

## Naso: Spiritual Specialization

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At 176 pesukim, Parshat Naso “tops the charts” as the longest parsha in the entire Torah. Its heft is a product of the protracted final section of Naso which delineates the gifts of the twelve nesi'im or tribal leaders. Even though their gift-packages were identical, the Torah enumerates each and every one of the twelve collections. Evidently, there is a deeper lesson to this “gift-giving”- a lesson important enough to justify extensive repetition of seemingly redundant information.

Commenting on this pageant of gifts, the Midrash portrays the mindset of the respective leaders as they offered their tributes. Each tribe possessed a unique talent and a distinct historical calling. These traits and tendencies had been announced by their patriarch, Ya'akov, and the tribes had preserved these different “identities” for hundreds of years. Finally, these mishkan-gifts presented an opportunity to express these tribal ambitions and dreams. The gifts symbolized their tribal hopes for future roles in Jewish History.

For example, Yehuda anticipated a future as monarchs and the rounded plates of silver denoted their projected expansive global kingdoms. Zevulun, for their part, were sea merchants and, to them, the plates implied the vast oceans upon which they would sail to assure a commercial “stream” for the rest of the nation. The population of Reuven took great historical pride in having served as “first responders” during the sale of Yosef. Viewing themselves as national heroes, they viewed the plates of silver as a symbolic encapsulation of their heroism. The Hebrew word for plate is “ke'ara”; the letters of this word, if scrambled, can be conjugated to form the word 'ikar' which would

suggest 'primary or principal' and would depict their role as early interveners. Ironically, the very same silver plates represented monarchy for the tribe of Yehuda, seafaring for the tribe of Zevulun and heroic first response for the tribe of Reuven. Though, to the naked eye their gifts seemed identical, they resonated with different symbolism for each distinct tribe.

This phenomenon provides an important dual lesson about religious growth. Each tribe took pride in their unique calling and their unique talents. Too often, we adopt one universal standard of religious excellence and attempt to stretch it collectively. Naturally, people are endowed with very different talents and interests and authentic religious identity is better achieved when those unique personal talents are developed and channeled for religious growth. Often we hear a story about a gadol and the inspiring trait which they modeled. Almost immediately that trait becomes "gold standard" or the "paradigm" which everyone is expected to aspire to. It is completely valid to deeply admire a trait in another while appreciating our individualism and acknowledging that this trait may not be ideal for our lives and for our religious ambitions. During the era of prophecy, personal interviews with prophets would conclude with personal guidance based on each person's unique character and individual personality. This assessment would assist each individual in developing a personal program of religious experience. Sadly, we no longer have access to supernatural character assessment, but identifying and assessing our own individual personality and traits is no less crucial in constructing genuine religious identity.

What is true on an individual level may also be true at a communal level. No particular community or ideology is perfect, and each community adopts different and hopefully complementary agendas. Proposing one single communal pattern ignores the reality that no

single community can fully encompass the entire gamut of interests and agendas. Each community excels uniquely at its own 'project' and adopts norms which may be beneficial for that community but irrelevant or even counterproductive for another. Sometimes we disparage "other" communities because they don't meet a particular objective standard without sufficiently appreciating their own 'individual' or 'particular' trajectories. This Midrash highlights a nation of specialists – each tribe specializing in their particular area of national and religious mission. It reminds us of the value of religious specialization.

However, despite their marked differences and despite their specialized roles, each leader offered an identical gift. When expressing our individualism we crave difference and ultimately distinction. We sometimes feel suffocated by conforming to behaviors and cultural mores of others. Human beings have a deep-seated desire to act differently and express their individualism through unique personal action and behaviors. Sometimes the pursuit of individualism yields vanity and self-promotion. In our attempts to assert our independence and individualism, we often loudly announce our personalities and compromise the dignity of privacy.

The tribal leaders provide an important second lesson- individual and personalized identity can be expressed through identical "practice". Even though the external activities may seem duplicate, these activities can be motivated by very different motivations and narratives. Preserving our individualism doesn't demand dissimilar behavior or vastly differing "expressions". It is possible to homogenize behavior and actions without suffocating emotional individualism. While donating the exact same gift, the leaders of Naso were driven by a range of different motivations and aspirations. Their identical gifts created

grandeur and decorum while avoiding the one-upsmanship which could have ruined the harmony of the mishkan induction.

As we seek individual experience we musn't underestimate the value of social conformity and cohesion. All too often, people from more diverse communities assume that members of more conforming communities are all identical, and lack any individualism. When communities adopt common dress codes this assumption of conformism becomes even more strident but remains largely inaccurate. Though conforming social modes do encourage group-think and less personal expression, individual experience still surges under the mask of conforming social mores. Each person and each community struggles to strike a balance between individualism and collectivism. We should avoid simplistic assumptions based on "optics" without carefully understanding and appreciating personal journey for identity which are undertaken by humans across the social and religious spectrums.