

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Nasso
June 11, 2022 *** Sivan 12, 5782

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."

Food For Thought

Sage and Saints by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/naso/sages-and-saints/>

Two Versions of the Moral Life

Parshat Naso contains the laws relating to the Nazirite – an individual who undertook to observe special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink wine or other intoxicants (including anything made from grapes), not to have his hair cut, and not to defile himself by contact with the dead (Num. 6:1–21). Such a state was usually undertaken for a limited period; the standard length was thirty days. There were exceptions, most famously Samson and Samuel who, because of the miraculous nature of their birth, were consecrated before their birth as Nazirites for life.[1]

What the Torah does not make clear, though, is firstly why a person might wish to undertake this form of abstinence, and secondly whether it considers this choice to be commendable, or merely permissible. On the one hand the Torah calls the Nazirite “holy to the Lord” (Num. 6:8). On the other, it requires him, at the end of the period of his vow, to bring a sin offering (Num. 6:13–14).

This led to an ongoing disagreement between the Rabbis in Mishnaic, Talmudic, and medieval times.

According to Rabbi Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the Nazirite is praiseworthy. He has voluntarily undertaken a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos said, “I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and your young men for Nazirites,” (Amos 2:11) suggesting that the Nazirite, like the prophet, is a person especially close to God. The reason he had to bring a sin offering was that he was now returning to ordinary life. His sin lay in ceasing to be a Nazirite.

Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. For them the sin lay in becoming a Nazirite in the first place and thereby denying himself some of the pleasures of the world God created and declared good. Rabbi Eliezer added:

From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life. Taanit 11a; Nedarim 10a.

Clearly the argument is not merely textual. It is substantive. It is about asceticism, the life of self-denial. Almost every religion knows the phenomenon of people who, in pursuit of spiritual purity, withdraw from the pleasures and temptations of the world. They live in caves, retreats, hermitages, monasteries. The Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls may have been such a movement. In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted similar kinds of self-denial – among them the Chasidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. In retrospect it is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Chasidei

Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts may have been familiar with Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews towards the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were ascetic movements in the first centuries of the Common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were, in fact, dualists, holding that the true God was not the creator of the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. Therefore God – the true God – is not to be found in the physical world and its enjoyments but rather in disengagement from them.

The two best-known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the Nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish practices. Judaism strongly believes that God is to be found in the midst of the physical world that He created that is, in the first chapter of Genesis, seven times pronounced “good.” It believes not in renouncing pleasure but in sanctifying it.

What is much more puzzling is the position of Maimonides, who holds both views, positive and negative, in the same book, his law code the Mishneh Torah.

In Hilchot Deot, he adopts the negative position of Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar:

A person may say: “Desire, honour, and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world; therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the other extreme.” As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing.... This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way.

Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 3:1.

Yet in Hilchot Nezirut he rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of Rabbi Elazar: “Whoever vows to God [to become a Nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy.... Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet.”[2] How does any writer come to adopt contradictory positions in a single book, let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer lies in a remarkable insight of Maimonides into the nature of the moral life as understood by Judaism. What Maimonides saw is that there is not a single model of the virtuous life. He identifies two, calling them respectively the way of the saint (chassid) and the way of the sage (chacham).

The sage follows the “golden mean,” the “middle way.” The moral life is a matter of moderation and balance, charting a course between too much and too little. Courage, for example, lies midway between cowardice and recklessness. Generosity lies between profligacy and miserliness. This is very similar to the vision of the moral life as set out by Aristotle in the Nicomachean Ethics.

The saint, by contrast, does not follow the middle way. He or she tends to extremes, fasting rather than simply eating in moderation, embracing poverty rather than acquiring modest wealth, and so on. At various points in his writings, Rambam explains why people might embrace extremes. One reason is repentance and character transformation.[3] So a person might cure himself of pride by practising, for a while, extreme self-abasement. Another is the asymmetry of the human personality. The extremes do not exert an equal pull. Cowardice is more common than recklessness, and miserliness than over-generosity, which is why the chassid leans in the opposite direction. A third reason is the lure of the surrounding culture. It may be so opposed to religious values that pious people choose to separate themselves from the wider society, “clothing themselves in woollen and hairy garments, dwelling in the mountains and wandering about in the wilderness,”[4] differentiating themselves by their extreme behaviour.

This is a very nuanced presentation. There are times, for Rambam, when self-denial is therapeutic, others when it is factored into Torah law itself, and yet others when it is a response to an excessively hedonistic age. In general, though, Rambam rules that we are commanded to follow the middle way, whereas the way of the saint is *lifnim mishurat hadin*, beyond the strict requirement of the law.[5] Moshe Halbertal, in his recent, impressive study of Rambam,[6] sees him as finessing the fundamental tension between the civic ideal of the Greek political tradition and the spiritual ideal of the religious radical for whom, as the Kotzker Rebbe famously said, “The middle of the road is for horses.” To the chassid, Rambam’s sage can look like a “self-satisfied bourgeois.”

Essentially, these are two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create a decent, just, and compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. That is what makes Rambam so acute a thinker. He realises that you cannot have both. They are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But what about the members of the saint’s own family? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint’s own country? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what about the rule of law, and justice? Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. Yet you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Ultimately, saints are not really interested in society. Their concern is the salvation of the soul.

This deep insight is what led Rambam to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the Nazirite. The Nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a chassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, and exemplary.

But it is not the way of the sage – and you need sages if you seek to perfect society. The sage is not an extremist, because he or she realises that there are

other people at stake. There are the members of one's own family and the others within one's own community. There is a country to defend and an economy to sustain. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For we are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; to exist in society, not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others.

Hence, while from a personal perspective the Nazirite is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a "sinner" who has to bring an atonement offering.

Maimonides lived the life he preached. We know from his writings that he longed for seclusion. There were years when he worked day and night to write his Commentary to the Mishnah, and later the Mishneh Torah. Yet he also recognised his responsibilities to his family and to the community. In his famous letter to his would-be translator Ibn Tibbon,[7] he gives an account of his typical day and week – in which he had to carry a double burden as a world-renowned physician and an internationally sought halachist and sage. He worked to exhaustion.[8] Maimonides was a sage who longed to be a saint, but knew he could not be, if he was to honour his responsibilities to his people. That is a profound and moving judgement, and one that still has the power to inspire today.

[1] See Judges 13:1–7; and I Sam. 1:11. The Talmud distinguishes these kinds of cases from the standard vow for a fixed period. The most famous Nazirite of modern times was Rabbi David Cohen (1887–1972), a disciple of Rav Kook and father of the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi She'ar-Yashuv Cohen (1927–2016). [2] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Nezirut 10:14, [3] See his Eight Chapters (the introduction to his commentary on Mishna Avot), ch. 4, and Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot, chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6. [4] Eight Chapters, ch. 4. [5] Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 1:5. [6] Moshe Halbertal, Maimonides: Life and Thought (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 154–163. [7] There were Sages who believed that in an ideal world, tasks such as earning a living or having children could be "done by others" (see Brachot 35a for the view of R. Shimon b. Yochai; Yevamot 63b for that of Ben Azzai). These are elitist attitudes that have surfaced in Judaism from time to time but which are criticised by the Talmud. [8] See Rabbi Yitzhak Sheilat, Letters of Maimonides [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Miskal, 1987–88), 2:530–554.

[The Art of Burden-Bearing by Rabbi Shani Rosenbaum](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-naso-shani-rosenbaum-moraltorah/)

<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-naso-shani-rosenbaum-moraltorah/>

Last week I paid a visit to my Bubbie, and she opened the door with heartbreak in her eyes. "I've been watching the news," she said. We spoke for a few moments of the horrifying mass shooting in Texas, about each broken piece of our legal and political systems exposed, once again, in this tragedy's wake. "Let's not talk about it anymore," my Bubbie finally said. With a twinge of guilt and a sigh of relief, I allowed my attention to turn with hers to the sweet mundane details of our lives, to

Rummikub, to dinner.

Our parshah, Naso, begins with the distribution of burdens. The word “*naso*” is an instruction, in its context, to take a census of the Levite families tasked with various duties related to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). But the main meaning of its root, *nasa*, is to lift or carry. This root appears time and again in our parshah, as one particular task is associated with each clan: *la'avod u'lemasa*, to serve and to carry — to literally shoulder the burden of the *Mishkan* as the Israelites move through the wilderness.

A great deal of care is devoted to the particulars of *avodat masa* — the service of burden-bearing. Verses upon verses list the proper procedure for deconstructing each section of the *Mishkan*; carefully covering each piece of the inner structure; and dividing and carrying the load. What might we make of all this covering and carrying?

I have been thinking about that evening with my Bubbie, about the guilty relief I felt at the offering, “Let’s not talk about it.” The burden of all that is broken in our world often feels both impossible to bear, and, if we are honest, impossible to put down. We are gripped by either the pain of confronting a horrifying headline, or the guilt of setting it aside to watch trashy TV.

Some parts of the *Mishkan*, our parshah teaches, were so heavy that they required the help of wagons. But some parts were so precious that they could only be carried on human shoulders. What made it possible for the Levites to shoulder this sacred burden, without being overwhelmed by the task?

Break down.

Cover.

Carry.

Build.

Break down.

Cover.

Carry...

I wonder if there might not be some wisdom in “let’s not talk about it”; if the *covering* might, sometimes, be part of the *carrying*.

The Levites were not asked to confront the significance of what they bore on their shoulders in every moment of their journey; instead, the most sacred objects were presented to them sealed off in protective wrapping. Covering up the deconstructed *Mishkan* was not an act of avoidance, but an acknowledgement that there is a time for *avodah* — for service, and its attendant vulnerability; and a time for *masa* — for carrying — which necessitates a bit more removal. At the same time, the Levites knew that the *carrying* itself was temporary — and that *building* always followed.

The pull to put down the broken pieces of our world is most powerful when we find ourselves wandering without rhythm; without a sense of when and where we will

set our stakes in the ground. If I say “let’s not talk about it” with no plan for engagement — no date in my calendar for a protest, no op-ed drafted on my desk — then I may indeed be neglecting my *avodat masa*. But if I choose to play cards with Bubbie tonight, knowing that tomorrow I will spend a few minutes calling my senator, then I am simply tucking away the burden for now, protecting the fragments — and my own capacity to carry them — until the next opportunity for building.

What if we are not expected, in every moment, to be struggling to rebuild our disassembled world? What if a little bit of separation from the onslaught of suffering might re-sensitize us to its urgency, to life’s sanctity? Perhaps a framework of *avodat masa* can help us locate that fuzzy line between taking meaningful rest and simply avoiding responsibility.

We might begin with community and accountability. Who are the high priests you find yourself looking toward for instruction and supervision? Who are the other burden-bearers who might urge you forward when you are weary?

And then we could keep in view, if not an ultimate destination, at least the next encampment. What if we asked ourselves “If not now — when?” as a genuine, rather than rhetorical question? If we get in the habit of putting pursuit of justice on our schedules as we would any other important *avodah*, the daily weight of the world might begin to feel a bit lighter. *(Rabbi Shani Rosenbaum teaches Talmud and Halakha at the Rabbinical School of Hebrew College. She has served on the programming teams of OLAM and Encounter, and ran T’ruah’s 2020 “Jewish law and ethics hackathon” for navigating COVID-19.)*

Naso by Rabbi Shuli Passow

<https://www.bj.org/toward-shabbat-naso-3/>

Some of the most vivid Jewish memories from my childhood took place in the social hall of Lower Merion Synagogue.

Every week, after we sang the final notes of “Adon Olam” to conclude the service, a communal ritual was set in motion: From his seat on the bimah, Rabbi Levene would raise a Kiddush cup and recite the blessing on wine. Next, Mrs. Borck and Mr. Feldman would open the partition between the sanctuary and the social hall. And then: Whoosh! A rush of people would sprint from their seats, crowding at the tables for a piece of herring, a cookie, or cubes of savory noodle kugel, all pre-poked with toothpicks and arranged on plastic plates by the “Kiddush ladies”—volunteers who arrived early Saturday morning for preliminary preparations and then slipped out of the service to organize the last few details just before the partition opened.

Kiddush was a sweet and lovely chaos: Little ones toddling around, their parents secure in the knowledge that another adult would prevent them from leaving the room; older children playing ball in the parking lot while their parents socialized.

Kiddush was when my brothers and I would sneak cups of soda, which we were never allowed to have at home. It was when last-minute plans were made for Shabbat lunch or an afternoon playdate, and when my mother would take waaaaaay too long talking to all her friends and I'd have to drag her away so we could go home and eat.

The first Shabbat community I joined as a young adult had its own Kiddush culture and rituals. When the service ended, we would all stack our chairs, help set up tables, and bring out the food that had been lovingly plated by our own "Kiddush guy," Doug Loring. Volunteers would fan out to six designated "zones" of the room, each tasked with identifying and welcoming new people. At the scotch table, the rule was that you could not take a drink until you had introduced yourself to someone you didn't know.

When I moved to Brooklyn years later, the minyan I attended had a similar grassroots feel, with volunteers shopping and setting up for Kiddush each Shabbat. Because this was Park Slope, there was also a compost committee, dedicated to collecting all the food waste from the Kiddush and bringing it to a local community garden to be composted. (Shocker: I soon became the committee's chair.)

It's easy to dismiss Kiddush as a mere appendage to services, to joke about the dry cookies or the scramble at the buffet line. Perhaps you're even wondering why it's a topic worthy of attention in a Toward Shabbat column! I've chosen to muse about it here because my experience has taught me that Kiddush can be one of the most important expressions of a synagogue community's values and spiritual commitments outside of prayer. The food that is served, and the way it is served; the interactions between children and adults, and between old-timers and new faces; the degree to which volunteers are involved in making it happen—all of these facets, and more, communicate volumes about an institution's culture.

Codifying the prophet Isaiah's proclamation to "Call the Sabbath a delight, and the Lord's sacred day an honor" (Isaiah 58:13), Maimonides provides instruction to individuals about how to make Shabbat a day of honor (kavod) and delight (oneg) through one's clothing, food, and the atmosphere in the home (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Shabbat 30:1). Kiddush is one way we can fulfill this holy vision in the context of the synagogue. Recently we've brought back a temporary version of our community Kiddush after pausing it because of the pandemic. During this interim stage, we are taking the opportunity to intentionally reflect on how Kiddush can be transformed to bring greater kavod and oneg to this aspect of Shabbat, and to better express the values of our community. (*Rabbi Passow is the Director of Community Engagement at Bnei Jeshurun in NYC*)

[Parashat Nasso: Getting the Message by Rabbi Elliot Goldberg](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/parashat-nasso-getting-the-message/)

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/parashat-nasso-getting-the-message/>

Two linguistic features of this Torah portion remind us of the need to speak

carefully even when our message is true.

After providing details about how the Israelites organized their encampment during their travels in the desert, the Torah turns its attention in Parashat Nasso to the gifts that were brought by tribal chieftains for use in the Tabernacle:

On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils. When he had anointed and consecrated them, the chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the chieftains of the tribes ... drew near and brought their offering before the Lord (Numbers 7:1-3)

The construction of the Tabernacle and its dedication have been a central theme of the biblical narrative beginning in the second half of the book of Exodus, continuing into the book of Leviticus, and concluding in the book of Numbers. The task engaged many people.

The Israelites were commanded by God to donate the materials that would be used to build and equip the Tabernacle. The Torah reports that their response was overwhelming, so much so that the people were told to stop giving as the sheer quantity of the materials that had been donated had become a burden to the project managers.

So given the widespread involvement in the Tabernacle project, why would the Torah choose to open its narrative with the words, “*On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle*”? In doing so, it appears that credit is being given to Moses for a project that was a group effort.

The medieval commentator Rashi suggests that the Torah does this “because Moses devoted himself wholeheartedly to it, ensuring that the shape of each article was exactly as God had shown him on the mountain and showing the workmen how it should be made — and he did not err on a single shape.”

In other words, in giving credit to Moses, the Torah is not ignoring the contributions of others, but rather recognizing Moses’ unique leadership, passion and dedication for the project and his efforts to ensure that it was completed exactly as God had envisioned.

Just a few verses later, while describing the gifts brought to the Tabernacle by the heads of each of the tribes, the Torah fails to identify Nachshon Ben Aminadav as the chief of his tribe as he brings the first gift. This is noteworthy, as the Torah takes the time to describe each chieftain’s gift individually, even though they are all identical, emphasizing their equal status. Why would the Torah present Nachshon differently from his peers?

One could say that in dropping his title, the Torah is not slighting Nachshon; rather, it is honoring him for bringing humility to his position. Perhaps while serving as chieftain of his tribe, Nachshon never held himself above those he represented, and unlike his peers, he did not let the status of his position go to his head. Thus,

what appears to be a slight is actually a compliment.

The Midrash has a different theory. It suggests that the reason Nachshon is not called by his title is so that “if he should ever feel tempted to lord it over the other chieftains by saying, ‘I am your king, since I was first to present the offering,’ they could retort by saying, ‘You are no more than a commoner, for every one of the others is called a chieftain, while you are not described as one.’”

Sometimes, people in positions of authority need to be reminded not to overstep. Yet couldn't the message that bringing the first gift did not mean that Nachshon was first among equals have been delivered without slighting him? Likewise, couldn't the Torah have found a way to recognize Moses for his leadership alongside others whose contributions are worthy of recognition?

Thinking about Parashat Nasso, it's hard not to think about the need to speak sensitively, to find ways to praise someone without slighting others, and to honor the contributions of every individual without diminishing those of their peers. Doing so strengthens our ties to one another and helps ensure that God's presence will reside in the sacred spaces that lie in the heart of our encampments. *(Rabbi Elliot Goldberg is a teacher, curriculum consultant, teacher trainer, and professional coach with more than two decades of experience in Jewish day schools and a lifetime of summers at Ramah Camps. He has a passion for studying Jewish texts with teens and adults and is learning Daf Yomi for the first time this cycle.)*

Sotah: Understanding Change by Rabbi Lisa Grushcow

[https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/sotah-understanding-change/
Confronting a troubling biblical narrative.](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/sotah-understanding-change/Confronting_a_troubling_biblical_narrative.)

The sotah ritual (Numbers 5:11-31), in which a man suspects his wife of adultery and subjects her to an ordeal, has been notoriously difficult for contemporary readers, especially from a feminist perspective. The unequal application of the ritual to women and not men, the lack of due process, the physical and emotional humiliation — all of these combine to make this passage a challenging place in which to find meaning. As such, this passage keeps company with a number of other biblical texts that are problematic, even painful, to read.

Rabbi Rebecca Alpert offers a valuable model for confronting such troubling teachings. In her book *Like Bread on a Seder Plate: Jewish Lesbians and the Transformation of Tradition* (1997), Alpert presents a number of approaches for dealing with traditional texts on homosexuality. She suggests that we can understand these texts by interpreting them in the context of their own time and place. We also can try to wrest new meaning from them, or we can simply acknowledge the pain that they have caused — and continue to cause. These approaches are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and they can apply also to this Torah portion.

Taking the Ritual in Context

Certainly in the case of the sotah, we can analyze it in light of its historical context. Comparing this passage with other ancient Near Eastern texts reveals it to be in keeping with other laws contemporary to Torah times.

In terms of the pain the passage has caused, we can easily imagine its effect on women thousands of years ago, but we ourselves are spared direct impact.

Modern readers have long taken solace in the fact that this practice is no longer in force — and thus is far from the purview of synagogue ritual committees. In fact, it is unclear whether this ritual ever took place. Even in the Torah, the law is given without a connection to any particular incident. The Mishnah states that an early rabbinic leader discontinued the ritual of the sotah (Sotah 9:9). The entire body of rabbinic literature cites only one example of its implementation.

Regarding the medieval period, a little-known fragment from the Cairo Geniza still gives instructions as to how to perform the ritual in one's neighborhood synagogue; but there too, no record has been found of anyone actually doing so. (For details, see Lisa Grushcow, *Writing the Wayward Wife: Rabbinic Interpretations of Sotah*, 2006, pp. 297-300.)

When we try to understand the sotah ritual in context, we can be relieved that it has not been implemented for at least 2,000 years. But how can we wrest meaning from this difficult text? Interestingly, the very discontinuation of the ritual — and the rabbinic explanation of its abandonment — may give us a way to find meaning. The official suspension of the sotah ritual provides an example of how religious and legal change happens, and how such change is explained. For those of us who are committed to the Torah and also see Judaism as a path that embraces change, this is a crucial issue.

How the Ritual Disappeared

Some modern scholars assume that the ritual of the sotah disappeared because of the destruction of the Temple. Others argue that the ritual was abolished as a bold rabbinic move, to remove a practice that was seen to be unfair. But when one looks closely at the rabbinic texts, neither of these reasons is found.

Rather, the explanation given is that things were getting worse — either more people were openly committing adultery, or more husbands were sinning in such a way that the sotah ritual did not then work on their wives. The Rabbis account for these and other examples of decline by claiming that the deaths of certain sages led to the disappearance of certain qualities from the world (see for example, Mishnah Sotah 9:9).

Thus, in these rabbinic texts, change results from a world that is getting worse. It is also worth noting that we find a similar outlook in the Greco-Roman world that surrounded the ancient rabbis. From that perspective, religious and legal changes were a response to moral, sexual, intellectual, or political collapse.

Making Change Positive

Coming back to the sotah ritual, then, it seems that our ancestors did not abolish the ritual because they found it morally objectionable. Instead, they used the best conceptual tools of their time to make sense of why change had happened, and those tools explained change as the product of decline.

Our modern paradigm, in contrast, is fundamentally based on the assumptions of science, the Enlightenment, and Emancipation: We believe that it is possible for humanity to make changes based on progress, not decline. The optimism of the Enlightenment has been tempered by the Holocaust and other tragedies of modern times, but the fundamental shift remains. For us, change can be positive, even holy. We believe that God continues to speak to us. Living in accordance with our new understandings of gender and sexual identity has enriched our clergy and communities.

Living in a world more openly diverse has taught us the importance of outreach and inreach for our communities, in all their diversity. Scientific insights spur us to find new ethical and spiritual answers to questions of life and death. The existence of the modern state of Israel challenges us to live richer Jewish lives, wherever we are in the world. These changes and others are celebrated, not lamented as evidence of decline.

Ultimately, then, the sotah ritual is most powerful as a teacher of change: how we understood change in the past, and how we might understand it now. Just as the Rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud used the best conceptual tools of their time to understand change, so must we — with the tools of our own time. Such an approach is not abandoning our tradition; it is being true to it.

The end of the Babylonian Talmud's tractate on sotah gives us a glimmer of possibility: some of our ancestors might also have had a different perspective on change and decline. Mishnah Sotah 9:9 ends with the statement that with the death of Rabbi Judah haNasi (Judah the Prince), humility and the fear of sin disappeared. In the Talmud's commentary, this statement is challenged. "Do not teach that humility is gone," says Rav Joseph, "for I am still here!" "Do not teach that the fear of sin is gone," says Rav Nachman, "for I am still here!" (BT Sotah 49b). Rav Nachman's self-proclaimed fear of sin — not to mention Rav Joseph's self-proclaimed humility — suggests that our ancestors, like ourselves, thought that they still had something to add. *(Rabbi Lisa Grushcow is the senior rabbi of Temple Emanu-El-Beth-Sholom in Montreal. She was ordained by Hebrew Union College and earned a doctorate from Oxford University.)*

Yahrtzeits

Erwin Mevorah remembers his father Chaim Mevorah on Tues. June 14(Sivan 15).
Nikki Pusin and Russett Feldman remember their mother Mildred Monheit Pusin on Thur. June 16 (Sivan 17).

Coming up at Kol Rina

Friday evening study and Kabbalat Shabbat via Zoom, June 10

Our monthly Friday evening Zoom program will take place tomorrow, Friday, June 10, beginning at 5:15 with Torah study led by Lenny Levin, and followed by Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv. We hope to see you there! **Please note that there will be no in-person Shabbat morning service this week.**

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/533517572?pwd=dVFHR2NGZFBCYWp1Yzd6ald0bzFRdz09>

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### **Monday evening minyan on Zoom**

Our regular weekday evening minyan will take place via Zoom on Monday, June 13, beginning at 8:00. Your presence allows mourners and those observing yahrzeits to say Kaddish. Please support your Kol Rina friends by attending.

Use the following Zoom link to attend:

<https://zoom.us/j/97663987468?pwd=NjFhaVZUZkpSZ3pxQWJjOU5UWFR4QT09>

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****Attention Kol Rina Members** Save the date for our Annual Meeting!**

Our Annual Meeting will take place on Wednesday, June 22, beginning at 7:30 pm, via Zoom. More details will follow. We will need a quorum of VOTING MEMBERS (full members) in order to vote on officers and board members, adopt a budget and conduct other business. Please save the date and plan on attending!

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### **Brunch and Learn: Prof. David Fishman on "Russia's War in Ukraine through the Lens of Jewish History," June 26, 10:00 am via Zoom**

On the morning of June 26 (the same day as our 10th anniversary celebration), the Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina, in cooperation with Congregation B'nai Shalom of West Orange, will present Professor David Fishman, who will speak on the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of the history of the Jews of Ukraine.

David E. Fishman is a professor of Jewish History at The Jewish Theological Seminary.

Dr. Fishman also serves as director of Project Judaica, JTS's program in Ukraine, which is based at Kyiv-Mohyla Academy University in Ukraine. Dr. Fishman is the author of numerous books and articles on the history and culture of East European Jewry. His most recent book, The Book Smugglers: Partisans, Poets, and the Race to Save Jewish Treasures from the Nazis, has been hailed as "Monuments Men for book lovers" and "first rate scholarship that pulses with the beat of a most human heart."

For 15 years, Dr. Fishman was editor in chief of YIVO-Bleter, the Yiddish-language scholarly journal of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. He is a member of the Academic Committee of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

SAVE THE DATE for this fascinating and timely program, which is free and open to the entire community. Further details to follow.

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Yiddish through Songs with Ellen Muraskin

The Susan Marx Fund for Adult Education at Kol Rina is sponsoring an eight-week summer Yiddish course, taught by Ellen Muraskin and designed to teach vocabulary and grammar for all learners, new and ongoing. Every week there will be a new song-- and no homework! Join the group-- join the learning-- join the fun!

There is a \$25 registration fee for the course. Checks should be made payable to Kol Rina and mailed to Treasure Cohen, 14 Euclid Avenue, Maplewood, NJ 07040.