Weekly Parsha NASSO
Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The Torah reading this week begins with a commandment to Moshe to count the Levites, especially the family of Gershon. The Hebrew words that are used to make this count, literally translated, mean "raise the head" of the family of Gershon, who are an important section of the tribe of the Levites.

There are many different interpretations as to why the Torah chose to use this formulation of words to indicate a count of that family. The Torah certainly could have used a simpler and more direct verb to indicate to Moshe that he was to take a census of that family of the Levites.

I remember that when I attended law school long ago, we students had to prepare the cases that would be discussed in the lecture of the professor for that day. The professor had a very prickly personality and oftentimes was even slightly inebriated when teaching the class. His methodology was to call upon a student to read and discuss a case at first before expounding upon what principle of law that case illustrated. The professor was very short tempered and usually skewered the hapless student attempting to read and explain the case. Because of this, no one in our class ever wanted to volunteer to read the case and lead the discussion about it. So, at the beginning of every class all of us had our heads lowered and refused to make any eye contact nor any other apparent physical connection with the professor. He was, hands down, a terrible person and we put our heads down to avoid having to deal with him.

Perhaps this is the reason why the Torah use this phrase of 'raising the head' when discussing the role of the Levites in Jewish public life and their tasks in the service of the Temple and the Tabernacle. It is a privilege to be a Levite, to be in the service of the God of Israel and the people of Israel. It is a matter of pride and accomplishment and not to be viewed as a burden or something to be minimized. One has to volunteer enthusiastically for the work in the service of God in Israel.

If one is proud and enthusiastic about one's role within the Jewish community and sees one's self in the perspective of generations and tradition, as doing holy work and contributing to eternal projects, can one really feel the pride and joy of being a Levite… and in fact, of being a Jew.

The Torah abhors slackers. Those who attempt to escape or avoid the necessary commitment and effort to be Jewish and to serve the cause of Jewish survival and success eventually are not destined to remain part of the eternal people. Jewish history testifies to this basic fact of Jewish life. Only by raising one's head and, in effect, saying count me in, can one expect the blessings of eternity.
Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Berel Wein

Sages and Saints (Naso 5779)
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Parshat Naso contains the law of the Nazirite – the 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 God" (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 R. Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the Nazirite is praiseworthy. He has voluntarily undertaken a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos (2:11) said, "I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and your young men for Nazirites," 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. R. 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."[2]

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 R. 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.[3]

Yet in Hilchot Nezirut he rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of R. 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."[4] 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 saint is a person of extremes. Maimonides defines chessed as extreme behaviour – good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires.[5] So, for example, "If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint [chassid]."[6]

The sage is a different kind of person altogether. He or she follows the "golden mean," the "middle way," the way of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. He or she avoids miserliness in one direction, prodigality in the other, and instead chooses the middle way of generosity. The sage knows the twin dangers of too much and too little, excess and deficiency. He or she weighs the conflicting pressures and avoids the extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. What makes Maimonides so acute a thinker is that he realises that you cannot have both – that 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? They may suffer because of his extreme self-denial. A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's country and its defence? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what then 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. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society. They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path. I know no moral philosopher who makes this point as clearly as Maimonides – not Plato or Aristotle, not Descartes or Kant.[7]

It was this deep insight that led Maimonides 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. That is why Maimonides calls him "praiseworthy" and "the equal of a prophet."
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 as well as the others within one's community. There are colleagues at work. There is a country to defend and a society to help build. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue.[8] In a strange way, saintliness is a form of self-indulgence. We are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; 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,[9] 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.

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.
Shabbat Shalom

Shabbat Shalom: Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89)
By Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Efrat, Israel – "When a man or woman shall commit any sin that people may commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty; then they shall confess their sin which they have committed…" (Numbers 5:6–7)

According to Maimonides, this verse, which obligates confession, is the basic source for the commandment of repentance; repentance is incomplete without verbal confession. Writing in his Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Teshuva 1:1) he rules that "every commandment in the Torah… if a person violates any one of them either intentionally or accidentally, his act of repentance must be accompanied with confession before God, because it's written in the Torah 'then they shall confess their sin which they have committed.'"

Detailing the nuts and bolts of repentance, Maimonides divides the process into four pragmatic steps: recognition of sin, confession, the act of resolving never to repeat the sin, and – in order to effectuate "total" repentance – resistance from repeating the transgression when faced with a similar temptation under similar circumstances. Hence guilt, the inevitable accompaniment of sin, can be dealt with by means of repentance, which has the power to totally obliterate the act of wrongdoing.

In contrast, Freud, when he discovered the Oedipal complex, assigned mankind a guilt so profound that his message of the "haunted soul" permeates the modern sensibility, from the bleak no-exit landscapes of the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman to the comic-cosmic ones of Bergman's disciple Woody Allen. According to them, not only are we doomed to repeat the sins of our parents, but we are also limited – and even crippled – by the transgressions of our past. All of us, the theory goes, suffer from primal guilt. The past is inescapable. And inevitably, being born into a situation beyond our control, guilt is coupled with gloom. At best we learn to acknowledge our past, and make do. The past controls our present as well as our future!

But in Judaism, as we began to see from Maimonides, a violation of any of the commandments – whether it was purposeful or accidental, conscious or unconscious – may be repented for and forgiven. That and more: a sin may become the means – a sort of pogo stick – for creative betterment; a transgression may be transformed into a good deed, a

black mark into a brilliant jewel – a sort of alchemy for the soul. No, Dr. Freud, not only is our present not controlled by the past, but our present has the ability to change the past. As Professor Mordechai Rotenberg of the Hebrew University establishes in his work, Rebiographing and Deviance, repentance is built into the theology of Judaism, allowing us not only to escape from the permanent scars of past misdeeds but through a transformative ascent, our sins become virtues – not just in the metaphoric sense, but in real psychological and interpersonal terms. Through the gift of repentance, each individual can re-biographize the events of his life, transforming transgression into a virtue.

Sources for such transformation can be found in a wide range of classic texts. For example, the Talmud (Yoma 86b) cites Resh Lakish, himself a repentant armed robber, as saying that "when true repentance takes place all transgressions are turned into merits," and Rabbi Abbahu (Berakhot 34b), who taught that "where the penitent stands is higher than that of the completely righteous individual." How is this possible? After all, "of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" How can we recreate, recast, the past? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, discusses this issue in his classical work Al HaTeshuva (On Repentance, edited by Pinĥas Peli), and he explains it on the basis of the realization that it is usually only when one loses something – an object or a relationship – that one truly appreciates its value. Hence, tragically perhaps, only when one has lost his closeness to God and the Jewish tradition can one truly re-embrace them in depth, and then with even greater fervor and appreciation than before. As the great Psalmist King David cried out, "From the depths [of despair] do I call upon you, O God" (Psalms 130:1); it is precisely the depths of my despair that provide me with a jump-start, a push upwards to achieve a close relationship.

I would like to suggest a further insight. After all, the pen used to rewrite our lives (rebiographing) is called repentance, as we have just seen, and it itself is one of the 613 commandments in the Torah. And to repent means to turn back, to turn ourselves back to the period before we sinned, to turn the clock of our lives back as well. Even though Maimonides divides the process into four steps, confession must be particularly important to him because, in his first law in the chapter of repentance, a paragraph of eighteen lines (in my edition of Mishneh Torah, published by Mossad Harav Kook), the Hebrew word for confession, vidui, is repeated no less than thirteen times.

Perhaps by repeating "verbal confession" so often, Maimonides provides us with a clue as to the process by which Judaism turns sins into virtues.

Confessions which lead to a change of heart and personality (recognizing a sin and truly determining, and garnering the strength, never to repeat it again) differ qualitatively from confessions when lying on a psychiatrist's couch or in a dark confessional booth. Authentic confession must be expressed directly to the individual one sinned against. Such a verbal confession – when the lips utter the words to be heard – becomes not only an "at-one-ment" between two individuals who had become alienated and estranged from each other, but it also makes the individual "at-one" with himself, the self he would like to be and the self he has sadly become. It also brings together and makes "at-one-ment" between conflicting parts of a person's consciousness: heart and mind, internal feeling and external communication. It allows the individual to confront and verbally express his sin, his imperfection, his failure, to conceptualize what he has done, first to himself, and then to the other he has wronged. It enables him to reconnect with his full self as well as with others, without the mask of self-deception and without the curtain of separation. Only from such a brutal and truthful encounter with oneself as well as with other can the difficult process of change begin.

A sin (ĥet) is literally a missing of the mark, a disconnect, a failure to make the proper connection and reach out to the other in love. It's clear that Erich Segal's ridiculous message that love means "never having to say you're sorry" is in direct opposition to the Torah's view. Much the opposite! Saying you're sorry to another is recognition of the other, of realizing the pain of the other. Saying you're sorry in a relationship is an admission of love, a cry from one heart to another that one feels and sees the hurt that one has caused the other, that one has the courage to admit one's smallness, one's selfishness, one's self-centeredness in the presence of the other, whose love will empower the beloved to become whole, to grow, and to give again.

Words are the first tangible, external expression of a new reality; real change can only be proven by different external actions. If verbal confession cannot be spoken, if the individual cannot bring him or herself to at least face and express the crime against the other with words of sorrow and remorse, change will never be effectuated and the relationship between the two will never be repaired. Words can at least begin to create new realities, and a new reality can hopefully create a new individual and a new relationship.

Many years ago a married woman with two children came into my office, confessing that she had encouraged a relationship with a single man; they had stopped just short of adultery, her husband had found out and he now wanted to divorce her. She confronted her guilt, recognized who she had become and how much she had sacrificed for momentary lust, and spoke of how she truly loved her husband and desperately wanted to save their marriage and make amends for what had happened. After meeting with both of them, it also became clear that the husband had been neglecting his wife, that his business had taken him away from home much more often than he should have traveled, and that he too shared in her guilt – although not to the same extent. Each confessed wrongdoing to the other, each recognized the need for change, and not only did the marriage continue but it became much improved. In a very real way, the woman's transgression became transformed into a merit; it served as a spark-plug and wake-up call for two individuals to learn how to live with one another in love, consideration, and mutual commitment. Their present repentance redeemed the past and dramatically changed their future. There is no greater tribute to and confirmation of human freedom than the possibility of change, of growth, of renewal – than the mitzva of repentance.
Shabbat Shalom!

Beha'alotecha: The Seven Lamps of the Menorah
Rav Kook Torah

"Speak to Aaron and tell him, 'When you light the lamps, the seven lamps should shine towards the center of the Menorah.'" (Num. 8:2)
Why does the Torah emphasize this particular detail - that the seven lamps should face the center of the Menorah? Why not begin with the overall mitzvah - to light the Menorah each evening?
Also, what is the significance of the Menorah's seven branches?
Different Paths of Wisdom
The Sages wrote that the Menorah represents wisdom and enlightenment (Baba Batra 25b). All wisdom has a common source, but there exist different approaches to wisdom. Every individual pursues those spheres of knowledge to which he is naturally drawn.
The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 15:7) compares the seven lamps of the Menorah to the seven planets in the solar system, illuminating the nighttime sky. What is the meaning of this symbolism?
Many of the ancients understood that the planets and constellations influence our nature and personality traits. A person under the influence of Mars, for example, will have different traits then one under the influence of Jupiter (see Shabbat 165a). In other words, God created each of us with a unique character in order that we should perfect ourselves in the particular path that suits us. In this way, all of creation is completed; through the aggregation of all individual perfections, the universe attains overall perfection. Just as each planet symbolizes a

distinct character trait, each branch of the Menorah is a metaphor for a specific category of intellectual pursuits. God prepared a path for each individual to attain wisdom according to his own character and interests.

Towards the Center

However, we should be careful not to follow our natural intellectual inclinations exclusively. The Torah stresses that "when you light the lamps" - when we work towards that individual enlightenment that suits our particular character - we should take care that this wisdom will "shine towards the center of the Menorah." What is the center of the Menorah? This is the wisdom of the Torah itself. We need to draw specifically from the light of Torah, whose source is the underlying unity of all wisdom.

In truth, the seven branches of the Menorah are not truly distinct, separate paths. All seven receive light from the unified wisdom with which God enlightens His world. For this reason, the Menorah was fashioned from a single piece of gold, mikshah zahav. The special manner in which the Menorah was formed reveals the underlying unity of all forms of wisdom.

(Gold from the Land of Israel (now available in paperback) pp. 239-240. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 53-55.)

See also: BeHa'alotecha: Great Dreams

Drasha
By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky
Parshas Naso :: Pennies From Heaven

The portion of Naso contains phrases that are said every day by every congregation in the world. In the Diaspora they are incorporated in the repetition of the Shemone Esrai, the (morning) standing prayer, and in Israel the kohanim themselves, the priests, recite them each morning as they bless the nation: Birkas Kohanim, the priestly blessings. In this week's portion Hashem instructed the kohanim to bless the people: "Thus shall you bless the nation of Israel, speak unto them. May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May He illuminate His countenance upon you and let you find grace. May He lift His countenance upon you and establish peace for you." (Numbers 6:22-26)

It seems that we ask for more than blessing. Why is each one of the blessings followed with its practical implication? Bless us… and safeguard us. Illuminate us … and let us find favor in the eyes of others. Lift countenance.. and establish peace for us. Is it not enough to be blessed and have the illumination of his countenance? What is the necessity of the second half of each blessing?

Noted attorney Robert Harris, Esq. of Woodmere, told me a wonderful story:

A man once pleaded with the Al-mighty to bestow a bit of His abundance upon him. He implored and begged his Creator for long life and wealth. After all, the poor soul figured, G-d had an abundance of everything; why then, wouldn't He spare something for a Jew in need. He entered a huge, empty synagogue on the Lower East Side and began to cry.

"Ribono Shel Olam (Master of the universe)," he cried "in the great extent of Your eternity what is a million years?"

The man began to tremble. He imagined that he actually heard a response.

"To Me a million years is just a mere second!" boomed a voice inside his mind.

The man continued. "And," he pleaded, "to the magnitude of Your great bounty, what, may I ask, is a billion dollars?"

"A billion dollars is just a mere penny," came the resonating reply.

"Then," begged the man, "can I not have just one of your pennies?"

"Surely!" came the response. And then a pause. "But you must wait a mere second!"

It is not enough to get a blessing from Hashem. It must be given with the assurance that it will have a practical implication. Many people receive blessings of wealth and health only to lose them to thieves and aggravation. Each of the priestly blessings is followed by a safeguard – a follow up. A blessing of wealth alone is not enough. Hashem must guard it. Illuminating us with His countenance is not enough. Unless fellow humans appreciate the grace that G-d has given the Jews, in this very corporeal world, it is a worthless gift. And of course, even if He lifts his countenance upon us we still need the blessings of shalom – peace.

The Torah also teaches us that blessing others must be done with a full heart and full hand. To bestow generosity on others must include a vehicle to appreciate the bounty. Otherwise you have given the gift of a billion dollars – in a million years. We may give blessings to our fellow Jews, but the greatest blessings we receive and give are those that we can use – immediately and forever.

Good Shabbos!

Dedicated in memory of Irving I. Adelsberg by the Adelsberg Family

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Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Nasso
For the week ending 8 June 2019 / 5 Sivan 5779
Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - www.seasonsofthemoon.com
Insights
Me and My Shadow

"This is the law of the nazir: on the day his nazirut is complete, he shall bring 'him' to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." (13:6)

I remember watching an episode of "I Love Lucy" about 250 years ago. Lucille is dressed as a clown, looking at herself in the mirror, adjusting her costume and fixing her makeup. In reality, the "mirror" doesn't exist — another actor is pretending to be her reflection. Her "reflection" proceeds to mimic Lucille's every movement. The synchronization of their movements is amazing and extremely funny.

Suspicious from the beginning, Lucille constantly attempts to fool her "reflection" into making a mistake, but her "reflection" manages to move in total harmony with her. In a last attempt to expose the prankster, Lucille drops a ball she is holding. Unbeknownst to her doppelganger, the ball is attached to a string and rebounds into her hand. The ball in her "reflection's" hand, however, bounces all over the stage. Howls of laughter. Lucille chases her "reflection" all over the set. Fade out.

"Oh wad some power the giftie gie us, To see oursels as others see us!" wrote Scotland's national bard Robert "Rabbie" (not Rabbi) Burns (1759-1796).

It always amazes me how transparent we are. We think that nobody sees us, that we can conceal our character flaws and blemishes. Our body language, however, our choice of words, our tone of voice, our choice of car, everything we do, reveals who we really are.

If we could see ourselves through others' eyes, most of us would turn various shades of puce.

"This is the law of the nazir: on the day his nazirut is complete, he shall bring 'him' to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." (13:6)

Rashi explains that the word "him" in this verse means "himself." The question remains though, why didn't the Torah choose the normal reflexive pronoun?

A nazir is a man or a woman who adopts voluntary restrictions not to drink wine or any grape products, to refrain from trimming the hair of the head and face, and to avoid contact with a cadaver. What was the purpose of this self-imposed abstinence?

The process of nazirut was a kind of therapy to remove excesses, indulgence and self-centeredness. If this procedure was successful, the nazir was able to see himself exactly the way someone else would see him, without any of ego's self-serving bribery.

Thus the verse tells us that if he "bring(s) him"— if he sees himself the way the world would see him, then "his nazirut was complete" — the purpose of his abstinence had been successful. Who he is and who he thinks he is have become identical.

He and his shadow are now one.

Sources: based on the Meshech Chochma in Mayana shel Torah.

OU Torah
Uniformity and Uniqueness
Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

One of the interesting paradoxes of human life is our tendency to copy one another and to try to "fit in" with friends and acquaintances, while simultaneously trying to be distinct from others, and to be our "own person."

The pressures of conformity are very strong in all human societies. People who are different are often treated as outcasts. And each of us determines our behavior with an eye toward others' opinions. We want to be part of the group, part of the crowd.

The pressures that human groups, large and small, exert upon each of us results, not only in conformity, but in uniformity. Groups demand that all members act in accordance with their norms and its standards. Behavior which breaks the mold of uniformity is seen as threatening, even bizarre.

And yet, we all feel the need to assert our uniqueness, our own precious individuality.

One of my personal favorite cartoons shows a crowd of penguins, looking identical, all black and white. In the center of the horde is one penguin with a barely noticeable red bow tie. The cartoon's caption has that penguin saying, "I got to be me".

Obviously, conformity is necessary for a society to function efficiently, and to maintain its equilibrium. Individual self-expression is also necessary, to introduce new coping methods into the social process.

There are dangers to both tendencies, that which demands uniformity, and that which allows for the individual's urge for autonomy and self-assertion.

Countless times in history, we have witnessed terrible dangers intrinsic to crowd behavior. We have seen the negative effects of cults, which encourage blind conformity to group norms. We have seen entire nations unquestioningly following cruel calls for the genocide of targeted populations.

We have seen the urge to be different result in equally harmful and dangerous behavior. Individuals who just want to be noticed will resort to serial murders of innocents, or to venting their rage by spraying a school campus with bullets. Self-expression carried to the extreme.

Apparently, there are good sides and bad sides to both social conformity and individualistic behavior. The secret lies in the balance between the two.

In the Torah portion Naso, which is read in the synagogue this week, even the casual reader will be troubled by the repetitive description of the offerings of the twelve tribal princes. Each of them contributes an absolutely identical set of celebratory gifts to the tabernacle. The uniformity of the twelve sets of gifts is absolute. It seems as if each of the twelve princes strove to totally conform to the others, and none dared defy the standards of the rest of the group. An example of conformity, if there ever was one.

The congregants in the synagogue who hear the Torah reader repetitively chant the monotonous lists of contributions often feel bored and ask, "Why the repetition, and why the uniformity?"

Here, the rabbis of the Midrash help us out. They take a different, deeper, and more perceptive view. Motivated by the same discomfort as today's Torah listener, they exclaim, "Their gifts are all identical, but each has his own unique intention."

Although the gifts all shared common explicit language, the thoughts and emotions behind each gift differed from prince to prince. Each lent a different kavanah, a distinct unspoken meaning, to his gifts. And that meaning was based upon the unique nature of each prince and the tribe he represented. The gifts were all the same; the underlying intentions were as different as one can imagine. The lyrics were identical; the melody, different.

The rabbis speculate at some length as to the nature of these implicit intentions. They wonder as to how the prince of the tribe of Reuben might have expressed his tribe's uniqueness in contradistinction to the prince of the tribe of Simon, and Levi, and Judah, and so forth.

All human societies contain the tension between the pressure to conform and the inner urge to be distinctive. Religious societies contain that tension all the more. Judaism, for example, requires conformity to an elaborate set of behavioral guidelines. The casual observer of a group of Jews at prayer, or at the Passover Seder table, or circling the bimah with their palm fronds during the holiday of Succoth, will see a group of people who seem to be obsessively imitating each other.

But the observer who is familiar with the inner lives of those who comprise that group of Jews will realize that each person's prayer is different and reflective of his or her unique experience. Everyone around the Seder table is responding to different religious memories, and each of those who are circling the bimah is doing so with a very distinctive and unique set of religious emotions.

If there is a lesson to be gained from this perspective of our Parsha, it is this: Religious behavior calls for a great deal of uniformity, but also insists that each individual draw from his or her own wellspring of inspiration.

We all must be the same, yet we all must be different. This paradox is true of all human societies. It is especially true of the society of Jews.

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Rabbi Eliakim Koenigsberg
Sacrifices for Unity

At the end of Parshas Naso the Torah describes the sacrifices that the nesi'im brought during the dedication of the Mishkan. In describing these korbanos, the Torah repeats the same formula twelve times. Why did the nesi'im each bring the exact same korban? And why did the Torah have to repeat the details of the korban twelve times? These pesukim are every ba'al korei's dream, but why are they necessary? The Torah could have just listed the names of the nesi'im and then said that they all brought the same sacrifice.

The Ramban (Naso 7:2-5) answers that the Torah describes the korban of each nasi separately because in fact they did not bring the same korban. They may have offered the same animals and the same items, but each one had different reasons for bringing the various elements of his korban. Rashi (based on the Midrash) outlines the intentions of Nesanel ben Tzu'ar, the nasi of shevet Yissachar. But according to the Ramban, each nasi had his own special thoughts and intentions in mind when offering each element of his korban. The Torah demonstrates this by describing the korban of each nasi separately to show that each of their korbanos was unique. But it still seems puzzling. If each nasi wanted to bring a different korban, why did they all offer the same animals and the same vessels?

The Chofetz Chaim takes a different approach. He suggests that the nesi'im intentionally brought exactly the same korban so that they should not feel jealousy toward each other (like what happened with Kayin and Hevel). No nasi should feel that his korban was more beautiful or more expensive. No shevet should think that its nasi was superior to that of any other shevet.

The Chofetz Chaim adds that this is the deeper meaning behind the comment of the Midrash that Nesanel ben Tzu'ar suggested this idea to the nesi'im. He didn't simply advise them to bring korbanos. Rather, his advice was that each one of them should bring the same korban so that everyone should be equal in the dedication of the Mishkan and no one should feel jealous of someone else.

The Midrash continues that Hashem was so happy with this attitude of the nesi'im that He told them to bring their korbanos even on Shabbos. Although normally the korban of an individual may not be brought on Shabbos, an exception was made for the korbanos of the nesi'im. It was as if Hashem were saying, "I want to have a part in your beautiful gesture, so take my Shabbos with you. Allow me to be part of this wonderful effort to prevent jealousy." The Torah describes the korban of

each nasi separately to highlight and to emphasize how important it is to act in a way that prevents jealousy.

That is not to say that individuality and personal expression have no place in avodas Hashem. The fact is there is a concept of hiddur mitzvah (beautifying a mitzvah). Every person can determine how much additional money he will spend on his esrog, his tefillin or his korban to enhance the mitzvah beyond its basic obligation. But if the Torah recognizes the importance of personal expression, then why was Hashem so pleased with the nesi'im for offering the same korban?

Perhaps the answer is that the concept of equality was especially critical at the dedication of the Mishkan. Chazal comment (Avos 3:6) that when ten people learn Torah together, the Shechina dwells amongst them. And the same is true when five people learn Torah together, or three or two or even one. The Mishna cites pesukim to prove each of these statements. Apparently, while the Shechina is found even with one person learning Torah, it dwells with greater intensity in a group of ten. The larger the tzibbur (the group) that unites together in Torah, the greater will be the presence of the Shechina within that group. The most intense revelation of Hashem's presence in all of history was at the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai. That is why the prerequisite for kabbolas haTorah and the experience of ma'amad Har Sinai was the unity of the Jewish people. "Vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar - and the Jewish people camped opposite the mountain, k'ish echad b'leiv echad - like one man with one heart." (Rashi, Yisro 19:2). For Hashem to reveal Himself with the greatest intensity, all of Klal Yisrael had to unite together to create the largest tzibbur possible.

The presence of the Shechina in the Mishkan was a replica of its presence at Har Sinai (see Ramban, beginning of Parshas Yisro). To enable the Mishkan to become a structure worthy of housing the presence of the Shechina with the same intensity as on Har Sinai, it had to be a place which united the hearts of Klal Yisrael. This was accomplished through the heartfelt donation in which every member of Klal Yisrael participated - "mei'eis kol ish asher yidvenu libo" (see Gra, Shir Hashirim 1:17). And this feeling continued throughout the building and the dedication of the Mishkan.

Perhaps this is why Hashem was so pleased with the korbanos of the nesi'im. The dedication of the Mishkan was not an appropriate time for self-expression. It was a time to unite all of Klal Yisrael together, to ensure that the Mishkan would be a worthy place for the Shechina to dwell. By offering korbanos in a way that prevented jealousy and promoted unity, the nesi'im demonstrated they were willing to sacrifice their personal avodas Hashem for the greater good, to help establish the Mishkan as a place where the Shechina would feel welcome.

Personal initiative and self-expression are important values in avodas Hashem. But sometimes it is by not promoting ourselves but by uniting together with all of Klal Yisrael that we strengthen our connection with Hakadosh Baruch Hu and we make ourselves even more worthy of His bracha.

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Parashat Naso: The Key To God's Blessing
Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz

Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing, which we read in this week's Torah portion of Naso, is a favorite moment for people who go to the synagogue. In Israel, this blessing is recited every day; outside of Israel, it is recited several times a year.

Toward the end of the prayer service, the kohanim walk up to the front of the synagogue, wrap themselves in their tallitot (prayer shawls), raise their hands toward the congregation and bless it with a blessing composed of three parts: "May the Lord bless you and watch over you; May the Lord cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you; May the Lord raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26).

Where the Torah instructs the kohanim to bless the congregation with Birkat Kohanim, we read two additional verses. One serves as the introduction to the blessing, and the other as a conclusion. The introduction is: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the Children of Israel, saying to them: May the Lord bless...." (ibid. 6:22-23).

Simply, God instructs Aaron and his descendants the kohanim to bless the nation. But at the conclusion of this instruction, we read another verse which raises a question regarding the identity of who is giving the blessing: "They shall bestow My Name upon the Children of Israel, so that I will bless them" (ibid. 6:27).

So who is giving the blessing? God, who says "so that I will bless them," or the kohanim, who were told "This is how you should bless the Children of Israel"? Actually, when you listen to the content of Birkat Kohanim itself, this question is easily answered. The kohanim say to the congregation "May the Lord bless you and watch over you." So we see that the kohanim bless the nation with God's blessing. They do not create the blessing themselves. They just pass it on.

On the literal meaning of the words "so that I will bless them," great Jewish sages of the 1st century CE, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yishmael, disagreed (Talmud, Hullin 49). According to Akiva, the meaning of these words is as we understand: It is not the kohanim who bless the nation; rather, God provides His blessing to the nation. "I will bless them," with "them" referring to the Jewish nation.

Yishmael does not disagree with this concept, since, as we have already shown, the blessing itself shows us that God is the one doing the blessing and not the kohanim. And yet he believes the words "I will bless them" contain an additional meaning. The entire nation is blessed with God's blessing by the kohanim, but – asks Yishmael – who blesses the kohanim themselves? "...so that I will bless them" is the answer. God Himself blesses the kohanim.

But are the kohanim not included in the blessing of the entire nation? Do they not receive the blessing from God that they themselves bequeath to the congregation standing before them, which hears their blessing? Why the need for another blessing in the form of "I will bless them"? It seems that Yishmael is teaching us an incredibly important lesson. Indeed, the kohanim are blessed by the same godly blessing that they pass on to the entire nation. But by performing this deed, by blessing the nation, they merit an additional blessing.

God's blessing is given to all people. But whoever blesses others is privileged to receive an additional blessing. A person who wholeheartedly blesses another person is himself blessed with God's blessing.

Sometimes it is hard for us to wholeheartedly bless another person. We might be worried that his success might harm our own. The Torah teaches us that the opposite is true. The more we bless, the more we are blessed. The more we love and the more we strive for others to be happy, the more loved and the happier we will be.

There is no blessing like God's blessing, giving us abilities, aspirations and hope. Whoever wants to merit receiving this blessing must provide others with abilities, aspirations and hope, all of which we need so badly.

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.

Shema Yisrael Torah Network
Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Naso
פרשת נשא תשע"ט

והתודו את חטאתם אשר עשו והשיב את אשמו בראשו

They shall confess their sin that they committed; he shall make restitution for his guilt in its principal amount. (5:7)

The Rambam (Hilchos Teshuvah) writes that concerning all mitzvos – whether asei, positive, or lo saaseh, prohibitive – if one transgresses them, either intentionally or inadvertently, when he repents he must be misvadeh, confess, his sin to Hashem. The principal

foundation of teshuvah, repentance, is that one come to grips with the reality that he has transgressed. He only accomplishes this when he confesses his sin and confronts the issues: A) that he sinned, B) why he sinned; C) what provoked him to rebel against Hashem. The concept of vidui, confession, applies in all cases of sin/error. Through introspection and self-examination, we are able to identify -- and become more aware of -- our inner spiritual imbalances. The awareness alone can be transformative. When we confront our sins, acknowledge our misdeeds, face our shortcomings, we are able to go to the next step: remorse/regret, so that we can begin the journey to teshuvah in earnest.

Interestingly, the mitzvah to confess is written concerning the transgression of gezeilah, theft. Why? Vidui is a requirement for every sin. Why is theft singled out? The Sfas Emes quotes the Chidushei HaRim (cited by Likutei Basar Likutei) that every aveirah, sin, is rooted in gezel, theft. In order to execute the sin for which he is presently confessing, he was beholden to his physical abilities, strength (even talents), all of which are G-d-given gifts. Certainly Hashem did not create and maintain him for the purpose of becoming a sinner. Thus, every sin, every infraction, carries with it an element of theft. He stole from Hashem! He needed Hashem's "help" in order to carry out his sin. If he were to be rendered weak and helpless, bedridden and deathly ill, he would be unable to sin. In fact, he probably asked Hashem to grant him the ability to live the lifestyle that he chose for himself. That is chutzpah at its nadir, but we all do it. Whenever we live counter to Hashem's mandate for us, we are stealing from Him. Thus, when we klop al cheit, confess to Hashem concerning our latest sin, we should not forget that included in that sin is the aveirah of gezel, because, unless one first steals from Hashem, he will be hard-pressed to carry out his sin successfully.

This concept extends much deeper beyond the requirement of vidui as a prerequisite for teshuvah. It reminds us that everything that we are able to do, our very existence, is a gift from Hashem. Imagine inviting someone for dinner. The guest sits down to eat and, after filling himself to contentment, takes a bottle of the host's most expensive wine and proceeds to pour it all over his finest tablecloth. It would be gross chutzpah. Are we acting differently when we take our bodies, our G-d-given talents, and use them injudiciously against Hashem? Yet we complain when punishment is meted out, and we have to question the reason. Thus, the first step in vidui is to introspect how we had been able to sin and add that to our list of spiritual infractions.

כל ימי הזירו לד' על נפש מת לא יבא

All the days of his abstinence for the sake of Hashem, he shall not come near a dead person. (6:6)

A nazir is considered holy – so holy that he may not come in contact with a dead body, even if the deceased is a close relative. Sforno notes that this restriction parallels that of the Kohen Gadol, High Priest, whose exalted position sanctifies him to the point that he must refrain from defiling himself from coming in contact with a dead body, even if it is a close relative. In this respect, the nazir is like a Kohen Gadol.

Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl, remarks that, in effect, the Torah is giving each Jew the unique opportunity to elevate his pedigree and achieve Kohen Gadol status (so to speak), albeit temporarily. The prohibition against the nazir becoming tamei, ritually impure, is not an ordinary prohibition. It is a reflection of the nazir's exalted status of sanctity. Now that he has assumed the mantle of nezirus, he must act the part and maintain the highest level of kedushah, sanctity. This is a level of purity otherwise reserved only for the Kohen Gadol. Now it can become the domain of each and every Jew – if he so choses to separate and elevate himself.

The concept of nezirus is such that every person has the opportunity to achieve greatness in kedushah, holiness, if he so chooses and is willing to accept the responsibilities that come with the territory. It is all about dedication to a goal: kedushah and perseverance in attaining it.

Sforno cites a query by Chazal, "Is it because there are not enough pallbearers in Teveria that I sent you away from Netzivim?" (The Mordechai to Meseches Moed Kattan in the laws of aveilus quotes this in the name of the Yerushalmi. Rav Wolbe attributes it to the Yerushalmi Pesachim 3:7, which relates the following.) Rabbi Avahu sent his son, Rabbi Chanina, from his home in Ceasaria to study Torah under Rabbi Yochanan in Teveria. A while later, it came to Rabbi Avahu's attention that his son had taken time off from learning so that he could perform the mitzvah of burying the dead. His reaction (Rabbi Avahu's) was, "Are there no dead people in Ceasaria?"

Rav Wolbe explains Sforno as equating a person who is dedicated to Torah study to a nazir. A Jew who studies Torah is engaged in a most lofty endeavor and to interrupt his learning, even to tend to the dead, is a form of defilement. (Even though he is neither a Kohen nor a nazir, he is involved in kedushah and, thus, becomes a kadosh.) Although halachah does mandate one to interrupt his learning to attend to the needs/escort a dead person, Rabbi Avahu was telling his son not to occupy himself with this lofty mitzvah, because Torah study is a holier pursuit.

Sforno's message is quite clear and compelling. One who dedicates himself to a holy endeavor has an enormous responsibility towards that endeavor. He may not desecrate himself by tending to other tasks that carry the risk of "defilement." When one is involved in holiness, he, in turn, becomes sanctified like the Kohen Gadol, nazir and yeshivah man, who are all engaged in kedushah. If such holy men are enjoined not even to involve themselves in a mitzvah that bespeaks a level of defilement with regard to their present holy endeavor, how much more so should one not interrupt holy endeavors for something frivolous.

The nazir leaves this world (so to speak) and enters a new world, a holy world. When we dedicate a portion of our time to Torah, i.e. chavrusa, shiur or Tefillah, or other forms of avodas Hashem, we enter another world, in which our dedication must be unequivocal, without allowing for interruption or distraction to defile this holy opportunity. The nazir teaches us that our dedication should be total.

וגלח ראשו ביום טהרתו

He shall shave his head on the day he becomes purified. (6:9)

When the nazir completes the days of his nezirus vow, all of his hair is shaved off. The Sefer HaChinuch suggests that this is done in order to suppress the yetzer hora, evil inclination. He must remove all of his hair so that his evil inclination does not return to incite him to sin. Extremes clearly alter the appearance of a person negatively. Thus, very long hair and completely shaven heads both destroy the appearance of a person, making it that more difficult for the yetzer hora to succeed in convincing him to return to his pre-nazir activities. The nazir took his nazarite vow because he realized that the outside world is alluring and destructive. He did not want to chance falling into its clutches. Thus, he removed himself from the domain of the yetzer hora. The yetzer hora works and is effective anywhere, anytime, on anyone, but we do not have to make it easier for him. The nazir took a big step to protect himself. Now that he is returning to the outside world, the Torah wants to make sure that his success not be short-lived.

It happens all too often that we have been fortunate enough to reach a young Jew who has deviated from the path of Torah. We think that our success will not only be realized, but will continue as the youth makes an about face and comes home. Then something happens: spiritual cold feet, or the yetzer hora -- sensing a loss coming its way -- redoubles its efforts, so that it ensnares the youth once again – only this time – tighter. It is for this reason that we must immediately put safeguards in place, or all of our hard work will be for naught.

In Niflosecha Asichah, Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the story of a gadol b'Yisrael whose rebbe had the foresight to protect his "investment" with safeguards. The young man that he saved ultimately became a wellspring of inspiration for thousands – personally, and through his notable talmidim, students. It was not, however, always like that, and it almost did not happen. Now, for the story.

A woman who survived the Holocaust came to Eretz Yisrael and settled in Yaffo/Jaffa. She sent her children to chareidi, frum,

schools. After a short while, she decided to remove her son (his name was Chaim) from the yeshivah that he was attending – due to financial concerns. She could barely afford the tuition, and she felt that the family could use another provider. She would enroll her son in a trade school, so that he could learn a trade and eventually help support the family. On her way to the yeshivah to present her decision to the principal, she met Rebbetzin Shapiro, wife of Horav Simchah Zissel Shapiro. The rebbetzin asked her where she was going (apparently they had some form of relationship). The widow responded with a tale of woe about her decision hopefully to alleviate her circumstances by taking her son out of yeshivah.

When the rebbetzin heard this, she became all shaken up. She pleaded with the woman not to carry out her intentions. It would spiritually devastate her son. He needed to remain in the yeshivah if he were to remain a frum Jew. The woman agreed, despite her financial straits, to leave her son in the yeshivah. Rebbetzin Shapiro was acutely aware that despite this woman's sincere and noble intentions, when the going would get rough, she would change her mind and remove her son from the yeshivah. The rebbetzin convinced the woman to send her son to another yeshivah where the rebbetzin was able to have her tuition payments lowered significantly. They switched to Slabodka where, in a short time, he became a premier student. Following the Sefer HaChinuch's rationale that upon reaching out to a person one must address all avenues in which his subject could regress, Rebbetzin Shapiro covered all of the bases.

After a stint in Slabodka, young Chaim transferred to Mir, where he developed a close relationship with the Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, zl. During Chaim's tenure in Mir, the Rosh Yeshivah's nephew, Nosson Tzvi, arrived from Chicago. Rav Leizer Yudel (as the Rosh Yeshivah was endearingly called) matched his nephew with the rising star of Mir, Chaim. The two studied diligently for some time.

Chaim became Horav Chaim Kamil, zl, who established Yeshivas Ofakim, which became the primary spiritual font of the Negev. The "nephew" was none other than Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl, Rosh Yeshivah of Mir. All of this was the result of a short conversation between a rebbetzin who would not take "no" for an answer and a mother who really did not want to say "no." Rebbetzin Shapiro not only convinced Mrs. Kamil to keep her son in yeshivah, she fortified her convincing advice by following through and having the boy transferred to another yeshivah where it was not only financially amenable, but also scholastically challenging. As a result, the boy's brilliance shone to the good fortune of the Torah world.

פר אחד בן בקר איל אחד כבש אחד בן שנתו לעלה

One young bull, one ram, one sheep in its first year for an elevation/burnt offering. (7:15)

The Midrash (Rabbah 13:19) wonders why it was necessary to sacrifice three olos, burnt offerings? They reply that the three korbanos coincided with the three positive qualities maintained by the Jewish People in Egypt, which catalyzed their worthiness for redemption: they did not change their Hebrew names; they did not change their Hebrew language; they remained morally observant. The quality of keeping one's given Hebrew name is powerful. A Jew who has kept his name -- or at least has made an effort to remember it -- has established a lifeline to Judaism that continues to nurture him even if he reneges everything else spiritually. It is the chain that affirms a bond between generations, and reminds those who have deviated from tradition that they are not only Jewish, but they can still return home. At times, when I question Jewish men incarcerated for various crimes they committed, I ask them what it was that spurred them to Judaism. The answer will invariably be the Jewish name that they were called by their zaidy or bubby. This is their only connection that anchors them to the religion that their parents had renounced. They still remember Sundays at bubby's home and the name by which she called them. It might be a little thing to us who grew up with a strong kesher, bond, with Yiddishkeit, but, to those whose parents had nothing, and they had even less, their Hebrew names maintain a strong significance in their lives.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, relates the following incident, which he heard from a distinguished talmid chacham, Torah scholar, who vouched for its authenticity. A non-observant Jewish physician who worked as an emergency room doctor in a large Los Angeles hospital was on the floor when the paramedics brought in a man who had apparently suffered a heart attack. Someone taking a walk had discovered the man lying on the street in pain, unaware of what had happened, who and where he was. The first order of business was to save his life. The emergency room doctors and nurses worked on him for half an hour until they declared him dead. It was sad, because they had no idea about his identity or his next of kin.

Suddenly the doctor noticed the "dead" man move his hand slightly. At first he thought it was a reflex, which is not that uncommon. When he noticed other parts of his body begin to move, he realized that this was not a reflex. The patient was alive. He immediately removed the sheet covering the patient's face and, to his utter shock and disbelief, saw that the patient was very much alive. He immediately began heart compressions to revive him fully, but the patient raised his hand to motion him to halt. The patient looked up at the doctor and said, "They call you Chaim Meir?" The doctor almost passed out. True, this was his Hebrew name, but no one called him by this name, because no one was aware that he even had a Hebrew name, let alone what it was. He was called Barry. Only his elderly grandmother called him Chaim Meir.

The patient then asked Dr. Chaim Meir, "Do you put on Tefillin every day?" The doctor answered, "No." "Well, starting today, I command you to put on Tefillin every day." The patient continued, "Do you observe the laws of kashrus?" The doctor answered, "No." "This, too, will change. As of today, you will begin observing kashrus." The patient concluded his instructions, closed his eyes and died.

The doctor was obviously shaken up, but convinced himself at first that it was nothing. A few days passed, and he related the incident to some of his friends who, like him, were non-practicing Jews. As he related the story, questions began to form in his mind, questions which he could not easily ignore.

First, how does a man that was declared dead by competent physicians, specialists in the field of emergency medicine, return from the dead and act very much alive? Second, how did the patient know who his doctor was and what his Hebrew name was? His name was unknown to everyone, other than a few close relatives. Last, what merit did he, a non-observant Jew, have to be the subject of such an incredible, almost miraculous revelation?

The doctor continued with life as usual. One does not turn his back on a life of non-observance and become a frum, observant, Jew simply due to one inexplicable incident. He was having too much fun. One thought actually did disturb him, to the point that he could not get it out of his mind: "They call you Chaim Meir." These words of the dead man kept repeating themselves over and over in his mind. He was unable to erase these words, to consign them to oblivion; they continued to haunt him all of the time.

Finally, a number of years passed, and a well-known Rav was a patient in the hospital. This Rav was a holy man who noticed something was missing when he gazed on the face of the doctor. He asked the doctor what was troubling him. The doctor opened up, revealing the incident that had occurred a few years back. When the Rav heard the story, he told the doctor, "You must have a very special merit to be worthy of such an encounter. You were sent a message from on High. Do not ignore it!"

The doctor slowly commenced his journey of repentance until he became a complete baal teshuvah, penitent, and turned around his life. What struck him the most about the incident which catalyzed his return to Yiddishkeit was the man referring to him by his Hebrew name. The fact that someone remembered made the difference. It connected him to his grandmother and served to unite him with the past.

I read the story and of course, I was astounded. Apparently, this doctor had some unique z'chus that made him worthy of this

incident, but why the name? What is so special about the name that it served as the primary catalyst for this return? Names are considered very significant in Judaism. One's Jewish name is the channel through which life reaches him from Above. The Sifrei Kabbalah teach that when a child is named by his parents, they (his parents) experience a minor prophecy, because somehow the child's destiny is wrapped up in the combination of Hebrew letters that make up his/her name. Indeed, Chazal instruct us to name our children after righteous Jews, because his name often influences a person's behavior/destiny (Midrash Tanchuma, Ha'azinu 7). In other words, his Jewish name, which has such an intrinsic effect on a person, is in some way inspired by Hashem. With this in mind, we understand why the name plays such a critical role in maintaining one's ties with Judaism.

Va'ani Tefillah

את צמח דוד עבדך מהרה תצמיח – Es tzemach David Avdecha meheirah satzmiach. May You speedily cause the outgrowth of David, Your servant, to sprout forth.

As mentioned, our gedolim, Torah leaders, not only understood the importance of belief in the imminent arrival of Moshiach Tziddkeinu, but they lived in such a manner that, at any moment, he could literally walk in the door to herald the Final Redemption. Horav Elazar Nissan, zl, son of the saintly Yismach Moshe (Horav Moshe Teitelbaum, zl) would spend the entire week engrossed in Torah study and return home for Shabbos. One week, he was late in coming home. Once chatzos, midday, passed, the family began to worry in earnest. The roads in those days were far from safe. As Shabbos Kodesh came closer, their fear that something terrible had occurred became a great reality. During this entire time, the Yismach Moshe was in his room, unaware of any issue, totally ensconced in his Torah study and preparations for the Shabbos Queen.

One hour prior to Shabbos, when many men had already left for shul, R' Elazar Nissan arrived home. It had been a long, rough trip but, Baruch Hashem, he made it. One of the chassidim who had been in the house ran to the Yismach Moshe screaming, "He is here! He is here!" The second the Rebbe heard the wonderful news, he donned his long frock, grabbed his hat, and went out to greet (whom he thought was) the guest. He had waited his entire lifetime for this moment. Finally, Moshiach had arrived! When he saw that it was "only" his son, he fell to the ground in tears muttering, "He did not come. This is not him." This is what preoccupied the thoughts of this holy leader.

Sponsored in loving memory of
our dear father and zaidy on his yahrzeit
Rabbi Shlomo Silberberg
הרב שלמה בן נתן ז"ל
נפ' י"ד סיון תשנ"ט
ת.נ.צ.ב.ה.
Mrs. Mimi (Solomon) Eichenthal and Family

prepared and edited by Rabbi L. Scheinbaum

Hilchos Shabbos

8233. "Placing Fruits or Vegetables into a bag to Ripen"
One is permitted to place unripened fruits and/or vegetables into a paper bag to help them ripen more quickly on Shabbos.
8234. This is not an act of Zoraya because the fruit is no longer a growing plant, and the softening and ripening that occurs later merely sweetens the fruit.
Sefer 39 Melochos

Fasting on the Wedding Day
By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Now that Shavuos is past, we enter the heaviest wedding season of the Jewish calendar. I decided to discuss this usually not-well-understood topic.

Question #1: Our wedding is going to be after nightfall. Do we fast until the wedding, or may we break the fast when it gets dark?
Question #2: Yocheved asks: I usually do not fast well, and I am concerned how I will feel at my wedding if I fast that day. What do I do?
Question #3: Sheryl's dilemma: "What will I explain to my non-observant parents when they exclaim at my pre-chupah reception - 'What! You can't eat anything at your own wedding?'"

Sheryl comes from a very assimilated background. Let her explain:
"In my extended family, my parents were considered the religious ones, since they were the only ones who married Jewish. Furthermore, my Dad was the only one who fasted on Yom Kippur, albeit with a little cheating on the side. So, when my family members heard that I had become Orthodox, they were shocked at many of my new practices, despite my efforts to keep things as low-key as possible. None of them had a clue what it means to really keep kosher or Shabbos. Now that I'm getting married, many of them are curious to attend my wedding, and I would like to make the experience a Kiddush Hashem for them. Therefore, I intend to explain our mitzvos and customs to them in the best possible light."

Sheryl's goals are indeed noble. How will she explain the reason we fast on one's wedding day to someone who knows little about Yiddishkeit? The prospect seems almost ominous.

Why do we fast?
Although early authorities cite at least six different reasons for this custom, most halachic authorities discuss only two of them (e.g., Levush, Even Ha'ezer 60:1; Magen Avraham and Elyah Rabbah, introduction to 573; Beis Shmuel 61:6; Chachmas Adam 129:2; Aruch Hashulchan, Even Ha'ezer 61:21):

Reason #1: To avoid inebriation
Some explain that the practice is to ensure that the chosson and kallah are fully sober when they participate in the wedding ceremony. By not eating and drinking, they will certainly drink nothing intoxicating prior to the ceremony. Some commentaries provide an interesting twist to this explanation. They explain that the concern is that if one of the marrying parties drinks anything intoxicating on the wedding day, they may subsequently claim that they were inebriated and that, therefore, the marriage is invalid (Levush, Even Ha'ezer 60:1)! As someone once said, love is not only blind, but also sometimes intoxicating.
Reason #2: To achieve atonement
Since a chosson is forgiven for all his sins, he should fast as atonement (Yevamos 63b; Yerushalmi, Bikkurim 3:3).

One allusion to this atonement is found in the Torah. In the very last verse of parshas Tolados, the Torah records that one of the additional wives Eisav married was Machalas, the daughter of Yishmael. The Yerushalmi points out that although her name was actually Basmas and not Machalas, the Torah calls her Machalas, to indicate that even someone as sinful as Eisav is forgiven on his wedding day (Shu"t Divrei Yatziv #259).

Who fasts?
I am sure you are already asking why I said that the chosson fasts on his wedding day, and omitted the kallah. This leads us directly to our next question:

Are there any halachic differences between the two reasons given for the fast? Indeed, there are several. One issue that might be affected is whether only the chosson fasts or also the kallah. The authorities dispute whether the wedding day atones for both parties or only for the chosson.

Indeed, Talmudic sources mention only the chosson in this connection, and some later authorities contend that the wedding is indeed an atonement day only for the chosson and not for the kallah. Following this approach, some authorities conclude that only the bridegroom fasts and not the bride (Ben Ish Chai, 1: Shoftim: 13). Others contend that despite the fact that the Gemara mentions only atonement for the chosson's sins, since the kallah is a direct cause of his atonement, she also receives forgiveness on this day (Aishel Avraham Butchach 573).

However, if the reason for the fast is to guarantee the sobriety of the parties, the kallah, too, should fast, even if the day is not a day of atonement. Of course, it won't be easy for Sheryl to explain all this to her family at the reception prior to her wedding. I will soon mention other reasons that she can provide them.

On the other hand, many authorities rule that the wedding day atones for both kallah and chosson, the same as Yom Kippur (Magen Avraham, introduction to 573; Elyah Rabbah 573:2; Beis Shmuel, 61:6). Following this approach, the kallah should fast also, even if we are not concerned about her becoming inebriated at her wedding (Rama, Even Ha'ezer 61:1). This, too, is why both chosson and kallah say viduy after mincha on the day of their wedding (Pischei Teshuvah, Even Ha'ezer 61:9). In addition, the couple should pray for a happy marriage that is blessed with children who bring great credit to themselves and to Hashem (Aruch Hashulchan, Even Ha'ezer 61:21).

Sheryl can certainly tell her family this reason for the sanctity of the day, and say that this is why she will be fasting. This will also provide her with the occasion to explain that a Torah marriage involves holiness, sanctity, and opportunity for spiritual growth, all ideas that will impress her family.

How long must one fast?

There are other halachic differences that result from the two reasons quoted above. If one fasts to ensure that the couple remains sober, then they should not break their fast until the wedding ceremony, even if it does not take place until after dark. Accordingly, if the ceremony takes place on a winter night, they should logically continue their fast, even if this means that it extends into a second halachic day (Shu"t Mahari Bruno #93; Aruch Hashulchan 61:21). On the other hand, if the fast is for atonement, then, once they have completed the day, they can break the fast. A third opinion holds that when the ceremony is at night, their fast does not begin until sunset that day – since prior to sunset is still the day before their wedding (Aishel Avraham Butchach 573). To the best of my knowledge, this last approach is not followed.

How do we rule?

The Chachmas Adam (129:2) concludes that since the fast is only a custom, one need not be stricter than the requirements of halacha for established fast days. Therefore, one may end the fast at dark and does not have to wait until the ceremony. However, one should be careful not to drink anything intoxicating until sipping the wine at the chupah (Pischei Teshuvah, Even Ha'ezer 61:9). The Aruch Hashulchan disagrees, but I believe accepted practice follows the Chachmas Adam.

What about the opposite situation -- when the ceremony takes place before nightfall? According to the rationale that the fast is atonement, some contend that one should fast the entire day, even if the ceremony took place in the afternoon (Bach, Orach Chayim 562 at end; Beis Shmuel 61:6). This means that after the wedding ceremony is complete, the chosson and kallah continue to fast until nightfall, even through the chupah and the yichud room! However, accepted practice is for the couple to end their fast at the ceremony, even when it takes place before nightfall.

Do Sefardim fast?

Most sources citing the custom of fasting on one's wedding day are Ashkenazic. Whether or not Sefardim fast on this day is dependent on local custom. The popular Hebrew halachic anthology, Hanisu'in Kehilchasam, mentions many Sefardic communities that followed the custom of fasting on the wedding day, at least for the chosson, including the communities of Algeria, Baghdad, the Crimea, Salonika and parts of Turkey (pg. 198, note 56). On the other hand, the prevalent custom in Constantinople (Istanbul), Egypt, and Eretz Yisroel was not to fast on the day of the wedding (see Birkei Yosef, Orach Chayim 470:2; Shu"t Yabia Omer 3: Even Ha'ezer: 9). It is interesting to note that some explain that the custom in Egypt was not to fast because the weddings were always conducted in the morning. They explain that when the wedding is held late in the day, we are concerned that the chosson and kallah may drink something intoxicating, but when the wedding is in the morning, there is no such concern (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chayim 470:2). One could thereby argue that when the Sefardim marry in the evening, they should follow Ashkenazic practice and fast.

Nevertheless, the common practice among Sefardim in Eretz Yisrael today is not to fast. Rav Ovadyah Yosef rules that Sefardim who moved to Eretz Yisrael should not fast on the day of the wedding, even if they come from communities where the custom was to fast. Although he respects this custom of the Ashkenazim to fast, he contends that since this is a day of celebration, those who do not have the practice are not permitted to fast.

Like receiving the Torah

What are the other reasons mentioned for the fast?

One early source states that the reason for the fast is that the wedding ceremony commemorates the giving of the Torah at Har Sinai. Indeed, many of our wedding customs, such as the carrying of candles or torches by those accompanying the chosson and kallah, commemorate our receiving the Torah. Continuing this analogy, one early source mentions that just as the Jews fasted prior to receiving the Torah, so too a chosson fasts the day of his wedding (Tashbeitz [Koton] #465). What I find interesting about this reason is that I am unaware of any Medrash that mentions the Jews fasting on the day they received the Torah. Obviously, the Tashbeitz was aware of such a Medrash. Perhaps this is why the later halachic authorities do not discuss this opinion or any halachic ramifications that result from it.

This is a beautiful reason to observe the fast, although I suspect that Sheryl's family might not appreciate it.

To avoid rift

Here is another, very meaningful reason mentioned for the fast, although it is largely ignored by the later authorities: The Gemara (Shabbos 130a) states, "No kesubah is signed without an argument." Unfortunately, it is common that differing opinions about wedding arrangements or setting up the newly- married couple cause friction between the families making the wedding. Since this problem is common, the couple should strive their utmost to avoid any conflict at all, and they should also pray and fast that the wedding pass with no disputes (Shu"t Mahari Bruno #93). Somehow, Sheryl did not think that her parents would appreciate this reason for her fast, and I tend to agree with her.

The king gets judged daily

Others explain that the origin for the custom is because the chosson is compared to a king, and we are taught by the Talmud Yerushalmi that a king is judged daily (Sanhedrin 2:3). Thus, the chosson fasts because he is being judged on his wedding day (Shu"t Mahari Bruno #93). Although we may not fully understand what this means, it is certainly a reason to do teshuvah and fast.

To appreciate the mitzvah

The above-mentioned anthology Hanisu'in Kehilchasam mentions yet another reason, which he attributes to the Rokei'ach. Great tzadikim were in such eager anticipation of performing rare mitzvos that they could not eat on the day they had an opportunity to perform one. Similarly, the chosson and kallah look forward to performing their mitzvah with such excitement that they cannot even eat!

Do they say Aneinu?
Do the chosson and kallah say Aneinu in their prayers, even if they will end their fast before the day ends?

The Rama (562:2) rules that the chosson recites Aneinu in his prayers, even if he is not going to complete the fast, such as when the wedding ceremony takes place during the daytime. In this latter situation, where he will not be completing the fast, many recommend that he omit the three words in Aneinu, BeYom Tzom Taaneiseinu, on this day of our fast, since for him it is not a full day of fasting (Rav Shelomoh Zalman Auerbach).

Accepting the fast
Usually, someone intending to have a voluntary fast must state at the end of mincha on the day before that he intends to fast the next day. Do the chosson and kallah accept the fast during mincha on the day before?

The halachic authorities recommend that the chosson and kallah make this declaration during mincha the day before the wedding, and recommend specifying that one intends to fast only until the time of the ceremony. Nevertheless, even if one did not declare the day to be a fast, and even if one did not mention the stipulation, one may assume that they should fast and they are required to fast only until the ceremony (Mishnah Berurah 562: 12). If the ceremony is before nightfall, the chosson and kallah should daven mincha before the wedding ceremony so that they can recite Aneinu, since once they break their fast, this prayer is inappropriate (Mishnah Berurah 562:12). By the way, if they forgot to say Aneinu, they do not repeat Shemoneh Esrei.

Are there days when they do not fast?
Indeed, a chosson and kallah must refrain from fasting on the many days when fasting is prohibited. This includes weddings taking place on Chanukah or Rosh Chodesh. The Magen Avraham (573:1) adds that they should not fast even on minor holidays, such as Isru Chag, Tu Bishvat and the Fifteenth of Av.

But maybe they will get intoxicated?
I understand that they are not allowed to fast—but if the reason for the fast is that they should not become inebriated, how will this be prevented? To avoid this danger, they must be careful not to drink any intoxicating beverages before the ceremony (Pri Megadim, Mishbetzos Zahav 573:1). Observing this precaution is a fulfillment of the custom to fast.

What about Lag BeOmer?
Technically speaking, there is no halachic problem with fasting on Lag BeOmer or during the month of Nisan, even though the custom is not to. Since halacha permits fasting on these days, the custom is for a chosson and kallah to fast. This applies also during the month of Tishrei or the first part of Sivan, even on days when we do not say Tachanun (Magen Avraham 573:1, 2). The Elyah Rabbah (573:3) records a practice that chasanim and kallahs not fast on days when we do not say Tachanun (quoting Nachalas Shivah). The Elyah Rabbah rallies many proofs from earlier authorities that this is not the halacha, but concludes that one who chooses to be lenient and not fast on these days will not lose by his lenient practice (hameikil lo hifsid).

What about a second marriage?
Does someone marrying for a second time fast on his wedding day?

According to the rationale that the fast is out of concern that someone might become intoxicated, there is no difference between a first or second marriage, and one is required to fast. Similarly, according to the reason that this is a day of atonement, they should also fast, since the day of a second marriage also atones. This is obvious from the Biblical source that teaches us that this day atones. When Eisav married Basmas/Machalas he was already married to two other women, yet the Torah teaches that the day atoned for him. Thus, we see that even a subsequent marriage atones, and someone marrying for second or third time should fast on the day.

What if they are not feeling well?
At this point we can address the second question raised above: Yocheved asks, "I usually do not fast well, and I am concerned how I will feel at my wedding if I fast that day. What do I do?"

We should be aware that on the least stringent of the required fasts, Taanis Esther, even someone suffering from a relatively minor ailment is not required to fast. The custom to fast the day of the wedding is certainly less of an obligation than fasting on Taanis Esther and, therefore, if either the chosson or the kallah suffers from a minor ailment or could get weak or dizzy from the fast, they should not fast (Aruch Hashulchan, Even Ha'ezer 61:21). Of course, specific questions should be addressed to one's rav.

Conclusion
The Ashkenazic practice of fasting on the day of one's wedding is within the category of custom, minhag, and therefore, as we have seen, includes many leniencies. Indeed, when these reasons apply, there is no reason to fast unnecessarily. Thus, if one is a Sefardi, not feeling well, or marrying on a day when Tachanun is not recited, one has a solid basis not to fast. However, when none of these reasons applies, one must follow the accepted minhag. The Gemara teaches that customs accepted by the Jewish people come under the category of al titosh toras imecha, do not forsake the laws of your mother, and that one is obligated to observe them.

May the fasts of our chasanim and kallahs contribute towards the increase of much shalom and kapparah and the creation of many happy marriages in Klal Yisroel.

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לע״נ
שרה משא בת ר׳ יעקב אליעזר ע״ה