**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NASO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Naso (6:22-27) introduces the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, which requires the *kohanim* to bless the rest of the nation with the specific text presented here by the Torah. After dictating the text that the *kohanim* should use when blessing the people, God then proclaims, “They shall place My Name upon the Israelites, and I shall bless them” (6:27).

Rashi, based on the *Sifrei* and the Gemara (Sota 38a), explains this to mean that the *kohanim* should use the “*Sheim Ha-meforash*,” the actual Name of God, when pronouncing this blessing. Each of the three verses of the priestly blessing contains the Name of God, and God here clarifies that the *kohanim* should use the “*Sheim Ha-meforash*” in proclaiming three verses.

The Rashbam (6:23) understands this verse differently, explaining that the command of *birkat kohanim* requires the *kohanim* to bless the nation in the form of a prayer to God, as opposed to simply expressing their wish. The command, “They shall place My Name upon the Israelites,” according to the Rashbam, clarifies that the point of *birkat kohanim* is that the *kohanim* bless the people in God’s Name, as a prayer, rather than blessing the people in their own name, so-to-speak, as though they have special powers. God then promises, “I shall bless them” – that He will listen to the *kohanim*’s heartfelt prayer on the people’s behalf.

Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, explains this verse to mean that by invoking God as they bless the people, the *kohanim* enhance the people’s awareness of God as the source of their success and prosperity. The *kohanim* “place My Name upon the Israelites” in the sense of making them more keenly cognizant of God’s providence, of the fact that all their blessings come from Him. Rav Mecklenberg asserts that the word “*ve-samu*” (“and they shall place”) should be understood as referring to contemplating an idea, as in the command, “*ve-samtem et devarai eileh al levavkhem*” – “you shall place these words of mine upon your heart” (Devarim 11:18). God tells the *kohanim* that their blessing will have the fact of drawing *Benei Yisrael*’s attention to “My Name” – to His being the source of their livelihood and their wellbeing. And thus the purpose of *birkat kohanim*, according to this explanation, is that we recognize God as the one who gives us all we have, and so that alongside our efforts to support ourselves we also turn to Him for assistance and trust in His beneficence.

Sunday

The *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, which the Torah introduces in Parashat Naso (6:22-27), requires the *kohanim* to bless the rest of the nation with the specific text presented by the Torah. The *Sefer Ha-chareidim* (by Rav Elazar Azkari of Tzefat), in discussing this *mitzva* (*mitzvat asei* 4), writes that while the *kohanim* recite the priestly blessing, the congregation must remain silent and pay close attention to the blessing, because “they, too, are included in the *mitzva*.” Many later writers noted the implication of the *Sefer Ha-chareidim* that just as the *kohanim* have an obligation to bless the congregation, the congregation has an obligation to receive and listen to the blessing. This point was made by Rav Pinchas Horowitz (the “*Ba’al Hafla’a*”), in his *Sefer Ha-makneh* commentary to Masekhet Ketubot (24b).

By contrast, the Ritva, in his commentary to Masekhet Sukka (31b), writes explicitly that non-*kohanim* bear no obligation at all with regard to *birkat kohanim*. The context of the Ritva’s discussion is the prohibition of *bal tosif* – adding onto *mitzvot*. The Ritva asserts that this prohibition forbids adding additional features to a *mitzva* – such as adding a fifth species to the *arba minim* on Sukkot – but does not forbid repeating a *mitzva*. He draws proof from the fact that a *kohein* who recited *birkat kohanim* may recite the blessing again later in the day, adding, “And one cannot say that this is done to fulfill the obligation for others” – meaning, for the congregation – “because there is no obligation upon Israel” – meaning, upon non-*kohanim*. The Ritva clearly maintained that there is no obligation upon non-*kohanim* to receive the priestly blessing.

Rav Avraham Dov Kahana Shapiro, in his *Devar Avraham* (1:31), disputes the *Sefer Ha-makneh*’s understanding of the *Sefer Ha-chareidim*’s comment, and argues that there is no disagreement between the *Sefer Ha-chareidim* and the Ritva. Even according to the *Sefer Ha-chareidim*, Rav Shapiro explains, the congregation is obligated to pay attention and intend to receive the blessing as it is given, but they have no obligation to put themselves in a position to receive the blessing. Once they are in the synagogue when the *kohanim* confer the blessing, they are required to do their part by listening attentively, but this does not mean that they have an obligation to make a point of receiving *birkat kohanim* the way the *kohanim* have an obligation to recite *birkat kohanim*.

Rav Shapiro challenges the *Sefer Ha-makneh*’s understanding by noting the example of charity, which is a *mitzva* cast upon the donor, but not the recipient. A person with the ability to give has the obligation to offer charity to an individual in need, but the *mitzva* of charity certainly does not obligate the needy individual to accept it. By the same token, the fact that the Torah required the *kohanim* to extend a blessing to the people does not require the people to take advantage of this opportunity and receive the blessing. (Rav Shapiro notes also the example of *ha’anaka* – the obligatory gifts which a master must give to his servant when his servant is released after six years of service. The master is required to grant these gifts, but the servant certainly is under no obligation to accept them.)

We might consider explaining the *Sefer Ha-makneh*’s position in light of the comments of Rav Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*, regarding the significance of *birkat kohanim*. As we saw yesterday, Rav Mecklenberg writes that the purpose (or at least one purpose) of *birkat kohanim* is to direct the people’s attention to the fact that their success and wellbeing is determined by God. By wishing the people that God should bless them, care for them and grant them happiness and success, the *kohanim* heighten the people’s awareness of providence, that it is God who protects them and gives them all they have. Rav Mecklenberg explains on this basis God’s conclusion to the command of *birkat kohanim* – “They shall place My Name upon the Israelites, and I shall bless them” (6:27). According to Rav Mecklenberg, “They shall place My Name upon the Israelites” means that the *kohanim*, through their blessing, will instill within the people greater awareness of His control over the world and over their lives.

If so, then we can perhaps understand the view of the *Sefer Ha-makneh* that the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* imposes an obligation not only upon the *kohanim*, but also upon the people. Unlike the *mitzva* of charity, which is intended to assist the poor, and it is thus up to a needy person to decide whether or not to avail himself of this assistance, the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* is intended not only to help the people, but also to reinforce their belief in, and awareness of, God’s providence. As such, they do not have the option of whether or not to receive this blessing, and are rather required to put themselves in a position to receive *birkat kohanim* no less than the *kohanim* are required to pronounce *birkat kohanim*.

Monday

One of the topics discussed in Parashat Naso is the situation of a *sota* – a woman whose husband suspected her of infidelity, and warned her not to seclude herself with the man with whom the husband suspected she was having a relationship. If the woman would then be seen secluding herself with the man in question, she and her husband would be forbidden to engage in marital relations until she went to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and underwent a special ritual. This included drinking special water which the *kohein* prepared by first writing a certain text – dictated here by the Torah – and then erasing the ink into the water. If the woman survived after drinking the water, this proved her innocence, thus allowing her and her husband to resume marital relations.

The Gemara, in several places (e.g. Makkot 11a), notes the significance of the fact that the text which the *kohein* would erase into the water included the Name of God. This means, the Gemara comments, that God agreed to have His Name erased – something which is normally forbidden – for the sake of repairing a troubled marriage. In order to prove the wife’s innocence and thus restore trust in the husband’s eyes, God allowed the erasure of His Name – showing just how important the Torah views peaceful relations between a husband and wife, and among people generally.

The Rama, in a startling and controversial responsum (11), extends this point even further, asserting that the permission granted by the Torah to erase God’s Name in the *sota* ritual establishes a precedent allowing the suspension of grave prohibitions for the sake of promoting peace. So much so, the Rama writes, that it is permissible even to slander somebody when necessary to end a conflict. Though the Rama does not give the particular details of the situation he addresses, he indicates that a bitter conflict threatened to tear apart a community, and it was felt that the only way to end the conflict was to spread false, damning information about a certain individual. The Rama argues that this was allowed for the sake of restoring peace in the community. He reasons that if the Torah requires erasing God’s Name to restore peace to one married couple, then *a fortiori* it permits violating a prohibition for the sake of restoring peace to an entire community.

A number of later writers argued with the Rama’s unconventional ruling, and at least one *posek* – Rav Yisrael Zev Mintzberg, in [*She’eirit Yisrael* (O.C. 13)](https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20718&st=&pgnum=23&hilite=) – raised questions as to whether this responsum was actually authored by the Rama. Rav Mintzberg writes that this ruling is built upon “shaky foundations,” and proceeds to challenge the line of reasoning followed in the Rama’s responsum. He notes the explicit ruling of Rav Hai Gaon, cited by the Rosh (Nedarim 3:2), that the erasure of God’s Name in the *sota* ritual does not provide a precedent for suspending Torah law for the sake of peace. Rav Hai Gaon thus maintained that if a husband became angry at his wife and rashly took an oath that he would divorce her, his oath cannot be annulled if he later regrets it.

Moreover, as Rav Mintzberg cites, the Rama himself – ironically enough – in a different responsum (110:10), comments that the erasure of God’s Name in the *sota* ritual does not mark the suspension of the prohibition against erasing God’s Name. Rather, the Rama explains, this prohibition to begin with forbids erasing God’s Name as an expression of blasphemy or disrespect, whereas in the case of the *sota*, it is done constructively, for the vitally important purpose of conforming the wife’s innocence and thus repairing her marriage. Therefore, the erasure of God’s Name does not constitute the suspension of a Torah law. Certainly, then, it cannot serve as a basis for violating other laws – including the uniquely severe prohibition of slander – for the sake of peace.

Indeed, the *Chafetz Chaim*, in the work for which he received that name (*Chafetz Chaim*, 8:8), clearly rules otherwise. Without citing the Rama’s responsum, the *Chafetz Chaim* notes that the Talmud Yerushalmi (Pei’a 1:1) permits speaking *lashon ha-ra* – truthful negative information – about people instigating a conflict. The *Chafetz Chaim* comments (in *Be’er Mayim Chayim*, 16) that several *Rishonim* (the Rif, the Rambam and the Rosh) appear to disagree with this position, and he adds that even according to the Yerushalmi’s view, this leniency is subject to several conditions: 1) one must have firsthand knowledge that the person about whom he speaks is indeed guilty of instigating a conflict; 2) one’s intentions are sincere, and he does not speak negatively about the person out of spite or resentment; 3) one is convinced that speaking negatively about this individual is the only means of ending the conflict. The first condition – requiring that the speaker have firsthand knowledge about the person’s guilt – clearly indicates that only truthful negative information may be spoken for the sake of ending a conflict. And, this applies even according to the lenient view of the Yerushalmi, which is not accepted by all opinions. Certainly, then, the *Chafetz Chaim* would not permit spreading false information about somebody for the sake of ending a conflict.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we discussed the controversial responsum of the Rama (11) addressing the unfortunate situation of a community torn apart by conflict, to which the only solution was to slander one of the people involved. The Rama maintained that just as God’s Name would be erased as part of the *sota* ritual, for the sake of restoring peace between a husband and wife, it is likewise permissible to slander a person for the sake of restoring peace to a community plagued by strife. As we saw, later authorities disagreed, and some even questioned whether this baffling responsum was even written by the Rama.

In this responsum, the Rama (assuming he was, indeed, the author) addresses several objections that could be raised against his line of reasoning. One objection, he writes, is that perhaps one cannot compare an offense against God – such as erasing His Name – and a grave interpersonal offense, like slander. The fact that God instructed erasing His Name for the sake of repairing a strained marriage – even assuming that this command establishes a precedent for suspending Torah prohibitions for the sake of peace – does not necessarily mean that we may cause harm to another person for the sake of peace. To refute this argument, the Rama notes the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Sota (7b) that the *kohein* would try to convince the *sota* to confess her adulteress act, and as part of this process the *kohein* would remind her that there were great people who sinned and then confessed. One of the examples mentioned by the *kohein*, the Gemara says, is Reuven, who committed a sin with one of his father’s wives, Bilha. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Sota* 3:2) writes that the woman would be told the story of Reuven “*ki-pshuto*” – “according to its plain meaning,” which implies that Reuven actually slept with Bilha. Although the Gemara elsewhere (Shabbat 55b) explains that Reuven did not actually sleep with Bilha, and was guilty instead of a different offense (moving his father’s bed out of Bilha’s tent), the *sota* would be told that Reuven actually committed an incestuous act. The Rama infers from here that for the sake of peace – as in the case of the *sota* – it is permissible to publicize false, negative information about somebody.

This inference can be refuted on several levels. Most obviously, perhaps, a clear distinction exists between slandering a deceased person and slandering somebody who is alive. Rav Moshe Teitelbaum of Ujhel, in his *Yismach Moshe* (Parashat Mishpatim), notes the Gemara’s teaching in Masekhet Berakhot (19a) that the souls of the deceased are not troubled by what is said about them here in this world. The Gemara says that if one maligns a Torah scholar after his passing, then God will punish that individual for disrespecting the memory of a righteous person, but the deceased himself suffers no shame. Hence, the *Yismach Moshe* writes, dishonoring Reuven is not an interpersonal offense, and thus “slandering” him to the *sota* does not provide a basis for slandering a living individual for the sake of peace.

This point is made also by Rav Yisrael Zev Mintzberg, in [*She’eirit Yisrael* (O.C. 13)](https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20718&st=&pgnum=23&hilite=), who adds that while it is accepted not to speak slanderously about the deceased, doing so does not violate a Torah prohibition. This is in contrast to slandering a living person, which transgresses a number of severe Biblical commands.

Rav Mintzberg further notes that the *kohen* recalls this incident (and others) to the *sota* to show her examples of people who committed grievous sins which they then confessed, thereby earning forgiveness. Therefore, the “slander” spoke against Reuven is, in a sense, actually an expression of praise for Reuven, publicizing his having repented for his sin and having earned God’s forgiveness.

Additionally, Rav Mintzberg points to the Rama’s ruling (O.C. 610:1) that although generally it is proper for a victim to forgive the one who wronged him after he requests forgiveness, one is not required to forgive somebody who slandered him. One reason given for this ruling, as mentioned by the *Bach*, is that the slander tarnishes the family’s reputation, even for the offspring, and one does not have the authority to forgive the dishonor caused to his family and to future generations. It is difficult to imagine, Rav Mintzberg writes, that we would permit something so grievous – an act which one is not expected or required to forgive, no matter how many times the perpetrator asks for forgiveness – even for the lofty purpose of bringing peace.

In conclusion, it must be emphasized that the Rama’s startling ruling should not be understood as belittling in any way the gravity of the prohibition of slander. The Rama’s surprising position reflects not an underestimation of this prohibition, but rather the great importance of peace in a community, which in the Rama’s view, supersedes even one of the most grievous Biblical prohibitions. Although later *poskim* disagreed with the Rama’s ruling, it is nevertheless significant in that it underscores, in an especially dramatic way, the importance of maintaining peace and harmony in a community and how far we must go to avoid conflict.

Wednesday

The final section of Parashat Naso tells of the special gifts and sacrifices brought by the *nesi’im* – the leaders of the twelve tribes – in honor of the inauguration of the *Mishkan*.  The *nesi’im* first brought a joint gift – six wagons harnessed to oxen, for the *Leviyim* to use when transporting the *Mishkan* – and then each leader brought a large series of offerings.  One leader’s offerings were brought each day for twelve consecutive days.

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 8:3) comments, “The offering of the *nesi’im* was cherished by the Almighty like the song which the Israelites sang at the sea.”  The basis for this connection drawn between the *nesi’im*’s offerings and the *Shirat Ha-yam* – the song of praise sung by *Benei Yisrael* after the splitting of the sea – is the word “*zeh*” (“this”) which appears in both contexts.  *Benei Yisrael* proclaimed in their song, “*Zeh Keili ve-anveihu*” (“This is my God, and I shall glorify Him” – Shemot 15:2), and the Torah’s account of each tribal leader’s offering concludes with the phrase, “*zeh korban…*” (“This was the offering of…”).  Based on the common word “*zeh*,” the Midrash teaches that the *nesi’im*’s offerings were as dear to God as *Benei Yisrael*’s exuberant song of praise after the miracle of the sea.

How might we explain this connection?  Why did *Chazal* equate the *nesi’im*’s offerings with *Shirat Ha-yam*?

One of the differences between these two events is that *Shirat Ha-yam* was sung by the entire nation together, in unison, whereas the *nesi’im*’s offerings were brought by each tribe separately.  Moreover, commenting on the exclamation, “*Zeh Keli ve-anveihu*,” which implies that *Benei Yisrael* actually beheld a revelation of God, Rashi famously cites the Midrash as teaching, “A maidservant saw at the sea that which the prophets never saw.”  At the time of the miracle of the sea, all members of *Benei Yisrael* beheld a prophetic vision of sorts.  This event marked a moment of complete equality, where the entire nation shared the precise same experience to which they responded with the exact same song of praise, which they sang together.  By contrast, the offerings of the *nesi’im* were brought by one tribe at a time.  Whereas *Shirat Ha-yam* signifies the unique power of the entire nation joining together into a single entity, the offerings of the *nesi’im* reflect the value of allowing each group within the nation the opportunity to achieve in its unique, individual way.  The Midrash’s remark, “The offering of the *nesi’im* was cherished by the Almighty like the song which the Israelites sang at the sea” thus teaches that both elements are important and valuable.  We can accomplish a great deal when the many different groups of *Am Yisrael* join forces and work together harmoniously, as one unit, but it is also important for each “tribe” to develop its unique character and make its unique contribution.  God cherishes both “*Shirat Ha-yam*” – the beautiful “music” we create when the many different bands within our nation merge to work and “sing” together – and the “offerings of the *nesi’im*” – the distinct achievements of each group as it follows its unique path and produces a unique piece to be woven into the multicolored fabric of *Am Yisrael*.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Naso presents the laws relevant to a *nazir* – one who takes the nazirite vow committing himself for a period of time to several restrictions, including haircutting – “a razor shall not pass over his head” (6:5).

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his *Mei Ha-shiloach* (Parashat Behaalotekha), notes the contrast between this restriction observed by the *nazir*, and the process of the induction of the *Leviyim*, which included the removal of all their hair, as we read later (8:7). Whereas a *nazir* is forbidden to cut any of his hair, the *Leviyim* were formally inducted into their role as servants in the *Mishkan* by removing all their hair. The *Mei Ha-shiloach* explains this contrast based on the *Zohar*’s teaching that hair represents anger. The *Leviyim* were required to remove their hair as a symbol of their eliminating their negative character traits to be worthy of ministering before God in the *Mishkan*. The *nazir*, the *Mei Ha-shiloach* writes, lets his hair grow representing the triggering of a certain form of anger. A sincerely driven *nazir* takes his vow, which includes refraining from wine, in order to combat his sinful impulses. This is indicated by the famous statement of Shimon Ha’tzadik (Nedarim 9b) who said that, as a *kohein gadol*, he never partook of the sacrifices of *nezirim* because he felt they were all insincere, except in the case of one particular *nazir*, who had taken his vow to combat his desires. The *Mei Ha-shiloach* writes, in an enigmatic passage, “A strategy against desire is that a person brings himself to anger.” Anger is an effective means of combatting sinful desire, and therefore the *nazir*, who commits himself to subdue his negative impulses, grows his hair as a symbol of the “anger” he should muster as part of this effort.

How might we understand the *Zohar*’s comment that hair symbolizes anger, and how does this relate to the *nazir*’s struggle to overcome his natural vices?

Just as hair naturally grows from a person’s body, anger naturally grows and accumulates within us over time. The complexities and challenges of daily life can make us feel dissatisfied and frustrated, which can easily lead to anger. Just as one must cut and groom his hair to maintain a respectable appearance, similarly, we must “cut” and control our negative feelings in order to function properly in society.

However, the *Mei Ha-shiloach* here teaches that allowing anger to grow is appropriate in one specific context – when these feelings are directed towards ourselves, towards our own faults and vices. Harboring anger towards other people is destructive, but harboring anger towards our own shortcomings could spur us to grow and improve. And thus while we are generally encouraged to follow the example of the *Leviyim*, who removed all their hair as a symbol of the elimination of anger, the *nazir* refrains from haircutting as a symbol of his anger at his own faults, a form of anger which will help motivate him to change.

Significantly, the Torah requires the *nazir* to cut his hair upon completing his term of *nezirut* (6:18). His period of “anger” is useful as a temporary, short-term measure to focus his attention on combatting his sinful instincts, but is not encouraged as a permanent condition. Even anger directed toward ourselves should be minimized. Although we should constantly strive to improve, we must be careful to still respect ourselves, to admire our positive qualities and our accomplishments, and to avoid feeling angry at ourselves just as we must avoid feeling angry at others. We should want to be better in the future without disliking who we are in the present. The *nazir*’s “anger” is legitimate and admirable as a temporary measure, but is not a model that should be followed on a long-term basis.

Friday

Parashat Naso concludes by telling of the special gifts and sacrifices brought by the *nesi’im* – the leaders of the twelve tribes – to mark the inauguration of the *Mishkan*. The Torah refers to the *nesi’im* here as “*nesi’ei ha-matot*” (“leaders of the tribes” – 7:2), and the *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi, associates this expression with the other meaning of the word “*matot*” – rods. Rashi writes that these men were among the foremen who, as the Torah tells in Sefer Shemot (5:14), were appointed by the Egyptians to supervise the slaves and ensure they completed their labor. The Torah relates that after Pharaoh’s decree to force the slaves to fetch straw with which to produce bricks, making it exceedingly difficult for the slaves to meet their daily quota of bricks, the foremen were beaten by the Egyptian taskmasters. The foremen had compassion on the overworked slaves and refused to whip them and force them to meet their quotas, preferring to suffer beatings themselves rather than inflict pain on their fellow Israelites. These men were later named to leadership positions, and the *Sifrei* comments that the twelve *nesi’im* were among this group of selfless individuals. They are thus called “*nesi’ei ha-matot*,” alluding to the “rods” with which they were beaten in Egypt in order to alleviate their brethren’s suffering.

It has been noted that this background becomes especially pertinent, and meaningful, when we consider the gift presented by the *nesi’im* on the occasion of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration. In addition to the sacrifices offered by each *nasi*, they all collectively donated six wagons, each harnessed to two oxen, to be used by the *Leviyim* in transporting the *Mishkan* during travel. As the Torah tells (7:5-8), the wagons were given to the Levite families of Gershon and Merari, who used them for carrying the portions of the *Mishkan* assigned to them. The third family – Kehat – did not receive wagons, because they were assigned the sacred articles (the ark, the *menorah*, the *shulchan*, and the two altars), which needed to be transported by hand, with poles.

Significantly, these *nesi’im*, who displayed extraordinary self-sacrifice for the sake of the people, donated to the *Mishkan* wagons to ease the burden of the *Leviyim*. Although the *nesi’im* held themselves to an especially strict standard of *mesirut nefesh* (self-sacrifice), they did not demand that this standard be followed by others. Rather than expect the *Leviyim* to endure the hardship of carrying the materials of the *Mishkan* on their backs and shoulders, the *nesi’im* volunteered to help make the *Leviyim*’s job easier by donating wagons. They showed that although we must all strive for the highest standards of *mesirut nefesh*, and be prepared to work very hard and invest immense effort in performing *mitzvot*, when it comes to others we should be seeking ways to help ease their burden as much as possible, rather than demand of others the high standards to which we should be seek to adhere.

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