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“Samson” The Pathetic Hero

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z”l (Originally delivered May 27, 1972)

The Haftorah of this morning affords us an opportunity to return and re-investigate the figure of one of the most fascinating Biblical personalities, Samson. I am intrigued by the paradox he poses: the vulnerability of an apparently invincible hero, the weakness of a man so strong, the moral frailty of a Nazir--one dedicated to abstemiousness and santliness, and all that this has to say to us about the character and pretentious of both men and nations.

The Rabbis of the Talmud, the tradition of the Midrash and Bible commentators from ancient times to contemporary, are all of two minds about Samson. Some are sympathetic, despite his failings. Others are antagonistic despite his virtues.

An example of the favorable attitude to Samson is a statement by the Talmud (Sotah 10a) that שמשון דן את ישראל כאביהם שבשמים, *Samson ruled over Israel even as their Father in Heaven does--he was an eminently just man.* Or, in the same Talmudic passage, we are told that in addition to his last words recorded in the Bible, Samson offered up a prayer before the Holy One, and said: זכור לי עשרים ושנים שנה ששפטתי את ישראל ולא אמרת לאחד מהם העבר לי מקל ממקום למקום “Remember unto me, O Lord, the twenty-two years that I ruled over Israel, and not once during this time did I say to a single one of my people: ‘move this cane for me from one place to another.’” He was considerate, compassionate, and never overbearing. He was, after all, one of the galaxy of שופטים (Judges), the great leaders of Israel, during the formative period of our people’s history.

However, there is also a tradition that is quite critical of Samson. The hostility to him focuses largely on his lack of moral restraint. Thus, the Midrash tells us that שמשון בן הנשים, Samson could usually be found amongst the women. The several chapters of the Bible that speak of him tell us of three entanglements with Philistine women.

Ralbag maintains that it was foreordained that Samson be a Nazirite so that at least there be some restraint on the powerful passions that raged in his breast. But this restraint failed. The seductiveness of Delilah proved more powerful than the prohibition of his Nazirite vows. The Rabbis interpreted the name of Delilah as meaning דילדלה את כוחו, דילדלה את לבו, דילדלה את מעשיו ונסתלקה שכינה ממנו, *she dildelah, attenuated, his strength, diminished his heart, corrupted his conduct, so that the divine Presence left Samson.*

As for myself, my own views have changed over the years, and I suppose they shall continue to do so. As of now, I would say that I am inclined more to the latter or less favorable view of Samson, although not without a good deal of sympathy.

Samson died a heroic death, but his life was not really heroic at all. It was, rather, what one might call a Scriptural tragedy, one that begins even before his birth with visions, with טהרה, with devotion--and ends with an illicit love affair and moral bankruptcy. Like his father Manoah, Samson was dominated by a woman. But what a difference there was! Whereas Manoah was helped by his wife, for without her perceptiveness and wisdom and strength his name would never have been entered into the chronicles of Biblical history, Samson was destroyed by Delilah, the woman who dominated him. The figure of Samson emerges from the pages of the Bible as more pathetic than sympathetic.

His hair, which he did not cut because of his Nazirite status, is to me an important symbol of his personal charisma. I can imagine the effect of his appearance when he pounced upon the Philistines, and even of his appearance when he pounced upon the Philistines, and even as he moved among his fellow Israelites. Here was this giant, with his great muscles, and his flowing mane of wild hair. How awesome, how leonine, how overwhelming must

have been the impression of this man of גבורה (power). Yet, like hair, this charisma was attached to Samson but not really part of his intrinsic being. It was an aspect of his personality, perhaps, but it never became an element of his character, his soul.

With all this charisma, Samson failed to become a true leader. He was a Danite who operated by himself. Unlike other judges, he was not even the leader of his own tribe. And certainly unlike such people as Samuel and David, he never even aspired to unify all the tribes into one nation. The Rabbis, perhaps somewhat whimsically, said that Samson was a loner--like God himself! Thus

כאחד שבטי ישראל-כיחודו של עולם, מה יחידו של עולם אינו צריך סיוע, כך שמשון בן מנוח אינו צריך סיוע שלך (בראשית רבה)
“*Samson was like the truly One of the world- God; even as the One needs or seeks no help from others but does all by Himself, so Samson the son of Manoah.*”

Samson was a man of power and charisma. While he used them for the service of his people, they never contributed to his own growth. He had a long list of achievements of saving Jews; he was a מושיע. But he hardly qualifies as a wise man. The gestalt of Samson as he emerges from the pages of the Bible is not that of a truly religious personality or a man of Torah.

Samson trivializes his גבורה (power) for petty affairs, for shallow love and illicit romance. He allowed Delilah to abuse his special qualities--his hair, his גזירות, his power, his charisma--and so he lost it. Samson remained, at the end of his life, exposed: all the world was there to see that his unique qualities were not really part of him, they were external to him. Just as the scissors snipped off his crown of Nazirite hair, so was the cunning of a woman enough to reduce his power and diminish his charm to nought.

The Israeli writer and poet Abraham Kariv may be overstating the case, but certainly he has a point when he maintains that Samson gave גבורה (strength) a bad name. His life, Kariv maintains, was a kind of divine experiment in joining גבורה and קדושה, strength and holiness. But somehow the synthesis was not successful. Samson contained elements of both, but the gears did not mesh, the combination was never completed. And therefore גבורה never became a distinctive Jewish virtue. Yes, Jews may have גבורה, and sometimes they must possess power and utilize it--it is through the exercise of power that we have a State of Israel today. But it never became part of the catalogue of great Jewish characteristics such that you would hold them forth as a model for future generations.

Perhaps we can put it this way: Samson remains a Biblical Moshe Dayan.

An appropriate metaphor for Samson's type of charisma can be taken from one of his most famous riddles. The Bible tells us that he ripped apart a lion with his bare hands, and in the carcass of the lion honeybees gathered and Samson ate the honey they produced. Thereupon a riddle occurred to him and he tried it out as a bet upon his Philistine friends. The riddle was מעז יצא מתוק, “from the strong there came forth the sweet.” By this he meant that from the lion came forth honey.

Samson indeed had both: the power and strength of a lion, and the personality and attractiveness that might be associated with sweetness. And his charisma came from his strength. But there is a curious tinniness to his life. He never became real. What is wrong is that the lion is--dead. The sweetness is lifeless. Even Samson's sense of humor leaves me cold. His is a charm that issues from the strength of illusion, from a fundamental emptiness. Samson remains a man more to be pitied than admired or condemned.

Added to all this, he was a proud and vain man. The great historian of the Second Commonwealth, Josephus, in his Antiquities of the Jews, reminds us that Samson boasted that he smote a thousand men with a jawbone of an ass. At the moment of his triumph he did not attribute his success to God. Only later when he was vexed and thirsty and dejected did he appeal to God. But at the moment of his greatness he spoke only of his own victories.

But wherefrom this arrogance, so uncharacteristic of other Judges and other Jewish leaders?

The answer, I submit, is somewhat in the spirit of the Yiddish expression א חסרון די כלה איז צו שיין--the bride is so beautiful that it becomes a defect. Samson's problem was that he was too successful. Everything went his way. His life was an unbroken string of triumphs and he received the adulation of his grateful but not too perceptive people. And all this made him think that he is invincible.

His egocentricity was not of the repulsive, adult kind. Unlike Goliath who boasts when he confronts David, you cannot feel antagonistic and angry with him. Samson's vanity is childish and childlike. He strikes you as one who experienced arrested development: his infantile myth of omnipotence always remained with him. Since Samson never experienced defeat, he simply grew up with that same feeling of superiority. And it was this that brought about his downfall.

As an aside, read this psychological process on a

larger scale, and you understand part of the problem of the United States in Vietnam. Leader after leader of this country has been afraid to pull us out and “call it quits,” because he did not want to be the first President to preside over an American defeat. Our difficulty is that we are a country who for 200 years never lost a war--and therefore we are bleeding ourselves and a little country to death in the present involvement in Vietnam. Some time ago a distinguished Senator, Mr. Aiken of Vermont, suggested to the Senate that the United States proclaim that it won the war, so that now we can all pull out and go home and have peace. What he was doing was indulging this childish quality in the American psychology--since we never lost, we dare not lose for the first time. It is Samson’s problem on an international scale.

Compare Samson with two other Biblical heroes and see how the point comes out more clearly. Joseph was also charming, attractive, and politically powerful. But at the climax of his life, at the great test, he did not rule over his brothers or tell them how important he is. Instead, he said *כי למחיה שלחני לפניכם*, it is not my doing but God’s doing. Where did he get this sensible attitude, despite his success? From the years that he sat in prison. His failures made him a success. He had enough insecurity to temper him into realism. Whereas Samson never had the good fortune to fail.

Similarly, compare Samson with David. David, facing Goliath, speaks not of himself and his own power, but rather of the God of Israel. He was wise enough to do so because he was the youngest and least prominent in the family. He was overlooked and, fortunately, studiously ignored.

David suffered exile, hunger, and misery. And so, when at the height of his career he commits the moral blunder with Batsheba and is reproached by the Prophet Nathan, he has the courage and the moral strength to repent, to do *תשובה*. Contrast this with Samson, from whom we hear not a single word of regret or sorrow or contrition or apology. Samson was not able to do so because never before in his life did he have to say, “I am sorry.” (Perhaps our current generation, raised on a certain kind of novel and movie, might explain this by saying that Samson was in love with himself, and “being in love means never having to say I’m sorry”...) And so, when Samson was confronted by the great crises of his life, he crumbled morally as well as physically. At his moment of truth, he was found wanting. And at the end of his days, he lost his vision much before

he lost his sight as the Philistines plucked out his eyes.

It is for this reason that I find his end dramatic--when he pulls down the whole palace killing the Philistines with himself and crying out *תמות נפשי עם עם פלישתים*, “let me die with the Philistines”--but not quite as inspiring as I used to find it in the past. There were times when I returned to the story that I read this passage with great admiration. I still find it dramatic, but no longer admirable. Yes, Samson killed his enemies, bringing his world crashing down around him, and perhaps he had no choice and it was better that he did it. But now I realize something else: he left his own people a defeated people, all because of his vanity and his weakness.

So I feel sorry for Samson, but I can neither respect him nor truly like him. He is a hero, but a pathetic and pitiful one.

There are Biblical and Talmudical figures whom I recognize, in contemporary life. With all necessary changes being made, I can respond to the contours of the personality of an Aaron or a Solomon or a David or a Rabbi Akiva reincarnated, as it were, in some living figure. A Samson, however, is a non-repetitive character. I have never quite met a replica of Samson the son of Manoah, but there are aspects of his personality that I recognize all about me--and even in me. It is for this reason that this story is so very important. We must all search out within ourselves these particular qualities and reactions. This holds true especially for those who are more endowed with talent and potentiality; such people should be doubly alert to his particular problem. And most of all, those of us who are parents, whom God has given the responsibility for a future generation and who normally feel inclined to indulge our children and spare them from pain, we ought to look back at the personality and history of Samson and learn our lesson.

The Rabbis told us (Sotah 10a) that Samson was one of five Biblical figures created *של מעלה* של דוגמא, with a divine, superhuman talent. Samson’s was his *כח*, his *גבורה*, his strength. But he abused it. At a critical moment in his life, his power and his charisma failed him. Better yet, he failed them. He won all the battles, but he lost the war. So, in the Samson story, the Bible is not merely recording history. It is teaching us something--about ourselves.

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Support System

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In parshas Naso, the marching formation of the Jewish people is set in place with the completion of the work assignments given to the tribe of Levi. The nation is about to embark on its journey to the Holy Land, where its task will be to set up a society based on the principles of holiness, and thereby act as the bearers of God's name in this world. Before embarking on this journey, however, they are warned of various obstacles that may impede their progress in this direction. Among them is the breakdown of family life, as represented by the case of the sotah, or the wayward woman, whose husband has warned her not to be alone with a certain man, but still goes ahead and does just that. Suspicion of her infidelity thus aroused, she must go through a series of tests that will determine whether or not she actually engaged in illicit relations with this man. Following the section on the sotah, we are told of the nazir, the man who separates himself from wine, and refrains from cutting his hair and from defiling himself through contact with a corpse, even for a funeral. Following the section concerning the nazir, the kohanim are directed to bless the Jewish nation with the 'birchas kohanim,' or priestly blessing, by which they actually channel God's blessing to them. Rashi, citing the Talmud (Sotah, 2a), writes that the section on nazir follows that of sotah in order to teach us that if someone sees the sotah in her degraded state, when she is being tested in the Temple, he should separate himself from wine. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra writes that the section of the blessing of the kohanim follows that of nazir because the nazir, after he has gone through the process prescribed in the Torah, becomes holy, just as the kohein who blesses the nation is holy. There thus seems to be a progression, from the section on the sotah to that of the nazir to that of priestly blessings. There is, however, an alternative approach to the juxtaposition of these three sections, as suggested by Rabbi Joseph Wanefsky, zt"l, in his work, *From the Shadow of Insight*. I would like to present this approach and then modify it, based on a number of considerations that I will elaborate on.

Rabbi Wanefsky explained that the Torah is offering us two alternate approaches that can be taken when over-confidence and spiritual complacency threaten the breakdown of the family unit, on a small scale, and of Torah society, on a larger plane. One approach is that of the nazir, who, as Rabbi Wanefsky puts it, "abstains from

wine, from material splendor, from material abundance, from material affluence.' This is a solution, continues Rabbi Wanefsky, that leads to a monastic life. The other approach, however, is that of the kohein, as typified by the blessings he channels to the people. The kohein, through his spiritual influence, is involved in creating a society within all of the problems and conflicts that may arise as a result of material abundance and economic affluence. The kohein acts as a dominant force within that society, and endeavors to uplift it, rather than escape it. He is not the nazir who runs away to seek God in the desert, the forest or the mountaintop, but, rather the person who acts within the context of human problems and strife, and seeks to develop the cultural climate within the society that he lives in.

Rabbi Wanefsky in his approach to the convergence of these three sections of the Torah, directs our attention to the negative effect that the process that a nazir undergoes may have on the nazir himself and on society at large. There are, however, positive aspects to this process, as well. The prophet Amos (2:11) told the people that God had raised up prophets from their children and nazirs from their lads. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, zt"l, explained that at one point in Jewish history, young men were trained to become prophets by first undergoing the process of being a nazir. Moreover, the nazir is referred to as being holy, at least at the end of the successful fulfillment of his vow. Thus, there are also positive elements in becoming a nazir. I would, therefore, like to present a somewhat different approach to the connection of these three sections in parshas Naso, keeping in mind Rabbi Wanefsky's critical attitude to the path of the nazir, but, at the same time, bearing in mind the fact that he is referred to in the Torah as being 'kadosh,' or holy (note: we have dealt, in past years, with the dispute among the commentators regarding the status of 'kadosh' attributed to the nazir. Our remarks here are of a more general nature, without going into the various opinions found in the Talmud and among the classical commentators on this issue).

As we noted, the Talmud says that the reason the section of nazir is written after the section of sotah is to teach us that a person who sees the sotah in her degraded state should separate himself from wine. One approach for understanding the prescription is that it was divine providence which brought about this person's presence in the Temple at the

time of the sotah's ordeal, which was in order to bring him to a realization that there are forces within him which are drawing him to illicit behavior, and that he needs to control them. Becoming a nazir is a way of achieving this. However, realizing this, a person, if left to his own devices, may develop a tendency to go to extremes and completely isolate himself from society and from all forms of physical pleasure. By becoming a nazir, he is able to control this tendency while at the same time exercise control over the forces within him that were threatening to lead him to sin. Rabbi Avrohom Korman, in his work "HaParsha LeDoroseiha," writes that, actually, the restrictions placed upon the nazir are quite limited. There are only three areas in which he needs to exercise extra caution: 1) he must abstain from wine and wine products; 2) he must avoid defiling himself, even to bury a close relative; and 3) he must let his hair grow, not taking a haircut and not shaving his beard for the duration of his term as a nazir. In other religions, people who decide to live a monastic life are far more restricted than the nazir is. Thus, by channeling his desire to totally escape the world into a controlled system in which only a few things are restricted for him, he is actually able to use this tendency to elevate himself.

Rabbi Moshe Alshich, in fact, writes in his commentary that the reason the section of nazir is placed next to that of

the birchas kohanim - the priestly blessings - is to indicate that any person has the capacity to elevate himself to great spiritual heights and become similar to a kohein, even though he cannot, technically, deliver the blessings that the kohein does, or perform the same services in the Temple. While the Rambam, in his laws of Shemittah and Yovel, says that anyone can be like a member of the tribe of Levi, by dedicating himself to the service of God, the Alshich goes further and says that anyone can be on the level of a kohein, as well. This approach to the connection of these sections of the Torah reflects the explanation of Rav Avraham Ibn Ezra that we mentioned, namely, that the nazir is similar to the kohein in that he is referred to in the Torah as 'kadosh' - holy. In this way, he can help lead the people toward their ultimate goal of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, which, as we have often mentioned in the name of Rav Kook, entails the realization of holiness within the context of a functioning nation. This is, in fact, what Rabbi Wanefsky describes as the task of the kohein. According to his approach, however, becoming a nazir is in contrast to this task, while, as we have tried to show, becoming a nazir can actually guide a person, once he has successfully completed his nazirite term, to become the kind of leader that the kohein is supposed to serve as.

Why the Sotah Process is so Supernatural

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from the YUTorah shiur originally entitled "Why is the Sotah's Process so Supernatural?," given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on May 15, 2005)

In Medieval times it was common to have a trial by ordeal. Instead of relying on the principle of *Innocent Until Proven Guilty* and a trial based on evidence, they would do a mystical procedure. And based on whether a miracle happened, they would decide if the accused was innocent or guilty. They would throw an accused witch in the sea because they assumed that witches always float. If you floated, they were sure that you were a witch and burned you at stake. If you drowned, however, they realized that you were innocent. And there was a plethora of other, similar procedures that they used to do in Medieval times.

This approach to administering justice contrasts sharply with the Torah. The Torah has a very logical system based on the preponderance of the evidence, testimony of two witnesses (*al pi shnayim eidim yakum hadavar*), and expert judges. The process of Sotah is starkly different—it is clearly an exception. If the suspected adulteress gets "poisoned,"

she faces grave consequences, and if she does not get "poisoned," she gets nice brachos. According to most Rishonim, the miracle would be if she died because she was guilty. It is notable, however, that there is one shita that they intentionally poisoned her drink. In this case, the miracle would be if she was not guilty and survived the ordeal. It's not a major shita, though.

The question is, why is this the exceptional case of administering justice? And why is it not done in the usual way of proving the guilt or innocence *al pi shtaim eidim*—rational type of judgment? Some people like to criticize everything for no good reason. Based on this, they say that the Torah is misogynistic. When the accused is a woman, suddenly, you get this uncanny ritual. Of course, this couldn't be further from the truth, as we learn from an explicit gemorah in Makos. Why did Hashem invent the ritual of Sotah? Why did He put it in the Torah? The gemorah says

that Achitophel made a *kal va-chomer*—Hashem says, *Shmi she-nichtav be-kedusha, nimchak*. The Kohen erases My name, which is written be-kedusha, into the Sotah water. Normally, *mechikas shem Hashem* is an aveira. However, the gemorah states that in this case, it is mutar—to bring *shalom bein ish le-ishto*. Why did Hashem make a unique ritual in this case? For every aveira in the Torah, we follow the principle of *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*. If he did it, we punish him, and if he did not, we exonerate him. It works this way for all the other prohibitions in the Torah, except in this uncertain case of adultery. Why? If there is evidence, we will execute her—she deserves it—since the pasuk says *u-biarta ra*. If there is evidence of innocence, we will declare *bifnei am ve-eida* that she did not do it. But what if there is no evidence? In every other case, we don't do anything to the suspect. We respect the principle of *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*. But what happens if the husband is not sure if his wife committed adultery? Since there is no evidence, she is *muteres* to him— they can stay together. But for the rest of his life, he will think

that maybe she betrayed him. It will ruin their marriage. He will have to live with this 50/50 of not knowing whether she betrayed him. Therefore, Hashem made this special rule in the Torah—*la'asos shalom bein ish le-ishto*. Not to judge her. For that, we have a familiar principle of *Innocent Until Proven Guilty*. On the contrary, the purpose of the Sotah procedure is to restore her husband's faith in his wife. In the absence of clear proof, the only way to restore their happy marriage would be if the husband would be sure that she was faithful. How would he know for sure? For that, we need a miraculous sign from Hashem that would reassure the husband and make him love his wife again. That will bring back *shalom bayis*. And therefore, we have this special mitzvah that goes against the normative ways of meeting out justice, to restore the husband's faith that his wife was faithful to him—to bring *shalom bein ish le-ishto*. Ultimately, it is representative of the proper attitude of *Kol ha-Torah Kula*. As Chazal say, the Torah brings *shalom le-olam*. And this mitzvah is a classic example of this principle.

The Dignity of Man and the Dignity of Duty

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Jews don't count people. Instead the Torah creates a system of tabulating the population without actually counting human beings. This indirect counting scheme is delineated in parshat Ki Tisa: each citizen donates a half-shekel to the mikdash. Calculating the final sum of shekels (and dividing by half), provides an accurate population figure, without physically counting heads. Warning against the actual counting of people, the Torah sternly cautions: “when you count the Jewish people [insure] that each delivers a half-shekel to avoid a catastrophic plague”. The Torah indicates dire consequences for counting human beings; sadly, Dovid Hamelech, mistakenly counted actual people without employing an “intermediary” half-shekel. This miscue unleashed a plague which claimed the lives of 70,000 people.

Jews avoid counting people for several reasons – some of those reasons based upon mystical concerns. One of the more apparent dangers of counting people is the risk of depersonalizing individual identity. Each human being is born autonomous and different. Unlike any other creature, Man enjoys individual identity and the capacity for personal decisions. Equipped with freedom of choice and individual personality, we actively craft our world,

our relationships, and our identity. We stand alone in this universe with the capacity to personally shape our life. By respecting individualism, we respect the Divine image, which G-d implanted in each human being. Appreciating the complexity of the human condition and respecting the dignity of each individual is a “religious calling”- to revere Man as the pinnacle of G-d's creation. Counting humans and lumping them into larger populations imperils human individuality. Generally, when people are collected into larger groups, personal identity dwindles; when we become a “number” we forget that we have a name. The Nazis tattooed us with numbers in a vicious attempt to eradicate personal identity. Directly counting human beings can have similar, though less diabolical, effects.

For this reason, when conducting a census, we don't count people but, instead, we collect coins which, in turn are counted. The half-shekel underscores that each person possesses “value” and independence, and that this “worth” can't be muddled by ‘grouping’. Providing monetary value reinforces personal worth and counters the depersonalization of human identity.

The modern world is obsessed with counting human beings-directly or indirectly- and our individuality

is quickly fading. The science of statistics is crucial in predicting and navigating our future. Without this ability we remain vulnerable to the whims of uncertainty. Fortunately, when we employ statistical tools, we can attempt to predict trends, plan our future and steady our world. More and more, however, “Statistics” convinces us that we are merely a “statistic”, faceless numbers inhabiting a predetermined “graph of life” governed by statistical probability. It is becoming more difficult to assert personal destiny rather than sheepishly succumbing to cultural and societal trends. Additionally, our individualism is also challenged by the dynamic of “group think”. We surrender personal evaluation for the security of collective opinion. The internet has created a global forum for sharing information but also for encouraging “group think”. We consume content, in part, not based on personal interest but based on the level of interest this information has generated amongst others. We are drawn to viral content simply because it seems to be popular amongst millions. Additionally, social media helps us craft comfortable echo chambers which “pad” our exposure and relieve us of the burden of confronting different ideas. Without exposure to different ideas our own identity often remains shallow and formulaic. The internet enables the sharing of information but, sadly, forces us into “shared” opinion and the abdication of personal identity.

A world which doesn't cultivate individual identity disregards human dignity. Man possesses Divine dignity precisely because he is empowered to choose his own fate and to craft his own identity. Ignoring the dignity of Man yields a dangerous society. Respecting human dignity less, we are more prone to manipulate other human beings. If we fail to appreciate human dignity we tend to “objectify” others, treating one another more “instrumentally” – as objects to be manipulated for our own interest rather than Divine images deserving of the same dignity we crave for ourselves. The Torah was aware of the dangers of

depersonalizing human identity and mandated a counting method to avoid the loss of dignity. In the modern circus of group think, statistics, echo chambers, objectification of others and “identity politics”, we constantly face the challenge of respecting human dignity. We no longer donate half-shekel, but we must continually underscore human worth.

Yet, despite the significance and symbolism of the half shekel, this “process” is omitted in parshat Naso in the Torah's description of the census of the Levi'im. For some reason, this census is different and the Levi'im are shielded from the dangers inherent in a standard population census. For some reason, the dignity of a Levi, will not be endangered by actual counting and the Torah doesn't stress the half-shekel method. When describing the counting of Levi'im the Torah doesn't issue the ominous warning surrounding physical counting of people. It is unclear if the Levi'im were actually counted with a half-shekel, but either way the Torah doesn't record the half-shekel requirement for counting the Levi'im.

Unlike the rest of the population, the Levi'im weren't just counted as “numbers”. They are being tallied so that they can be assigned tasks in the mishkan. Some will port the mishkan from encampment to encampment while others will guard the entry gates of the mishkan; still others will be musically trained to accompany sacrifices with song. They will commit to lives of duty and of sacred mission. They will join a community of meaning and of common purpose. Their lives won't be self-serving and won't be driven by self-interest. Duty and mission will provide them with enduring dignity. They can be counted by head without concern that they will be dehumanized or reduced to statistics.

Every human possesses individual identity and innate dignity endowed by G-d. When humans employ their personal freedom to commit to a “life larger than themselves” their dignity augments. Duty, mission and service to others crowns the Levi'im with a dignity and nobility which isn't threatened by counting them directly.

A Triple Blessing

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Naso, the Torah records the text of the Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Blessings, recited by Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim, for all generations, as they lovingly bless the Children of Israel with Divine grace.

And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons saying, So you shall bless the Bnei Yisrael, say to them: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ ה', וְיִבְרְכֶךָ ה', May Hashem bless you and protect you; אֲרֹא ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵיךָ, וְיַחַנְךָ, May Hashem cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you; ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵיךָ,

וְיִשָּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם, May Hashem raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace; and I will place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them (Bamidbar 6:22-27).

In regard to this moving and impactful series of blessings, Rabbi Shalom Rosner writes, “When Birkat Kohanim is recited by the chazan (every day in chutz la’arezt and when there is no kohen present in Eretz Yisrael) during the repetition of the Amida, he prefaces the verse with an introductory prayer that begins, ‘Bless us with the threefold bracha.’

“Why is Birkat Kohanim called a threefold bracha when there are three verses, but actually six blessings - two in each verse? Rav Mordechai Willig shlita answers that each verse contains one twofold blessing, totaling three brachot (each with two components). What does this mean?

“The first blessing, May Hashem bless you and protect you, is about wealth. As Rashi explains, Hashem should bless us with material wealth and preserve and protect that wealth. Every blessing must be protected. HKB”H might bestow something upon us, but if we misuse it, then it can turn into something terrible - not a bracha at all. The bracha is that Hashem should provide for us, but also protect us to make sure we use our wealth properly, in our service of Hashem, not in pursuit of our desires... A bracha of material wealth must be accompanied by protection against its corrupting desires.

“In regard to the second blessing, May Hashem cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you, what is the ‘shining’ of Hashem’s ‘countenance’? This refers to the light of Torah... The bracha is that Hashem should light up our life with Torah. However, just like wealth is a double-edged sword, Torah can also be a double-edged sword. The more Torah we know, the more responsibility we have to act in a way that is fitting for it. If we are viewed as Torah scholars and do not act in an appropriate manner, then we desecrate Hashem’s Name. We have to be careful that our Torah learning and knowledge does not cause us to become arrogant. Therefore, the blessing for Torah knowledge must be balanced by a bracha that we find favor with others.”

And what of the final, concluding bracha - וְיִשָּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם, אֲלֵיךָ, May Hashem raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace?

Rabbi Rosner writes, “The first bracha relates to a material pursuit, and the second to a spiritual pursuit. The third and final bracha is a synthesis of the first two. We

ask that we will be able to properly balance between the material and the spiritual - a difficult balance to achieve. We therefore ask for peace and tranquility,” so that we may indeed achieve our goals in a pure and holy manner.

“Birkat Kohanim is thus indeed a threefold bracha, but each bracha requires a specific counterbalance, ensuring that our blessings are not misused but properly channeled in order to enhance our service of Hashem” (Shalom Rav, v.II, p.195-196).

We hope and pray that Hashem will bless us in both the realm of gashmius (material wealth) and ruchniyus (spiritual wealth). We hope and pray that Hashem will bless us with wealth and guard it so it won’t be lost. However, these blessings themselves are not sufficient if we do not know how to properly protect, utilize and channel the blessings in the service of G-d and the service of fellow man.

One evening, as Ha’Rav Avrohom Yaakov ha’Kohen Pam zt”l (1913-2001, Rosh Yeshiva Yeshiva Torah Vodaas) left a wedding hall, he said to the musician, ‘Thank you for your wonderful music.’ The musician smiled and replied, ‘Well, that’s my job!’ R’ Pam responded, ‘I’ll tell you what to do. From now on, when you play your music, have in mind that you want to fulfill the mitzvah of bringing joy to the chassan and kallah, to their families and friends.’ The musician did not understand how his work could be considered a mitzvah. ‘But I am getting paid to play music!’ he replied. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ said R’ Pam, ‘it still can be a mitzvah!’

“Similarly, R’ Pam told his dentist, ‘I envy you. You do chessed all day. People come to you in pain and you make them feel better.’ The dentist replied, ‘It’s a fringe benefit of the profession and the work that I do.’ ‘You are wrong,’ said R’ Pam. ‘Your profession is to do chessed with people. A fringe benefit of that is that you earn a living while doing chessed!’” (Rav Pam, Artscroll, p.368).

As we receive the Birkat Kohanim, let us remember that while G-d promises to do His part and bless us, we must do our part and utilize well all of our blessings.

The great Reb Simcha Bunim m’Peshischa zt”l (1765-1827) would say, “Our decisions in life must be as strategically calculated as a person playing chess. See to it that any move you make is not later regretted” (Great Jewish Wisdom, p.121).

May we indeed be blessed by the threefold blessing of the Birkat Kohanim, with the realization of the final blessing, וְיִשָּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

Blessing Our Children with Birkat Kohanim

Rabbi Yossi Goldin

In the middle of this week's parsha, Hashem issues a unique commandment to Aharon and his descendants: to bless Am Yisrael through the bestowal of three specific brachot outlined by the Torah. Known as "Birkat Kohanim", these brachot are bestowed by the Kohanim upon the community during davening each day in Eretz Yisrael, and on Chagim in Chutz la'aretz.

While much has been written about the powerful significance of Birkat Kohanim, a fundamental question arises. Why is the commandment to bless, to bestow brachot upon Am Yisrael, specifically delivered to the Kohanim? Without question, Kohanim certainly possess an elevated status within our community. We honor them with the first Aliyah to the Torah and as the first to lead Birkat Hamazon. When the Beit Hamikdash stood they played the major role in the service of the Bet Hamikdash. What is the connection, however, between these privileges and the phenomenon of blessings? Why, exactly, should the kohanim be granted the power of bestowing brachot upon Am Yisrael? Perhaps it would make more sense for the elders of the community, or the Rabbis of the community, to bestow these brachot, instead?

Perhaps we can make the following suggestion. A number of years ago I heard from mori v'rabi R' Michael Rosensweig the idea that Kohanim are woven into the communal structure of Klal Yisrael not only for the avodah they perform or for the honored position that is afforded to them. Instead, kohanim primarily serve to project a certain ideal stature and holiness to all of Klal Yisrael. It is not realistic to expect all of Am Yisrael to be careful enough to maintain a high level of holiness by following all of the necessary rigorous restrictions. G-d, therefore established an elite group within Am Yisrael, the Kohanim, and commanded them to keep these extra restrictions. By doing so, they would project a certain ideal of kedusha to all of Bnei Yisrael and would encourage the entire nation to continue to strive for growth in their own levels of holiness and spirituality.

Based on this idea, perhaps we can suggest that the kohanim are the most appropriate "bestowers of bracha" upon Bnei Yisrael specifically because they are the role models, the standard bearers, for the nation. By projecting an ideal of sanctity to Klal Yisrael and by setting the standard, they obtain the wherewithal and the ability to help Am

Yisrael bring the brachot to fruition. There is, therefore, no one more appropriate to bestow these brachot upon the nation than the Kohanim.

Many of us are familiar with the custom of parents blessing their children individually every Friday night before Kiddush. Interestingly enough, the text of the bracha that each parent gives to his child is actually the text of Birkat Kohanim. At first glance, this seems a bit strange—why specifically select the text designed for the use of the Kohanim as they bless the Jewish people in an entirely different context? Would it not have made more sense to tailor a special bracha for this occasion?

Based on the thoughts above, the bracha of Birkat Kohanim might actually be the most appropriate one for a parent to use in blessing a child. Parallel to the relationship that Kohanim are meant to establish with the rest of the nation, we, as parents, are meant to project an ideal to our children of how to act, and to model for them the characteristics towards which they should aspire. We are meant to be role models for our kids, to demonstrate the higher level of sanctity that may be beyond their reach at a young age, but that should always serve as their goal. Through this modeling, we can help our children achieve wonderful heights in avodat Hashem. Similar to the Kohanim, we are uniquely positioned to help our kids bring their own brachot to fruition; and, therefore, it is most appropriate for us to be the ones to bless them each and every Friday night.

In the midst of our Parsha, Hashem teaches us an important lesson regarding brachot in general. By directing the commandment to bless the nation specifically to the Kohanim, G-d demonstrates that it is specifically those individuals who serve as the role models for the people, who project for them a certain ideal, who are also the most appropriate ones to bless them as well. Following that model, we as parents are given the privilege and obligation, to model for our children what it means to serve Hashem and to strive for greatness. We are therefore also given the privilege to bless our children each week, even as we work towards helping them realize these incredible brachot.

Learning Torah and Achieving the Ultimate Peace

Rabbi Dr. David Shabtai

Immediately after we recite the Birkot Ha-Torah each morning, we demonstrate that we take our commitment to Torah learning seriously by reciting a section from Torah. Just like we immediately perform the mitzvah action right after reciting other birkot ha-mitzvah, so to by the daily birkot ha-Torah. Interestingly, the section of Torah that Hazal prescribed that we learn each and every morning are the several pesukim of Birkat Kohanim. It's an interesting choice since it's not an otherwise mandated part of tefilah and seemingly describes a mitzvah that only applies to a small fraction of the Jewish people (Kohanim).

Rav Amram Gaon, the author of one of the earliest versions of the Siddur, explains that Birkat Kohanim was chosen because the berakhot contain exactly 60 letters, corresponding to the 60 Masekhtot (roughly books) of the Mishnah. What better choice to follow up on berakhot on Torah learning than something that actually represents the entire gamut of Torah study. He then adds that one who strives to learn the entirety of Torah merits the berakhot of Birkat Kohanim.

The Midrash elaborates that Birkat Kohanim is described as encompassing all of Torah and thereby all possible berakhot because it ends with a blessing of peace - וישם לך שלום. As the very last Mishnah in Shas relates, "לא מצא הקב"ה כלי מחזיק ברכה לישראל אלא השלום (Hashem could not find a vessel that could contain blessing for Israel except for that of peace). All berakhah can only have value when there is שלום.

In today's historical moment, we can instinctively feel how true this is. When our brothers and sisters in Israel are living their lives with the constant worry about how far away they are from a bomb shelter, we come to think more about how safety and peace are some of the often unrecognized and underappreciated blessings that we all too often take for granted.

But there is also a potential deeper reason for specifically choosing Birkat Kohanim as the first piece of Torah to learn each and every day and why it comes to represent all of Torah study.

It is specifically fitting that Birkat Kohanim is a daily obligation specifically on Kohanim, whose ancestral heritage traces back to Aharon HaKohen — about whom the Mishnah testifies was always אהב שלום ורודף שלום (a lover

and pursuer of peace). Not between countries and nations, but among individuals, married couples, and neighbors.

Indeed, some point out that the Hebrew letter סמך that numerically represents 60 is a complete circle. Each point on the circumference of a circle is equidistant from the center; there is no point that is closer than the others. Symbolically, it comes to represent a type of equality, where each point / person comes to recognize the inherent importance and value in each other. When we each recognize that we aren't any better, more important, or more valued than anybody else, we can strive for a sense of peace that is predicated on mutual respect.

It's particularly appropriate that this message is couched in the framework of berakhot on Talmud Torah, particularly coming off the holiday of Shavuot. Maharal wonders why the Torah was not given to Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov. Why did Hashem wait so many generations to only give us the Torah after we left Egypt? Why weren't the great generations who lived earlier worthy of it?

He explains that Avraham, Yitzhak, and Ya'akov were all individuals. They were indeed great people, spiritually elevated, and inspirational figures. But they weren't a nation. Torah is only appropriate for a whole nation — something that we became as we left Egypt.

While we often focus on our own personal Torah study and do what we can for ourselves to feel more inspired in learning Torah and growing spiritually, each and every morning we remind ourselves of the value of the community in Torah study. There is something far more sublime in communal Torah learning — in recognizing the value of each of us encouraging each other, of learning together, and growing together. Torah is something that is accessible to all and Hazal teach us that we each have our own portion in it. It's a great equalizer and a way through which we can recognize and appreciate the greatness and value of each and every person. And in doing so, may we merit a true peace — among ourselves, our families, communities, friends, and around the world.

Inheriting and Meriting a Special Relationship with Hashem

Rabbi Noah Whittenburg

Akohen and a nazir don't walk into a house because there is a dead body inside. This sounds like a bad setup for a joke, but it's really the Halacha. Both a Cohen and a Nazir are not allowed to become tamei (ritually impure) from a dead person. However, there is one major difference between them: a Cohen can contaminate himself upon the death of his seven closest relatives, but a Nazir cannot contaminate himself for anyone.

If we were creating the rules, we probably would have done the opposite. A Cohen is born a Cohen, and remains a Cohen all his life. A Nazir chooses to do so, and generally only stays as such for 30 days. Furthermore, only a Cohen can serve in the Mishkan. Presumably, this means the Cohen has more sanctity than the Nazir. So why does the Torah seem to teach the opposite?

The Avnei Nezer (R. Avraham Borenstein, 1838-1910) explains that the reason is based on the respective sources of their sanctity. A Cohen inherits his kedusha from his family,

and therefore he is allowed to desecrate it for their sake. A Nazir, however, has independently invested to raise himself to a higher level. Therefore, he can never contaminate himself, even for family.

Every day in Az Yashir we recite the pasuk, “זֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵלֵינוּ” — *this is my God and I will build Him a sanctuary; the God of my father and I will exalt Him* (Shemot 15:2). The pasuk draws a dichotomy between a person's relationship with God and his parents'. However, the pasuk also demonstrates that these are not actually at ends with each other. On the one hand, we should connect to the God of our parents through the faith that they passed down to us. At the same time, we should be working to create our own special relationship with Hashem.

Just like the Cohanim, we should appreciate the Kedusha we received from our parents. However, we should not simply rely on that inheritance. We should also be like the Nazir and work to create our own self-made status.