

Parashat Naso

From Eliza McCarroll, Saturday 26 May 2018

Upon reading this week's Parasha, Naso, I must admit I felt as if I'd hit the jackpot, for here we find an entire portion which dedicates itself to the building of community, which seemed fitting for someone who has just spent significant time away from home for my first year of rabbinical studies at HUC, during which I would argue that community was a core focus. As a bit of background, the College requires that this particular year be at their Jerusalem campus, and as such, it is known as the "Year-in-Israel" component of the program - more on that a little later!

In Parashat Naso, God tells Moses to list the services each family will undertake for the sake of community and in honour of God. For example, we learn that the role of the sons of Gershon (notably, only sons) was to carry all of the tapestries and hangings of the Mishkan, or Sanctuary, and the Ohel Moed, or Tent of Meeting, throughout the desert, whilst the sons of Merari were to be responsible for the bars, pillars, and sockets which supported the Mishkan.

This is also the Parasha in which God commands Moses to send away both the lepers and the impure from the main Israelite camp, and where the laws regarding *Nazirim* - those who have temporarily elevated themselves to the level of Priest - are laid out, including refraining from drinking alcohol, cutting one's hair, or being in the presence of the dead, since this would lead to a state of impurity.

At this point, the question begs: what does any of this have to do with a year away in Israel? Well, for me, this boiled down to a consideration of some aspects of what it means to be a part of a community, which I hope may resonate with you, my home community of NSTE, and especially with our Teen Torah Tag Team participants, who are so beautifully assisting with our service this morning.

Firstly, very early on in the Year-in-Israel, we learnt that ***building community takes serious, serious work***. In some cases, this work is physical, seen in the carrying of the different elements of the Mishkan as discussed. However, in more modern-day terms, and, in being reflective of my experience, more often than not, it is the more metaphorical, emotional supporting and carrying of the people around us which takes up the majority of our energy. I was so fortunate this past year to be part of building a community of people who were willing to put in that effort, from holding community meetings to hosting Shabbat and festival meals for all forty-five of us, to a kindness campaign aimed at instilling positive reinforcement in our classmates, to organising to

go see the basketball, to even taking on certain prayer and education responsibilities on a class study trip to Lithuania over Pesach - and the list goes on and on. No-one said it was easy, but we discovered that we could go from not knowing each other at all to creating our own *Mishkan* in that desert country of Israel. This was through both building and being built by the strong foundation of a coherent, united, inclusive and warm community, accomplished by each person carrying just a small amount of the heavy load.

Which brings me to the second lesson reflected in the Parasha regarding community, which was the realisation that ***everyone has an important role to play*** - a different piece of the Mishkan to carry, a different skill to contribute. We learn from Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of North America's Union for Reform Judaism, that the Parasha opens with the words "*Naso et Rosh*", which he states is God's commandment to conduct a census of the people. For example, the sons (because again, by people we of course mean only sons, in this case ...) of Gershon previously mentioned numbered 2,630. What this can teach us is that through utilising all of our special skills - and I was lucky to be part of a cohort talented in many areas, from Jewish texts to music to education to activism to economics to the most important, cooking - we were, and can continue to be stronger together, embodying the lesson of "*Naso et Rosh*" - in other words, we must all make ourselves count, but everyone deserves to be counted.

In short, by putting in the difficult work (or hard yards, as we Aussies might say) and by contributing and recognising each of our unique skills and strengths, we can honour each other, and in that way, honour God, by being an active part of something larger than ourselves, for, at the end of the day, as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks states, "community is the human expression of Divine love".

With this idea in mind, we must remember that the effort and learning commanded of the People of Israel in building their community was for the purpose of honouring God. As such, it seems true to Biblical form that we find in our Parasha the first appearance of the familiar "Birkat HaKohanim", or Priestly Benediction, which we now typically recite over our children on Shabbat -

"*Y'varech'cha Adonai v'yishmerecha*" - may God Bless you and Keep you.

"*Ya'er Adonai Panav elecha v'yichoonecha*" - may God shine God's face toward you and grant you grace.

"*Yisa Adonai Panav Elecha v'yasem l'cha shalom*" - May God turn Gods face towards you, and grant you peace.

These are the words that God instructs, through Moses, Aaron and his sons (as the priestly class) to bless the people with, and which functions almost as their official prayer - "*Koh Tevarachu et B'nei Yisrael, Amor LaHem*" ("This is how you shall bless the Children of Israel, go say to them"). In terms of honouring God, this is an invocation of the Divine and acknowledgment of God's role in drawing us together, and unifying and protecting our community, including, as mentioned, our children. How appropriate, then, that this latest Tag Team Torah service, led by some of our community's newest young adults, is held on the reading of this Parasha.

However, to conclude, one of my favourite rabbis (apart from Rabbi Nicole, of course!), Rabbi Delphine Horvilleur, of the Reform Movement in France, who I had the absolute privilege to meet this past Sukkot, teaches that the word "*bracha*" (blessing), and the word "*berech*" (knee), share the same root Hebrew letters - *bet, resh, kaf*. Put differently, Rabbi Delphine continues, such a blessing charges us with a responsibility, which we can either accept and embrace, or which we can let can bring us to our *birkayim* - our knees.

My wish for you this Shabbat then, is that you, both Teen Torah Tag Team participants, and our congregation at large, will choose to work towards this sacred responsibility, and indeed, this loaded blessing, of community, being included by and including all in our number, and becoming elevated in that Divine love as a result - not temporarily, like our *Nazirim* of times gone by, but each and every day. Shabbat shalom.