

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Naso
June 6, 2020 *** 14 Sivan, 5780

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Naso in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2166/jewish/Naso-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Completing the headcount of the Children of Israel taken in the Sinai Desert, a total of 8,580 Levite men between the ages of 30 and 50 are counted in a tally of those who will be doing the actual work of transporting the Tabernacle.

G-d communicates to Moses the law of the sotah, the wayward wife suspected of unfaithfulness to her husband. Also given is the law of the nazir, who forswears wine, lets his or her hair grow long, and is forbidden to become contaminated through contact with a dead body. Aaron and his descendants, the kohanim, are instructed on how to bless the people of Israel.

The leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel each bring their offerings for the inauguration of the altar. Although their gifts are identical, each is brought on a different day and is individually described by the Torah.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Judges 13:2-25

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/681090/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah describes the birth of Samson, a lifetime nazirite. A condign haftarah for this week's reading, which discusses all the laws of the nazirite. Manoah and his wife, members of the Tribe of Dan, were childless. One day an angel appeared to Manoah's wife, informing her that she will give birth to a child. This child, the angel instructed, was to be a lifetime Nazirite. In addition, the angel instructed her to abstain from all foods forbidden to a nazirite — such as wine or ritually impure foods — from the moment she would conceive. The angel further informed the woman that her son will save the Jewish people from the Philistine oppression they were enduring at that time.

The soon-to-be-mother told her husband the good news. He entreated G-d to send His messenger again — they were unaware at the time that the messenger was an angel. G-d sent the angel again, and he repeated his instructions. Manoah and his wife then invited the angel to partake of a special meal they would prepare, but he declined. Instead he encouraged Manoah to offer the goat he wished to slaughter for the meal as a sacrifice to G-d. The angel then ascended to the heavens in the flame that devoured the sacrifice.

The haftarah ends with the birth of Samson: "And the lad grew, and G-d blessed him."

The Blessing of Love (Naso 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/naso-5780/>

I confess to a thrill every time I read these words:

Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

“May the Lord bless you and protect you.

May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn His face toward you and grant you peace.”

Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:23-27)

These are among the oldest continuously-used words of blessing ever. We recite them daily at the beginning of the morning service. Some say them last thing at night. We use them to bless our children on Friday nights. They are often used to bless the bride and groom at weddings. They are widely used by non-Jews also. Their simplicity, their cumulative three-word, five-word, seven-word structure, their ascending movement from protection to grace to peace, all make them a miniature gem of prayer whose radiance has not diminished in the more than three thousand years since their formulation.

In previous years I have written about the meaning of the blessings. This time I ask three different questions: First, why Priests? Why not Prophets, Kings, Sages or saints?

Second, why the unique form of the birkat ha-mitzvah, the blessing made by the Priests over the commandment to bless the people? The blessing is, “who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless His people with love.”[1] No other blessing over a command specifies that it be done with love.

There is an argument in the Talmud as to whether commands must be performed with the proper intent, kavannah, or whether the deed itself is enough. But intent is different from motive. Intent merely means that I am performing the command because it is a command. I am acting consciously, knowingly, deliberately, in obedience to the Divine will. It has nothing to do with an emotion like love. Why does this command and no other require love?

Third, why have human beings bless the people at all? It is God who blesses humanity and His people Israel. He needs no human intermediary. Our passage says just this: “Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.” The blessings come not from the Priests but from God Himself. So why require the Priests to “put His name” on the people?

In answer to the first, Sefer ha-Hinnuch[2] says simply that the Priests were the sacred group within the people. They ministered in the House of God. They spent their lives in Divine service. Their life’s work was sacred. So was their habitat. They were the guardians of holiness. They were therefore the obvious choice for the sacred rite of bringing down God’s blessings upon the people.

Rabbi Aharon Walkin, in the preface to his Matsa Aharon, offered a more prosaic explanation. The Priests had no share in the land. Their sole income was from the mattenot kehunah, the gifts of the Priests, that was their due from the people as a whole. It followed that they had an interest in the people prospering, because then they, too, would prosper. They would bless the people with a full heart, seeking their good, because they would benefit thereby.

Rabbi Avraham Gafni offered a third explanation.[3] We read that on the consecration of the Tabernacle, “Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them” (Lev. 9:22). Rashi

says that the blessing he gave the people on that occasion was indeed the priestly blessing as specified in our parsha. However, Ramban suggests that perhaps Aaron's blessing was spontaneous, and because he showed such generosity of spirit, he was given by God the reward that it would be his descendants who would bless Israel in future.

What then about the reference in the blessing to love? There are two different interpretations: that the reference is to the Priests, or that the reference is to God.

The second reverses the word order of the blessing and reads it not as "who commanded us to bless His people with love," but rather, "who in love commanded us to bless His people." The blessing speaks of God's love, not that of the Priests. Because God loves His people, He commands the Priests to bless them.[4]

The first reading, grammatically more plausible, is that it is the Priests who must love. This is the basis of the statement in the Zohar that "a Priest who does not love the people, or a Priest who is not loved by the people, may not bless." [5] We can only bless what we love. Recall how the blind and aged Isaac said to Esau, "Prepare me the tasty food that I love and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die" (Gen. 27:4). Whether it was the food that Isaac loved, or what it represented about Esau's character – that he cared enough for his father to find him the food he liked – Isaac needed the presence of love to be able to make the blessing.

Why then does the blessing for this mitzvah and no other specify that it must be done with love? Because in every other case it is the agent who performs the ma'aseh mitzvah, the act that constitutes the command. Uniquely in the case of the priestly blessings, the Priest is merely a machshir mitzvah – an enabler, not a doer. The doer is God Himself: "Let them place My name on the children of Israel and I will bless them." The Kohanim are merely channels through which God's blessings flow.

This means that they must be selfless while uttering the blessings. We let God into the world and ourselves to the degree that we forget ourselves and focus on others.[6] That is what love is. We see this in the passage in which Jacob, having fallen in love with Rachel, agrees to Laban's terms: seven years of work. We read: "So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her" (Gen. 29:20). The commentators ask the obvious question: precisely because he was so much in love, the seven years should have felt like a century. The answer is equally obvious: he was thinking of her, not him. There was nothing selfish in his love. He was focused on her presence, not his impatient desire.

There is, though, perhaps an alternative explanation for all these things. As I explained in Covenant and Conversation Acharei Mot – Kedoshim, the ethic of character.

The key text of the holiness ethic is Leviticus 19: "Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy." It is this chapter that teaches the two great commands of interpersonal love, of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness, taught by the Priests, is the ethic of love. This surely is the basis of Hillel's statement, "Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them close to Torah." [7]

That ethic belongs to the specific vision of the Priest, set out in Genesis 1, which sees the world as God's work and the human person as God's image. Our very existence, and the existence of the universe, are the result of God's love.

By blessing the people, the Priests showed them what love of one's fellow is. Here is Rambam's definition of what it is to 'love your neighbour as yourself': "One should speak in praise of his neighbour, and be considerate of his money, even as he is considerate of his own money, or desires to preserve his own honour." [8] Blessing the people showed that you sought their good – and seeking their good is what loving them means.

Thus the Kohanim set an example to the people by this public display of love – or what we would call today “the common good.” They thus encouraged a society in which each sought the welfare of all – and such a society is blessed, because the bonds between its members are strong, and because people put the interests of the nation as a whole before their own private advantage. Such a society is blessed by God, whereas a selfish society is not, and cannot, be blessed by God. No selfish society has survived for long.

Hence our answers to the questions: why the Kohanim? Because their ethic emphasised love – of neighbour and stranger – and we need love before we can bless. Love is mentioned in the blessing over the commandment, because love is how blessings enter the world. And why have human beings bestow the blessing, instead of God doing so Himself? Because the Kohanim were to be role models of what it is for humans to care for the welfare of others. I believe that Birkat Kohanim contains a vital message for us today: A society whose members seek one another’s welfare is holy, and blessed. [1] Sotah 39a, Sefer ha-Chinnuch. [2] Section 378.

[3] R. Avraham Gafni, Be-Inyan Birkat Cohanim, Zakhor le_Avraham, 1996, 523-531. [4] Rabbi Yerucham Perla, commentary to R Saadia Gaon, Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, 16. [5] Zohar III, 147b; see Magen Avraham, 128:18. [6] Sotah 5a: “Any person who has arrogance within him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: He and I cannot dwell together in the world.” [7] Mishnah Avot 1:12.

[8] Rambam, Hilchot Deot 6:3.

[The Torah of Large - Scale Projects by Ashira Konigsburg](http://www.jtsa.edu/the-torah-of-large-scale-projects)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/the-torah-of-large-scale-projects>

Naso opens up with a census of the Levites, who will be responsible for transporting parts of the Mishkan. Num. 4:3 specifies that those who will be engaged in this work are to be between the ages of 30 and 50 and fit for service when the Mishkan is operating. At first glance, the details of which family is to carry which piece of equipment seem trivial at best. Why does the Torah spend time laying out what color cloth the items are to be packed in? These passages seem akin to the whaling chapters in *Moby Dick*—perhaps included because of the author’s fondness for the whaling industry, but widely considered acceptable to skip. Was the biblical author especially fascinated by the logistics of moving a portable sanctuary through a desert? By the time this text was authored, the period during which the Mishkan was disassembled and transported would have passed, so do these passages serve as mere academic detail?

The rabbinic commentators are similarly concerned with these specifics. Perhaps they take their cues from the biblical text, thinking that if the minutiae of the Mishkan’s transportation are important enough to include in the Torah, they are important enough to study and explicate. It seems to me, however, that their interest offers a clue that there’s more relevance to these details than we might suspect at first glance: a closer look at these passages reveals crucial lessons about how effective operational procedures, often seen as trivial, are in fact critically important. This message is especially relevant today, as we contend with a global pandemic. Let’s look at these passages in more detail.

The first of the family responsibilities in the parashah is that of the Gershonites. They are responsible for the fabric that covers the Mishkan, as well as the partitions and the altar and its relevant equipment. In verse 27 we learn that these responsibilities are “performed on orders from Aaron and his sons,” who oversee how all the items will be carried. Ramban notes that this oversight is very hands-on: Aaron or one of the other high priests assigns a specific Levite to a specific task, saying, “This particular

Gershonite shall be the overseer for such and such a matter . . . or shall carry a certain number of the curtains.” Though we have no Mishkan to move, the same principles apply to us in the twenty-first century. In any massive organizational effort, it is important to develop a leadership structure and assign clear roles to avoid duplication of effort and ensure that someone is directly responsible for carrying out each task.

The second family is the Merarites. In verses 31–32 we learn that they carry the planks, bars, posts, and sockets. They are also responsible for the pegs, pins, and cords—things that are tiny, but crucial. While it is apparent that the Mishkan requires its ritual items and fabrics, its very structure depends on pins and pegs. The fact that these items are specifically listed teaches the reader that attention to detail is key—especially, in a large undertaking where it is easy to get distracted by the big, obvious, or, quite frankly, more interesting pieces. In our COVID-19 era, one such detail is that handwashing for 20 seconds is significantly more effective than doing so for shorter periods. Before February, this detail wasn’t one we paid much attention to, but now we know that a few more seconds may be the difference between staying safe or becoming infected.

The other Levite family, described in the beginning of chapter 4 (in last week’s parashah), is the Kohatites. Their responsibilities included the items from the Sanctuary: the Menorah, the Ark of the Covenant, the table of the showbread, and all the assorted vessels and utensils used for the ritual service. These items are covered and packed by the Kohanim (the priests responsible for religious rites), who then supervise the Kohatites in carrying the load. 4:15 specifies that only after the items are covered should the Kohatites carry them—if they touch the holy items, they will die! While the Bible’s concern seems to be with violating a ritual taboo, we too must entrust our safety to more qualified experts—in our case, medical professionals—who ensure our safety. We, like the Kohatites, are unqualified to take matters into our own hands. When public health experts give guidance about the best way to stem a pandemic, everyone must listen to them. These are life-and-death risks that are best addressed by those with the relevant expertise.

Though we are not engaged in moving the Mishkan, we are in the midst of an even bigger effort. While this particular pandemic is new, some key lessons are found in Numbers 4:

- Create a leadership structure and respect its authority.
- Pay attention to the smallest details, as they can determine the success of the endeavor.
- Place trust in qualified authorities, especially when it is a matter of protecting life.

Naso starts with a census, an attempt to ascertain which Levites are available for critical work. This information, and the way it is used, is key to the success of moving the Mishkan. For our global effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 to succeed, we as a society must all work together to stop the spread of the virus.

In my experience volunteering as a disaster responder for the American Red Cross in New York City, the situations that ended up working out for the best were those where the affected individual took responsibility for their own recovery. Though we can’t control when disasters happen to us, we do have control over the way we respond. By taking charge of our actions, we can change the course of a disaster and diminish its impact. In

the current global crisis, each of us has the opportunity to reduce the effects of COVID-19. Though the roles we are given may feel as minor as carrying the pins and pegs of the Mishkan, Naso teaches us that the smallest of details can make a significant difference. May our collective efforts yield success. (Ashira Konigsburg is a JTS Alumnae (RS, KS '09) and Chief Operating Officer at the Rabbinical Assembly)

[When It Really Is About The Patriarchy: Parshat Naso By Rabbi David Markus](https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/)

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

Dedicated to the family of George Floyd, and peaceful change makers everywhere.

I open this week's Torah portion (Naso), and I cringe. I read of ancient ways to serve in the Mishkan – all tribal men of a certain age. I read of Sotah trials, humiliating women to placate jealous husbands. Even the Threefold Blessing, phrased free of gender, was harnessed to aim first at Kohanim – only men (B.T. Hullin 49a, Rashi Num. 6:27).

Thankfully we've become adept at redeeming Torah from patriarchy. Some see Torah as socially developmental, meeting our ancestors only just a bit ahead of their Bronze Age context so that Torah would be practical. We might note that Torah itself responded to the Sotah trial by restoring an innocent Sotah woman's power: a false-accuser husband never could divorce her (Deut. 22:19). We can applaud Yohanan ben Zakkai for abolishing the Sotah trial outright (M. Sotah 9:9). We can celebrate that Zohar redeemed a patriarchal Threefold Blessing by teaching that one can bless only if one truly loves: an unloving priest's bones are as dust (Zohar 3:147b).

These approaches might offer comfort in proportion to how fully they rectify unfair power imbalances. I'm grateful to live in a time and place in which we proudly and publicly can heed Judaism's call to do just that.

But self-congratulatory pride has a short shelf life. This year especially, Naso booms with the intersectionality of structural prejudice, tribalism and misogyny. Whatever our eagerness and creativity to wrestle inconvenient parts of our history, our need to do so still hurts. We must say so clearly and without worry about disloyalty or heresy, much as a patriot who loves one's country can work tirelessly for a "more perfect union."

History's unhealed scars open as gaping wounds. I read Naso and I see George Floyd and Eric Garner. I read Naso and I see Ferguson. I read Naso and I see thousands in my coastal New York synagogue's congressional district, with the nation's highest per capita infection and death rates from covid-19 – and, not by coincidence, also the nation's poorest district and predominantly a district of color.

Unhealed wounds of race and class shape the covid crisis. The soil of structural prejudice is fertile ground for antisemitism, what Dr. Deborah Lipstadt calls humanity's most irrational and enduring hate that flourishes in other hatreds based on race and class. Toxic leaders tend to reek of misogyny. All of this intersectionality – how the almost unbearable barrage of breaking news about race, class, health, power and gender is all connected – becomes ever more glaring.

Naso commands this big-picture vision. Naso commands that we not look away or rush too fast to redeem difficult texts before we see how they fit together. Naso insists that we call tribalism and misogyny what they are – existentially linked to each other, a Biblical example of intersectionality that today is painfully real, frightening and lethal.

Naso reminds that Judaism's truest measure is not how enthusiastically or creatively we can re-read these difficult texts. Rather, the truest measure of our Judaism is how totally we commit ourselves to rectifying the structural barriers to human dignity, justice and fairness they encode.

Let Naso galvanize us not because of the Jewish self-interest that antisemitism thrives in any society that tolerates hate or structural prejudice – undeniably true as it may be. Rather, let Naso galvanize us because, for a people carrying the legacy of slavery, pogroms and Holocaust in our bones, there can be no other way.

(Rabbi David Evan Markus (AJR Adjunct Faculty – Rabbinics) is senior rabbi of Temple Beth El of City Island (New York, NY) and Founding Builder of Bayit: Building Jewish, a spiritual innovation start-up for all ages and stages. Rabbi Markus also serves as Faculty in Spiritual Direction and past Board Co-Chair for ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal. By day, Rabbi Markus presides as Judicial Referee in New York Supreme Court, 9th Judicial District, as part of a parallel career in government service.)

[This D'var is for Bamidbar but is Still Relevant to Naso](https://ajrsem.org/2020/05/parashat-bemidbar-5780/)
[Twelve Tribes Meditation for Parashat Bamidbar by Rabbi Jill Hammer](https://ajrsem.org/2020/05/parashat-bemidbar-5780/)
<https://ajrsem.org/2020/05/parashat-bemidbar-5780/>

Parashat Bemidbar describes how the twelve tribes encamp around the Tabernacle and the priests: three tribes on each side, with the Levites at the center. This sacred geometry is reminiscent of the months of the year and also of the four directions and seasons—twelve is three times four, a combination of two powerful numbers. One way to take in the Torah of Parashat Bemidbar is to explore the encampment of the twelve tribes through meditation.

Sefer Yetzirah, the Book of Creation, is a Jewish mystical work written between the 6th and 9th century CE. Sefer Yetzirah describes how God uses the Hebrew letters to create the world. Twelve of the letters are associated with twelve human faculties, and also with the twelve months. Later Jewish sources associate each month and faculty with a tribe as well. In one version of the correspondences, offered by translator Aryeh Kaplan, the association between tribes and faculties looks like this:

Yehudah/Nisan	Sihah/Speech
Yissakhar/Iyar	Hirhur/Thought
Zevulun/Sivan	Hilukh/Journey
Reuven/Tammuz	Re'iyah/Seeing
Shimon/Av	Sh'miyah/Hearing
Gad/Elul	Ma'aseh/Action
Ephraim/Tishrei	Tashmish/Intimacy
Menashe/Heshvan	Reihah/Smell
Benyamin/Kislev	Sheinah/Sleep
Dan/Tevet	Rogez/Anger
Asher/Shevat	Le'itah/Taste
Naftali/Adar	S'hok/Laughter

These correspondences can sometimes be quite powerful. For Yehudah, think of how Yehudah speaks to Yosef to convince him to release Benjamin, and how we tell stories at the Passover seder in Nisan. For Reuven, think about how the word “sight” is part of Reuven’s name, and how Tammuz is the month of the summer solstice and the longest days. Or think about how laughter makes so much sense as the faculty associated with Adar. In a time when we largely don’t identify as members of these tribes, this system of correspondences can invite new curiosity about the nature of the twelve tribes.

This practice, a version of which is offered in my new book on Sefer Yetzirah, *Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzirah*, offers gratitude for the twelve faculties mentioned in Sefer Yetzirah, and associates them with the twelve tribes. If any of these faculties are absent or impaired for you or others in your group, you can skip them, or, you can choose to contemplate any ways in which those faculties have mattered to you. Or, you can substitute some senses that are not in this list— for example, touch instead of sight, or vibration instead of hearing.

Close your eyes and breathe out.

Visualize a sacred space.

There are twelve encampments around the space, one for each of the twelve tribes.

Begin to travel around the sacred space, and enter each of the encampments.

Go to the encampment of Yehudah.

Remember a moment

when the gift of speech has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Yissakhar.

Remember a moment

when the gift of thought has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Zevulun.

Remember a moment

when the gift of journey has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Reuven.

Remember a moment

when the gift of sight has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Shimon.

Remember a moment

when the gift of hearing has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Gad.

Remember a moment

when the gift of action has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Ephraim.

Remember a moment

when the gift of intimacy has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Menashe.

Remember a moment

when the gift of smell has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Benjamin.

Remember a moment

when the gift of sleep has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Dan.

Remember a moment

when the gift of anger has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Asher.

Remember a moment

when the gift of taste has mattered to you.

Go to the encampment of Naftali.

Remember a moment

when the gift of laughter has mattered to you.

Offer gratitude for all these moments.

Now, go to the sacred space in the middle.

Choose one faculty that you need or value in this moment.

Commit to use this gift in a special way today.

Breathe out and open your eyes.

If you do this exercise as a part of a community, invite people to share in pairs about what they experienced. Or, you can ask people (or yourself), with what tribe they most identify right now.

Shabbat shalom.

(Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD, is the Director of Spiritual Education at AJR. She is the author of several books, including *The Hebrew Priestess: Ancient and New Visions of Jewish Women's Spiritual Leadership*, *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women*, and *The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for All Seasons*—as well as the forthcoming *Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzirah*.)

Yahrtzeits

Erwin Mevorah remembers his father Chaim Mevorah on Sunday June 7th (Sivan 15).

Nikki Pusin and Russett Feldman remember their mother Mildred Monheit Pusin on Tuesday June 9th (Sivan 17).