ritual responsibilities, and throughout it all, moments of transcendence. I look forward to continuing to seek out those moments with all those who belong to our community.

I would like to close with an interpretation of the Priestly Blessing written by Fanny Neuda in 1855. It is my prayer for all of us today and always.

AFTER THE PRIESTLY BLESSING

By Fanny Neuda

All-Compassionate One,
Let your blessing
That we have received at this hour, the blessing
That holy priests once bestowed on your people,
Fulfill us.
May it prove true for us
In its entire fullness and meaning, in every part.

Bless us, O God!

For you alone are the source
Of all blessing and well-being.
Bless us with the rich and manifold gifts of existence.
Bless us with firm and lasting health, with long life,
And with the strength to practice goodness
And do what pleases you.

Bless us in all that we begin.
Bless us through our children
And our children's children,
That they may grow to be our joy and honor.

And protect us.

Protect what you have given us
And what you continue to give.
Protect us, All-Compassionate One,
From all accidents and misfortunes.

Protect us from the loss
Of true friends and beloved family.
Protect us from hunger and want.
Protect us from becoming dependent
On flesh and blood.
Protect us in all that we love and honor.

Shine your countenance upon us.

May we feel your presence
In its holy tenderness and warmth,
May it illuminate the earthly night and fog.
Kindle in our souls the light of truth
With which to recognize you, O God,
And to perceive your eternal goodness and majesty.

And be gracious to us.

Your mercy alone is our hope and our rescue.
Be a gracious, mild, and merciful judge for us
In our waywardness and in our transgressions.
Take us to your heart in love and tenderness
When we return to you like regretful children.
Let your grace and mercy rest on us
Wherever and whenever we need it,
Whenever we call on you.

Turn your countenance toward us.

Your gaze rests on us, encouraging us
In all that is good and just,
Restraining us from doing wrong.
Your presence, which is always with us,
Is our comfort and our refuge in suffering,
Even when all turn away—
When father and mother, friends and children,
Forsake us—you never forsake us
But turn your compassion toward us.

And grant us peace.

May we be at peace with the world and with ourselves,

The peace of a tranquil conscience
And fulfilled obligations.
Let hate, envy, jealousy, and misunderstanding—
Everything that stirs up conflict and discord—
Flee from us.

Grant us peace, O God,
Your true, pure, flowing peace.
And, at the end, let us go forth from here in peace,
Gazing back on our lives with the satisfaction
Of a fully lived life, to find eternal peace with you,
The joy of heaven in your presence
And blessedness in your law.
Amen.