**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NASO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

**PLEASE PRAY FOR A REFUA SHELEIMA FOR OUR ALUMNUS  
CHAIM BINYAMIN BEN RIVKA HINDA, RABBI CHAIM STRAUCHLER,**

**INJURED BADLY IN A CYCLING ACCIDENT.**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Naso presents the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* – the special blessing that the *kohanim* are commanded to pronounce to the rest of the nation. This blessing concludes with the wish, “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*” – that God should “raise His countenance” upon the people, which is understood as a reference to showing them special grace and favor, beyond that which is normally extended to people. Thus, for example, the Torah in Sefer Vayikra (19:15) commands, “*Lo tisa penei dal*” – not to show special favor to a pauper when he stands trial, in consideration of his difficult plight. The term “*nesi’at panim*” refers to special treatment, showing people favor and judging them in an especially magnanimous manner because of a favorable predisposition.

The Gemara, in a famous passage in Masekhet Berakhot (20b), tells that the heavenly angels posed to the Almighty the question of how He allows Himself to show *Benei Yisrael* special grace and favor. After all, in Sefer Devarim (10:17), Moshe lists several different attributes of God, including “*lo yisa fanim*” – that He does not show favoritism, and holds all people equally to account for their wrongdoing. How, the angels wondered, could God violate His own principles by showing special favoritism to *Am Yisrael*? The Gemara tells that God responded to the angels by noting the special stringency that *Benei Yisrael* adopted in regard to the obligation of *birkat ha-mazon* (grace after meals). Whereas the Torah requires reciting a blessing only after eating to satiation (“*Ve-akhalta ve-savata*” – Devarim 8:10), *Benei Yisrael* have taken it upon themselves to recite *birkat ha-mazon* even after eating small quantities (as long as one has eaten a *ke-zayit* – the volume of an olive – of bread). For this, God explained to the angels, they are deserving of His special favor.

This story told in the Gemara is commonly understood as expressing the importance value of “*histapkut*” – feeling content and happy even when we do not feel fully satiated. Even when our blessings in life fall short of our hopes, wishes, desires and expectations, we are still to feel grateful, appreciative, joyful and content with our lot.

On this basis, *Chatam Sofer* insightfully suggests a possible point of connection between the blessing of “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*” and the concluding blessing of *birkat kohanim* – “*ve-yaseim lekha shalom*,” the blessing of peace. *Chatam Sofer* explains that one of the most critical prerequisites for living in peace is “*histapkut*,” the serenity that comes from feeling content with what one has. Many arguments erupt when people are unyielding in their demands, and unforgiving when their demands are not met. If we live with “*histapkut*,” humbly and calmly accepting our lot without feeling deprived, we are far less likely to become aggrieved and far more likely to forgive. This will, in turn, lead to a more peaceful life and stronger relationships with the people around us, in fulfillment of the blessing of “*ve-yaseim lekha shalom*” – the blessing of peace, which is the greatest blessing of all.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Naso of the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, the blessing with which the *kohanim* are to bless the rest of the nation. God told Moshe to instruct the *kohanim*, “*Ko tevarekhu et Benei Yisrael*” – “So shall you bless the Israelites” (6:23), and then proceeded to dictate the brief, three-verse blessing that comprises *birkat kohanim.*

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:11) cites several *Tanna’im* who point to the word “*ko*” in this verse as an allusion to the merit on the basis of which *Benei Yisrael* earned this blessing. Each *Tanna* cited in the Midrash associated the word “*ko*” in this context with an instance of this word in Sefer Bereishit. The first *Tanna* cited, Rabbi Yehuda, asserted that the word “*ko*” alludes to God’s promise to Avraham when He told him to look at the stars in the nighttime sky and then proclaimed, “***Ko*** *yiheyeh zar’ekha*” – “**So** shall your offspring be” (Bereishit 15:5). This event, Rabbi Yehuda claims, is the source of the merit for *Benei Yisrael*’s receiving this special blessing.

What might be the point of connection between *birkat kohanim* and God’s promise to Avraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars?

The comparison between *Am Yisrael* and the stars might point to not merely our nation’s numbers, but also to the ideal of each individual “shining” and contributing “light” without competition or strife. The stars all have their fixed position in the sky, and they remain there for eternity, without complaints, protest or envy of other stars. This is the ideal model that *Am Yisrael* is to follow. Each member of the nation is to find his or her place within the giant constellation of *Am Yisrael*, and supply all the light that he or she is capable of supplying. Just as the light of the stars all combine to illuminate, if only somewhat, the darkness of the nighttime sky, so are we each to provide the most illumination we can, so that this multitude of tiny sparks of light combine to illuminate the earth. In order for this to happen, we must each assume our place and remain there, without competing with or envying anyone else’s place. Only if we each occupy our appropriate place in the “constellation” of *Am Yisrael* can we together provide the “illumination” that we are supposed to provide.

On this basis, we might perhaps explain the association drawn between this promise to Avraham and *birkat kohanim*. The question posed by the Midrash – from where *Benei Yisrael* earned the privilege of this blessing – may relate to the phenomenon of one segment of the nation extending its blessings to the others. From where, the Midrash asks, does our nation receive the goodwill needed for its different groups to bless one another, to wish one another well, to encourage one another, without jealousy and petty competition? Moreover, the *kohanim* recite before declaring this blessing a *berakha* over this *mitzva*, describing it as a requirement to bless the Jewish People “*be-ahava*” – “with love.” How, the Midrash asks, does *Am Yisrael* receive this unique ability to extend love and goodwill to each other without conflict or strife?

The answer given by the Midrash is “*ko yiheyeh zar’ekha*” – God’s blessing to Avraham that his offspring would resemble the stars. We achieve the peace, mutual respect and goodwill embodied by *birkat kohanim* only if we understand and embrace the full meaning of this comparison, if we learn to respect each other’s place and feel content with whatever our individual role is. This symbolic message of the “stars” forms the foundation of *birkat kohanim*, of a nation whose members live together in mutual respect and with mutual concern, without conflict or competition.

Monday

In issuing the command of *birkat kohanim* – that the *kohanim* should declare a blessing upon the rest of the nation each day – God instructs Moshe to tell the *kohanim*, “So shall you bless the Israelites: Say unto them” (6:23), and He then proceeds to dictate the text of the brief blessing. Rashi notes the unusual construction “*amor*,” which differs from the standard imperative form of the verb “say,” which would be “*emor*” (as in “*Emor el ha-kohanim*” in Vayikra 21:1). Rather than give a precise explanation of the word “*amor*,” Rashi instead draws our attention to other instances where this construction is used, such as in the famous commands of “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Remember the day of Shabbat” – Shemot 20:8) and “*Shamor et yom ha-Shabbat*” (“Guard the day of Shabbat” –5:12). In his commentary to the command of “*Zakhor et yom ha-Shabbat*” in Sefer Shemot, Rashi writes that it means “pay attention to always remember Shabbat day.” In other words, the term “*zakhor*” refers to an ongoing condition, something that is required at all times.

Accordingly, as noted by Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*, the command of *birkat kohanim*, too, must be understood as an ongoing condition, as opposed to something that is done on specific occasions. Although the actual proclamation of *birkat kohanim* is made just once each day, the *kohanim* are commanded to live in a constant state of “*amor*,” of “blessing,” of wishing and praying for the nation’s wellbeing. The *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* obligates the *kohanim* not only to bless the people on certain occasions, but also to always concern themselves with the people’s needs and always wish for their joy, success and prosperity.

This might also be the symbolic significance of the requirement of “*nesi’at kapayim*” – that the *kohanim* must raise their hands when conferring this blessing (Mishna, Sota 38a). Rav Shmuel Alter, in his *Likutei Batar Likutei*, suggests that this requirement indicated to the *kohanim* that verbally conferring this blessing did not suffice. They needed to not only to pay lip service to their concern for the people, but to also act with sincerity and devotion to help the nation in any way they could. Blessing with both their mouths and their hands signified the *kohanim*’s obligation to both speak and act on the people’s behalf. The *mitzva* entails not simply a recitation, but an overall obligation upon the *kohanim* to concern themselves with the people, to see themselves as responsible for the people’s wellbeing, and to invest as much effort as they could to help, inspire, guide and uplift the rest of *Benei Yisrael* at all times.

Tuesday

We read in Parashat Naso of God’s command that *Benei Yisrael* send away from their camp those who had become *tamei* (ritually impure). God specifies three categories of impurity – those with the *tzara’at* skin infection, those who have experienced bodily emissions, and those who had come in contact with a human corpse (5:2). Rashi, citing from Masekhet Pesachim (67a-b), explains that different laws apply to these three categories of *temei’im*. *Tzara’at* marks the most stringent form, as it required remaining outside the entire Israelite camp, whereas those who had experienced emissions were barred only from area of the *Mishkan* and the area of the *Leviyim*, and those who had come in contact with corpses were barred only from the area of the *Mishkan*.

The Torah then tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s compliance with these laws: “The Israelites did so, and they sent them [those with impurity] outside the camp, as the Lord had told Moshe – so did the Israelites do” (5:4). Many writers noted the seemingly redundant conclusion, “so did the Israelites do.” Once the Torah had told us that *Benei Yisrael* “did so,” why did it then conclude, “so did the Israelites do”?

Chizkuni, based on the *Sifrei*, explains that these two phrases refer, respectively, to the nation generally, and to those who were impure. The Torah tells us that the nation implemented the policy that God had commanded – requiring the barring of the various groups of impure individuals – and that those individuals cooperated and agreed to leave the areas from which they were barred during their period of impurity.

A different, creative explanation is cited in the name of the *Bina Le-itim*, who suggested that the implementation of this policy, barring the impure from the camp, was accompanied by a process of reflection and introspection on the part of everyone else. *Tzara’at*, the severest form of ritual impurity, which requires a person to live in isolation outside the camp, is viewed as a punishment for various misdeeds, primarily, interpersonal offenses. When the Torah reiterated, “so did the Israelites do,” it means that they went further than simply banishing those stricken with *tzara’at*, and resolved to ensure that they themselves would not experience this impurity. Rather than simply send away those who had already contracted *tzara’at*, they also looked into themselves and made a commitment to improve their interpersonal conduct so that there would be no more *tzara’at* in the nation.

There are times when it becomes necessary to “banish” certain forms of “impurity” from our midst, when we need to take a stand against improper ideas or conduct and loudly proclaim that they have no place within our camp. Too often, however, such “banishment” ends up becoming nothing more than an ugly display of hubris, an opportunity to proudly affirm our superiority. There is something unseemly, and even dangerous, about condemning “impurity” in a condescending manner, as though we see ourselves as perfect and need simply to send away the “impure” in order for our camp to be what it is supposed to be. The *Bina Le-itim* teaches us that the process of eliminating “impurity” must be accompanied by our own process of introspection, that we cannot criticize and condemn others without concomitantly searching within ourselves to identify our own flaws and working to correct them.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Naso (5:5-8) discusses the laws relevant to a thief who falsely denies his crime on oath, and then repents. The penitent criminal is required to confess his wrongdoing, to return the stolen property, pay an additional fine, and offer an atonement sacrifice. The Torah describes this scenario as one where a man or a woman commits “*mi-kol chatot ha-adam*” – literally, “one of any of the sins of man” (5:6). In the next verse, it becomes clear that the situation described is one of theft, as the Torah requires the offender to return the stolen items to his victim. The Ramban explains that the term “*mi-kol chatot ha-adam*” refers to crimes involving financial harm to one’s fellow. Nevertheless, later commentators and *darshanim* sought to uncover the deeper meaning of this phrase, and to explain why the Torah referred to theft specifically in this way.

Rav Wolf Heidenheim suggested an explanation based on the Gemara’s remark in Masekhet Bava Batra (165a), “*ruban be-gezel*” – that most people are guilty of some form of theft. While very few people actually steal property that belongs to others, a large percentage of people are guilty of having at some point, in some way, unlawfully entitled themselves to money, property or material privileges that they did not rightfully deserve. For this reason, Rav Heidenheim proposed, the Torah refers to the broad category of theft with the term “*mi-kol chatot ha-adam*” – meaning, sins that people commonly commit. The Torah emphasizes that unlawfully entitling oneself to another person’s assets is an offense which many people are guilty of in one form or another, but one which nevertheless demands confession and means of atonement. One cannot excuse himself from the process of repentance with the claim that “everyone does it,” that this is a common offense which therefore need not be taken so seriously. The Torah demands that we confess, regret and seek to correct even mistakes which are commonly made, and does not allow us to ease our conscience with the knowledge that many others are guilty of the same offense that we committed.

A different approach is cited (in *Likutei Batar Likutei*) in the name of the work *Va-yedaber Moshe*, who suggested that the term “*adam*” in the phrase “*mi-kol chatot ha-adam*” alludes to Adam and his sin in the Garden of Eden. The Torah makes subtle reference to this sin to warn against responding to our religious failings the way Adam responded to his failure, blaming his mistake on his wife: “The woman which you placed alongside me – she gave me from the fruit” (Bereishit 3:12). Adam was guilty of violating God’s command despite the role played by his wife in his transgression – showing us that we ultimately bear responsibility for our actions, even when others are also partly to blame. The Torah here teaches that the process of repentance is required even when one commits “*mi-kol chatot ha-adam*,” a sin resembling Adam’s sin in the garden, which could be blamed on others. We must assume responsibility for our actions and acknowledge our guilt for the wrong decisions we make even if we were lured or influenced by others to commit the act, and even if somebody else in some other way took part in the wrongful act and thus bears part of the blame.

Thursday

Among the topics discussed in Parashat Naso is the atonement process required when a thief falsely swears innocence and then decides to repent for his crime. Such an offender is required to verbally confess his wrongdoing, pay the stolen goods or money (plus a fine) to the victim, and bring a sacrifice. The Torah then adds (5:8) that if the victim had died in the interim, and left no inheritors, then the payment is given to a *kohen* in lieu of the victim.

As Rashi cites from *Chazal* (in the *Sifrei*), this refers to the case of a convert, who loses all legal familial relationships at the time of his conversion. Somebody who was born a Jew, even if he dies without children, must have some relative – if only a distant one – to inherit money that is owed to him. Therefore, if the Torah speaks of somebody without any inheritor, this can refer only to a convert who dies without offspring, and whose biological family members are not halakhically considered related to him once he converted. Necessarily, the Torah here speaks of the case of somebody who steals from a convert who dies without offspring before the thief can return the stolen property, and the Torah requires the thief to make the payment to a *kohen*.

The concept seemingly being established here by the Torah is that when a person has no human relatives, then his closest relative is God, as represented by the *kohanim*. The thief in this case gives the money to a *kohen* because, as the victim is deceased and left no inheritors, his only “relative” is the Almighty, and thus the thief gives the money to His attendants, the *kohanim*. More broadly, the Torah here perhaps teaches us that when it appears that we have no “relatives,” that we have nobody close to us, we in fact have, at very least, the Almighty, who is “close to all who call to Him, to all call to Him honestly” (Tehillim 145:18). When we feel alone and forlorn, we are assured that God is our “relative” who cares for us and is close to us. We all have occasions when we feel alone and vulnerable. Even if we enjoy the company of loved ones, there are still times when we feel anxious, fragile and insecure. The law of *gezel ha-ger* (the return of stolen property to a *kohen* in the case of a convert who dies without inheritors) teaches us that we are really never alone, that we can always turn to God in our times of need and fear, and that He is always ready to assume the place of a close friend or loving family member.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Naso outlines the procedure that had to be followed in the case of a *sota* – a woman whose husband has reason to suspect her of infidelity. If the husband warned his wife not to seclude herself with the man in question, and witnesses later testify that she disobeyed this warning, the husband and wife may not engage in marital relations until she undergoes the special procedure outlined here by the Torah that would be performed in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This procedure concluded with the woman drinking special water which would miraculously cause her to die if she were guilty of adultery. If she survived the ordeal, then this would prove her innocence, such that the couple would be allowed to resume marital life.

The *sota* ritual also included a special barley offering which the woman needed to bring. Unlike other grain offerings, which were mixed with oil and spices, the *minchat sota* – the barley offering brought by the *sota* – consisted only of barley flour, without the addition of oil and spices (5:15).

The *Panim Yafot* commentary offers a halakhic explanation for this unique feature of the *minchat sota*, suggesting that it was necessary to protect the integrity of the *sota* process. The *minchat sota* was indispensable for the "test" of the water; meaning, if this sacrifice was not offered, or was somehow invalidated, then the water given to the *sota* to drink did not have its miraculous capability to determine her guilt or innocence. Accordingly, the woman seemingly could have sabotaged the process by becoming *tamei* before going to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* for this ordeal. For example, she could have gone to a cemetery, or not immerse after menstruation, such that would go to the Temple in a state of ritual impurity. The Torah states explicitly (5:18) that the *kohen* must place the offering in the woman's hands, and thus, it would appear that if the woman were impure, the offering became impure through contact with the woman's hands. As such, it would be invalid as a sacrifice, thereby sabotaging the entire process. To protect against such a scheme, the *Panim Yafot* explains, the Torah forbade mixing oil into the barley. One of the basic rules of *tum'a* is that foodstuff cannot become impure before it has come in contact with a liquid. By insisting that the *sota*'s barley offering be kept dry, the Torah protects it from *tum'a*, and thus guarantees that the offering would not be invalidated by the woman's state of impurity.

Later writers raised several questions against the *Panim Yafot*'s theory, including the fact that the *minchat sota* seems to have been mixed with water. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (15a) compares the *sota*'s offering to the grain offering brought by sinners guilty of certain transgressions (the *korban oleh ve-yoreid*), which also was brought without any oil. And in Masekhet Menachot (54a), the Gemara states that the flour of a sinner's grain offering would be mixed with water in order to make it easier for the *kohen* to perform *kemitza* – scooping a handful of the offering that would be placed on the altar. (If the flour was perfectly dry, *kemitza* would be very difficult.) It stands to reason that this was the case concerning the *sota*'s offering, as well. This quite obviously undermines the *Panim Yafot*'s entire theory, for even without the oil, the *sota*'s offering could become invalidated if the woman was *tamei*.

This point was made by Rav Meir Arik, in his *Minchat Kena'ot* commentary to Masekhet Sota (14a). In defense of the *Panim Yafot*, Rav Arik noted the Rambam's formulation in Hilkhot Ma'aseh Ha-korbanot (11:14), indicating that there was no requirement to mix a sinner's grain offering with water. This was allowed, but not obligatory. Conceivably, then, the *Panim Yafot* may have understood that in the case of a *sota*, where there was the concern that the woman might wish to invalidate the offering to sabotage the process, no water was added. (However, Rav Arik questions the *Panim Yafot*'s theory for other reasons, as well.)

A different refutation of this challenge was presented by Rav Meir Shapiro of Lublin, in one of his published responsa (*Or Ha-meir*, 29). The Mishna in Masekhet Menachot (55a) establishes that grain offerings were mixed specifically with *poshrin* – tepid, lukewarm water. Rav Shapiro notes that one source seems to indicate that *poshrin* has a special status vis-à-vis the laws of *tum'a*, and does not make foodstuff eligible to contract impurity. In Parashat Metzora (Vayikra 14:5), the Torah describes the process required for the purification of a *metzora*, which included the slaughtering of a bird over "*mayim chayim*" – fresh water. *Torat Kohanim* interprets the term "*mayim chayim*" as excluding several different kinds of water for this ritual, including *poshrin*. The Rash Mi-shantz, in his commentary to Masekhet Negaim (14:1), suggests that *poshrin* is excluded because it has a "*sheim levai*" – a special, distinct name and identity. The term "*mayim chayim*" refers to generic water, which has no special identifying quality, to the exclusion of *poshrin*. If so, Rav Shapiro comments, then we can easily defend the *Panim Yafot*'s contention. One of the laws of *tum'a* is that water with a "*sheim lavai*" does not qualify to make foodstuff eligible to receive *tuma* (Makhsirin 6:4). As such, the water mixed with the *minchat sota* did not allow it to become *tamei*, but it would risk becoming *tamei* if oil would be mixed into it.

(Taken from Rav David Mandelbaum's *Pardeis Yosef He-chadash*, Parashat Naso, p. 136-7)

[For the previous S.A.L.T. click here.](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-thursday-10-sivan-5778-may-24-2018)

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)