



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Naso 5782

Aristocracy in Jewish Society

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered June 9, 1973)

**This sermon is largely based on the ideas of the late Prof. Feivel Meltzer in his short book on פרשת השבוע.*

The quality and the character of a society can usually be measured by the kind of people it chooses to honor. A nation's heroes are normally a good index of its mores. You can know a people by observing whether it esteems bull fighters or poets, cloak-and-dagger operatives or philosophers, politicians or musicians, men of wealth and success or spiritual personalities.

With this in mind, it is instructive to inquire what kind of society Judaism envisions for us, and how successful we Jews have been, in practice, in conforming to this normative society and the ideals laid down for it by our faith.

At the end of the last portion, Be'midbar, we read the commandment **נָשָׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי קֵהַת מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי לְוִי לְוִי**, to take the census and assign duties to the family of Kehat, of the tribe of Levi. This morning's sidra, Naso, continues with the commandments of the census: **נָשָׂא, אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן גַּם הֵם**: to take the census and assign the duties to the family of Gershon.

Now, it has been asked: why is Kehat given precedence over Gershon, especially since Gershon is the בכור, or first born? The Rabbis of the Midrash put it this way:

אעפ"י שגרשון בכור, ומצינו בכל מקום שחלק הכתוב כבוד לבכור, לפי שהיה קהת טוען הארון ששם התורה, הקדימו הכתוב לגרשון.

Although Gershon was older, Kehat received priority because his task was to carry the Ark which contained the Torah.

We learn, therefore, that כבוד התורה is greater than כבוד הבכורה, that scholarship in Jewish life ranks over primogeniture.

Jewish law clearly lays down the priorities of respect and honor due to different categories of persons, and this

order represents the ideal hierarchy of Jewish society. In it, primacy is given to — the sage, the wise man, the scholar. Unlike Plato, the Rabbis did not place at the apex of society the Jewish version of the philosopher-king. They did not identify the man of intellect with the man of political authority and civic sovereignty. Rather, they gave the highest esteem to the חכם, the Jewish equivalent of a philosopher, and second to him was the מלך or king.

We are taught in the Mishnah that

חכם קודם למלך, מלך קודם לכה"ג, כה"ג קודם לנביא.

The order of priority is: sage, king, high priest, prophet. These four are the heroes of Jewish society.

Consider the Prophet. The reverence for him is clearly established in our tradition. Indeed, as part of the blessings over the Haftorah, we bless God

הבוחר בתורה ובמשה עבדו ובִּישְׂרָאֵל עִמּוֹ וּבְנְבִיאֵי הָאֱמֻתָּה וְהַצִּדִּיק.

Yet, the Prophet remains subordinate to the other three. Why is this so? Because prophecy is a response to negative conditions. Prophecy is not, as with soothsayers or magicians in other cults, a matter of forecasting or predicting the future, but primarily its task is to reproach and reprove and rebuke the people and summon them back to God and to Torah. The prediction of future consequences is but one aspect of the Prophet's task of תוכחה. Hence, the whole office of the Prophet is called into being only when the people reveal profound inadequacies and failures and backslidings. That is why the Rabbis said:

אלמלא חטאו ישראל לא ניתן להם אלא חמשה חומשי תורה וספר יהושע בלבד.

The next in order are מלך וכה"ג. Notice that the King comes before the High Priest. Why is this so? Because Judaism does not assert a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular as do other faiths. We do not believe that we must render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. All is God's realm, and the

King has his role to play in it. Political leadership has a “religious” function too, namely, that of establishing social peace and harmony and justice. Indeed, the Priest has, as his main task, the ordering of the relationships between man and God, בין אדם למקום, whereas the King is charged with establishing proper relationships בין אדם לחבירו. It is for this reason that the king takes precedence over the high priest.

But at the very pinnacle of the ideal Jewish hierarchy comes the חכם.

The Rabbis told us of three crowns:

כתר כהונה, כתר מלכות, כתר תורה.

And in אבות דרבי נתן we read that

כתר כהונה אפילו נותן כל כסף וזהב שבעולם אין נותנין לו.

One can never buy the crown of priesthood. Similarly, one can never buy the crown of royalty (although the effort has been made and it has been done — but illegitimately). Actually, both the High Priesthood and Kingship go from father to son. But when it comes to the crown of Torah-כל-- כל-when it comes to the crown of Torah, הרוצה ליטול יבוא ויטול one not only cannot buy it, he need not pay a penny for it. It is available to whoever desires it. All one must do to seize the crown of Torah is to spend his whole life in it, to experience sleepless nights, to suffer for it, to give up all the pleasures of the world that stand in the way of acquiring greatness and wisdom of Torah. No wonder that ממזר ת”ח קודם לכה”ג עם הארץ.

Of course, not all חכמה is creative and constructive. The Jewish tradition knows of חכמה להרע, or evil genius. True wisdom remains that which is based upon piety: ראשית חכמה יראת ה’.

Not only do I refer to piety in the conventional sense, but to any intelligence applied to the improvement of man’s life in the face of God. Thus Jeremiah told us אל יתהלל חכם בחכמתו... כי אם בזאת יתהלל המתהלל השכל וידע אותי כי אני ה’ עשה חסד משפט וצדקה בארץ כי באלה חפצתי נאם ה’.

True wisdom is the imitation of God, and God’s personality is one which seeks the establishment of love and justice and righteousness in the world. Hence, any human being who uses his mind and heart and intellect and will in order to realize and implement these great qualities, is a wise man. Judaism hence approves the חכמה of the scientist who improves life as an act of חסד, the intelligence of the philanthropist and the wisdom of the jurist and the businessman or any citizen whose goal is חסד. משפט וצדקה. But, above all others, is the wise man who is learned in the ways of Torah, who exposes himself to the direct message of the will of God: the חכם תלמיד.

Have we Jews succeeded? The answer is a fluctuating one. Generally I believe that the answer is more positive than negative. For instance, European Jewry, especially the pre-Emancipation Jewry, and the part that remained in the shtetl of Eastern Europe, as well as central Europe in some cases, was one which came close to realizing this social hierarchy of Judaism. The greatest dream of parents was not that their children become doctors or lawyers or engineers or very wealthy people, but that they become תלמידי חכמים. Jewish children were put to sleep in their cradles with the lullaby תורה איז די בעסטע סחורה.

Israel today, with all its problems and its military needs, still reverences learning. Of the four presidents of Israel, the first incumbent, Chaim Weizman ע”ה and the present President (יבדל לחיים) Prof. Katzir, are both men of science. Of the other two, Dr. Ben Zvi ז”ל and (יבדל לחיים) that great Jew, Zalman Shazar, achieved renown in Jewish scholarship.

In the United States, we were not so fortunate. It used to be that any national Jewish organization -- even the Orthodox, or perhaps especially the Orthodox, even this very day — felt that no convention meeting could be complete without a guest speaker who was preferably wealthy, non-Jewish, and either a politician or a humorist. Organizations vie with each other in getting “name” people, in the hope that by honoring them some of the honor would reflect back on themselves. But the people they chose to honor were certainly not those who could fit the prescription of the ideal Jewish structure.

Fortunately, the pendulum is swinging away from that kind of self-abnegation and unworthy attitude. A younger generation is more sophisticated, more accepting of its Jewishness, more understanding, and less sycophantic. They understand that true Judaism calls for the חכם to have the highest rank in the Jewish world.

At Sinai we were told that we were going to be and must be a שם קדוש, ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש, a people who emphasized priesthood and prophecy. Yet our special pride above all else was told to us by Moses before he died

כי הוא חכמתכם ובינתכם לעיני העמים... ואמרו רק עם חכם ונבון הגוי הגדול הזה.

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The Jewish Observer

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha includes within it the laws of the nazir, a person who makes a vow which forbids him from indulging in wine as well as grapes and grape products, from cutting his hair, and from defiling himself through contact with a human corpse. These laws follow immediately after the laws concerning the sotah, the wife who is suspected of having forbidden relations with another man. Why are these two sections juxtaposed? Rashi cites the Talmud in Sotah (2a), which says that this juxtaposition teaches us that someone who sees the sotah in her time of disgrace should take upon himself to abstain from wine, because indulgence in wine often leads to adultery. An obvious question one can ask on this Talmudic teaching is why does the observer of the disgrace of the sotah need to undertake all of the restrictions of the nazir, when it is only wine that is singled out by the Talmud as leading to the kind of immoral acts of which the sotah is accused?

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin, in his commentary *Oznayim LeTorah*, does ask this question, and answers it by explaining that we first need to understand what it is that is being observed. The disgrace of the sotah referred to by the Talmud, as Rashi in his commentary to *Maseches Sotah* explains, is not the immoral act itself, but the procedure in the *Beis HaMikdash* in which her clothing is ripped and she drinks from the 'sotah waters' as a test of her fidelity to her husband. Although some of her body is exposed through the rending of her clothes, it is presumed that the evil inclination will not thereby arouse the observers, since the woman is being degraded. However, says Rabbi Sorotzkin, the evil inclination works in subtle ways, and may arouse the person's desires even at such a moment. Therefore, he needs to distance himself from indulgence in items which may further arouse him. By becoming a nazir, he will of necessity abjure from wine, which can lead to acts of immorality, and also refrain from concentrating too much on the appearance of his hair as a prelude to illicit encounters. Although Rabbi Sorotzkin does not mention this, the medieval halachic authority, Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher, author of the *Turim*, preceded Rabbi Sorotzkin in this explanation of the need for the observer of the sotah to refrain from cutting his hair. Rabbi Shimon Schwab z"l, in his *Ma'ayan Beis HaShoeivah* to parshas Naso, cites this

explanation of the Tur and elaborates on it. The interested reader is referred to that work.

We still need to understand why the observer of the sotah in her state of degradation needs to avoid contact with a human corpse. Actually, this restriction seems to be counter-intuitive, since we find that the Talmud (*Berachos*, 5a) advises a person who feels that his evil inclination is getting the better of him to remember the day of death as a precautionary measure! Rabbi Sorotzkin explains that the impure nature of the corpse - its tumah - has a kind of mystical effect on the person who is defiled by it, which prevents him from attaining holiness, and thus leaves him open, again, to the enticements of the evil inclination. I would like to suggest a different, non-mystical explanation for the observer's need to avoid corpse-defilement, which connects this restriction of the nazir with the other two he must undertake.

We have mentioned many times in the past the explanation given by Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik z"l of the procedure of the parah adumah, or red heifer, which a person who is defiled through contact with a human corpse must undergo. This procedure has been characterized as a mystery that even King Shlomo, the wisest of all men, could not fathom. Rav Soloveitchik explained that the mystery involved is the mystery of death itself. Man is unable, on his own, to cope with the fact that he will eventually die, and needs an outside force, represented by the sprinkling of the mixture of parah adumah ashes and spring water, as described in the Torah, to help him deal with it. Ultimately, says Rav Soloveitchik, it is only the eternal God Who enables man to cope with the inevitability of death, linking him to eternity through his soul. Contact with death, then, can lead one to believe that life is futile, and this, in turn, can lead one to remove all moral restraints from himself, in the spirit of 'eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die.' For this reason, the observer of the sotah needs to avoid corpse-defilement, in addition to abstaining from wine and not attending to his hair, in order to avoid a possible descent into immorality as a result of the scene that he witnessed.

The Nazir's Sin of Being a *Yosheiv*

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from the YUTorah shiur given at the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on May 28, 2015)

As we know, the Parsha of the Nazir is very controversial in Chazal and Rishonim. Ramban and Rambam famously argue whether it is a good thing to be a Nazir. Rambam picks up on the famous drasha of Rebbi Elazar ha-Kappar, who says: *ve-chiper alav me-asher chata al ha-nofesh*—and he atones on his (the sinner's) behalf for the sin that he sinned through [coming in contact with] the [deceased] soul. What was the *cheit* here? The *pehuto shel mikra* is that *asher chata al ha-nefesh* means that the Nazir became *tamei la-nefesh* by coming in contact with a dead body. And the drash of Rebbi Elazar ha-Kappar is that he caused himself suffering by avoiding wine, by engaging in ascetic practices—and that's a *cheit*. And therefore, we see that *yosheiv be-ta'anis nikra chotei*. Because if just not drinking wine is a *cheit*, certainly not eating anything is a sin. Therefore, the proper *derech Avodas Hashem* is not to try to affect *inuy* upon oneself by avoiding the normal *hana'os* of *olam ha-zeh*.

And, of course, Ramban disagrees vociferously, and he says: What are you talking about? It says, about the Nazir, *kadosh yihiye ... ki nezer Elokav al rosho*—he shall be holy, for the crown of Hashem is on his head. How can this not be a good thing? And he defines when it is good to be a Nazir and when it's harmful—when it's worthwhile to withdraw from the normative material life in *olam ha-zeh*, and when it is not.

There is a sharp comment from Chidushei Ha-Rim, who makes a homiletical observation that summarizes what's really at the core of the opinions of various Rishonim and Acharonim who deal with this sugya. And he suggests being *medayek*—in a homiletical fashion—in the language of Rebbi Elazar ha-Kappar. Of course, in the *pesukim*, what's the context of *ve-chiper alav me-asher chata al ha-nofesh*? It's the *tamei* Nazir. You don't have this *pasuk* by the *tahor* Nazir. He must bring *korbanos* at the end of his *nezirus*—an *Olah*, a *Shlamim*, and a *Chatas*. And it doesn't say *asher chata al ha-nofesh*. A Nazir *tamei* must bring an *Olah*, a *Chatas*, and an *Asham*. And it says *asher chata al ha-nofesh*, there. Why does it say this *davka* in the context of Nazir *tamei*? What's the difference between their *korbanos*? By the Nazir *tamei*, the *pasuk* says, *ve-*

hayamim ha-rishonim yiplu, ki tamei nizro. He withdrew from all of *olam ha-zeh*, and then. . .he didn't make anything of it. His efforts were wasted. He must start from scratch. He withdrew from the normative life of *olam ha-zeh* and didn't create anything of it. When the *pasuk* says *yiplu*—it means that his effort was *le-vatala*. As opposed to the Nazir *tahor*, who actually created something: a *kiyum nezirus*, the *korbanos* at the end of his *nezirus*, and a certain, unique spiritual experience. And the *chiluk* is very *pashut*. If someone retreats from the pleasures of this world and creates something out of it—while making himself a better person in the process—then that's a source of tremendous *kedusha*; *nezer Elokav al rosho*. But if someone refrains from x, y, and z, yet does not use this opportunity to make himself a better person—that's a tremendous *chet*. G-d gave us the world to use it. Sometimes we indulge in certain desires and thereby *mechazeik* ourselves. And sometimes, we misuse those desires. But to forego things for no reason, without becoming a better person, that's *shtus*—and it means we are rejecting Hashem and the world He gave us. And Chidushei Ha-Rim is *medayek* in the words *yosheiv be-ta'anis*. Why not say *mis'aneh*, instead? Ok. Perhaps this is just a flowery expression that they used in the old days. But Chidushei Ha-Rim says: To be *yosheiv*, means that you sit in the same place. Someone who sits (read: stays) in the same place when he finishes his *ta'anis* as when they started is *nikra chotei*—he is like the Nazir *tamei*. He is not eating and drinking, yet he is the same person afterward. So he might as well have eaten and drunk. But someone who is not *yosheiv be-ta'anis*, someone who is *mehalech be-ta'anis*, goes somewhere because of his abstention. If he ends up being a different person from who he was before by using an opportunity to withdraw from food and drinks to refocus his life, think about the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, and grow from the experience of not indulging, and as a result he ends up a more sensitive, spiritual, and holy person than before, then he is like the Nazir *tahor*—who is not called a *chotei*. That's the reason the *ta'anis* exists. And therefore, some of the *poskim* write—like Rav Ovadyah in various places—that we are not *mis'aneh* as much as we used to.

A shaila whether one should take on an extra ta'anis on Mondays and Thursdays for a year is nonexistent nowadays. But even those *ta'anesim* that we do have—we are *chayav* in a certain number of *ta'aneisim* every year—we should remember that *kol ha-yosheiv be-ta'anis nikra chotei*. Ta'anis, if you are *yosheiv*, is considered a wasteful. The purpose of a *ta'anis* is to get you to a higher

spiritual place. Therefore, we should use those things that we do enjoy in this world to grow. And we must also use those opportunities when we should refrain from various pleasures of *olam ha-zeh* to grow and become a better person afterward. And we should always strive to advance ourselves, *be-ta'anis*, and in everything else—and not be a *yosheiv*. Shabbat Shalom.

The Dignity of Man and the Dignity of Duty

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

The drama of a nazir illustrates our delicate interface with the physical world which surrounds us. Hashem crafted us as spiritual creatures- more angel than animal. Homo sapiens are meaning-seeking animals, something the physical world can never provide. In our pursuit of meaning, we must look beyond.

On the other hand, Hashem fused our spirits to bodily frames and firmly planted us in a material world. The bodies which house our souls have physical needs and respond to physical experiences. These two “selves”- our bodies and our souls- though fundamentally different, feel indistinguishable. They heavily influence one another: spirituality affects physical well-being, while medical health influences our spiritual state. We are crafted as “two” but experience life as “one”.

Throughout our history, our tradition offered differing approaches to help navigate these two spheres. Often, the physical world was dismissed or even vilified. Why indulge excessively in a reality which is merely a “passageway” to a more eternal and grander “palace”? Temporary pleasures of a fading world should be avoided or, at the very least, curtailed. Our eternal spirit will long outlast this transient world and its fleeting pleasantries.

Pleasure is not only transient, it is also dangerous. Uncontrolled, it can lure us to sin or condemn us to a life of moral decay. Facing these perils, our best hope for virtue lies in minimizing our interactions with the material world and significantly curbing physical pleasure. As the famous dictum in *Pirkei Avot* encourages: “eat [meager] bread with salt, and sleep on the ground, [while] living a life of self-abnegation”. Though this phrase refers specifically to torah scholars, it reflects a more generic and minimalistic approach to physical pleasure.

Other approaches in our tradition were more “holistic”, promoting a healthy interaction with the physical world.

Experiences which deepen human character, can also increase religious depth and resonance. The deeper our emotional well-being and the more “well-rounded” we become, the more sweeping our religious experience becomes. Though often they clash, in religion, breadth can often increase depth.

The gemara in *Berachot* (35) portrays the blessing recited upon food- *birchat ha'nehenin*- as a form of “hallel”. Hallel isn't recited over empty experiences and certainly not upon toxic ones. Reciting ‘hallel’ before eating, implies inherent value in the experience of eating. Or, as the *Yerushalmi Talmud* (*Kiddushin*) claims: “each of us will be held accountable for the worldly pleasures we didn't fully appreciate” This warning doesn't sanction a life of self-gratification or decadence. Rather, it signals the value of aesthetic experiences and ratifies reasonable pleasure taken from Hashem's world.

We live in perpetual “tension” between these two poles. Too much indulgence and our soul withers. Too little interaction and our religious experience may become listless.

A nazir sits right at the boundary of this quandary. Distancing himself from wine and potential drunkenness, reflects a heightened religious sensitivity. The gemara traces his bold decision to the tragedy of an unfaithful woman or a *sotah*. Horrified at the prospect of marital infidelity, the nazir forswears wine, preempting a potential slip into the world of desire and sensuality. Recoiling at the horror of moral recklessness, he takes refuge in a life of self-deprivation. Heroically, he draws a line in the sand, which he dares not cross. A nazir chooses the monastery over the party life.

In a similar vein, a gemara in *Ta'anit* profiles a heroic nazir: an attractive man became enraptured by his own handsome image, reflected in a pool of water. Fearing

vanity and obsession with his own physical beauty, he pledged to be a nazir, hoping that his lengthy and unkempt appearance would mask his natural beauty. Worried about narcissistic conceit, he stepped away from the world of beauty. He closed his Instagram account.

Though a nazir is heroic and sacred, he is also referred to as a sinner who must offer chatat sacrifice to atone for his sin. Elaborating upon the sin of this “holy man”, the Rambam criticizes a nazir for upsetting the delicate balance between engagement with our world and withdrawal from it. The Torah carefully monitors our interaction with this world by prohibiting certain experiences and allowing others. By unilaterally banning wine which the Torah allows (and even commands), a nazir overturns the Torah’s “policies of regulation”. By villainizing wine, he frames Judaism as a rejection of this world rather than a calibration.

His sin lies in misrepresenting religion as something it isn’t. Religion does not suffocate, it regulates. It does not stifle, but it ennobles. It does not withdraw, it engages. We can be both angelic and human at the same time. The ambiguity surrounding the nazir underscores just how essential this calibration of the physical world is to religious sensibility.

We currently stand at a very critical crossroad. We live in an era of unprecedented affluence and the convenience of life surpasses anything our ancestors could have imagined. Life offers more comfort and greater luxury than ever before. The “bread and salt” of Pirkei Avot have been replaced by bagels and steak. We do sleep on the ground- but only when we go glamping. I don’t think that was the original intention of Chazal.

Yet, despite this transformation, our religious “language”

hasn’t changed. The Ashkenazic world, in particular, has adopted a mussar-influenced “rejectionist” view of the world. That voice, however, was distilled close to two hundred years ago in a more spartan and physically austere world. The economic conditions of 19th and early 20th century Europe, were harsh, and invited a policy of “bread and salt”. If life in Europe was unforgiving, conditions in the newly settled Palestine were simply unbearable. Many returned to Europe. Many who didn’t, perished. It was a challenge just to survive.

In a world of meager resources, a doctrine of religious ascetism braced religious dedication. The world looked was bleak and we had every reason to turn away.

Well, our world has certainly changed! Thankfully we now enjoy abundance and widespread prosperity. This voice of “deprivation” feels outdated and impractical. Continuing to parrot this message will only lead to religious schizophrenia. It is easy to reverentially nod at these messages of deprivation, as we scurry off in our SUVs to shop in Walmart or as we order Amazon on a smartphone. It is easy to sloganize a life of “bread and salt”, as we travel on our way to our Pesach hotels.

This type of disconnect- between what we voice and how we behave- is a recipe for shallowness, artificiality, and emotionless religion. Thinking one way and living another creates a plastic experience.

We desperately need an updated voice. We need to adjust our “frequency” and learn to live in a world of plenty. How can we enjoy this new world, with abstinence, dignity, and discipline? How can we protect our “spirit” when it is overwhelmed by material? How can we parlay this abundance into religious growth? Not every modern change is a demon. Unless we make it so.

Eternal Dividends

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

This week’s parsha, Parshas Naso, contains many fascinating topics, including: the Sotah (woman suspected of infidelity), the Nazir (the one who abstains from certain physical pleasures and foods in his quest for holiness), Birkat Kohanim (the Priestly Blessings), and the princely contributions to the Mishkan as part of the Chanukas Ha’Nissim.

And yet, the following dvar Torah focuses on none of these more “major” topics in the parsha. In an

inconspicuous pasuk (*kevi’yachol!*), towards the beginning of the parsha, we read:

וְכָל-תְּרוּמָה לְכָל-קֹדֶשׁ יִבְנֶה-יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר יִקְרִיבוּ לַפֶּהוּ לוֹ יְהוָה.

And all that is raised up of all the holies that the Children of Israel bring to the kohen, it shall be his (Bamidbar 5:9).

Of which gifts that are brought to the kohen is the Torah speaking about? Rashi (*ibid*) answers that the pasuk is speaking about bikkurim, the first fruits of the shivat ha’minim which are brought up from the fields to the kohen.

And then the next pasuk tells us:

וְאִישׁ אֶת-קִדְשׁוֹ, לֹא יִהְיֶה; אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יָתַן לַכֹּהֵן, לֹא יִהְיֶה.

A man's holies shall be his, and what a man gives to the kohen, it shall be his (5:10).

It is compelling to note that in both verses, the final words are: “לֹא יִהְיֶה”, it shall be his”. When a person gives bikkurim to the kohen, “it shall be his.” Whose shall the gifts be?

On the simple level of pshat (understanding), the pasukim are referring, of course, to the kohen. What he is given, “shall be his.” Once the landowner gives the first fruits to the kohen, they are no longer his (the landowners), but they have now become the possession of the kohen - they shall be his.

However, given the ambiguity of the phrase “they shall be his”, the verses can be explained as teaching us the following important life lesson.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski zt'l teaches, “How different Torah concepts are from secular concepts! A person who has a vast amount of money in the bank is considered wealthy because he owns that money. But if all the money remains in the bank and is not shared with others, the person is merely a shomer (watch guard), who has the money for safekeeping. He does not demonstrate ownership until he shares the money.

“This is what the Torah tells us in this week's parsha. ‘That which a person gives to the kohen shall be his.’ As long as one hoards his money (or other material matters and goods), or exchanges them for personal possessions, it is not really his! It is only when he gives of it to others that he demonstrates that he indeed once owned it (R' Yehoshua Trunk of Kutna, 1821-1893).

“The human being is a composite creature, comprised of an animal like body and ‘something else.’ The ‘something else’ is the aggregate of those traits which are unique to man. The accumulation of goods is, therefore, not a uniquely human feature.”

Animals in the wild also collect goods (food, shelter, shade, leaves, branches, a burrow etc). However, as a general rule, animals do not share their possessions with others, nor do they willingly sacrifice for other animals. To accumulate, and then to share, is a uniquely human characteristic and trait.

“When we share our possessions with others we are exercising our humanity. Giving to others is uniquely human and defines us as spiritual beings.

“Perhaps this is the message of this pasuk, ‘That which

a person gives to the kohen shall be his.’ Only what we give to tzedaka,” what we give away for mitzvos, what we pass on to others for chessed, is truly ours. (Twerski on Chumash, p.282).

While material matters in this world come and go, and all of life and the goods we amass here are fleeting, what is truly “it shall be his,” are the donations, contributions, acts of chessed and charity we give to others. For in giving away our material goods to others, we acquire eternity for ourselves. Hence, that mitzvah shall truly “be his.”

Henny Machlis a'h taught, “Let's say you have \$100 and suddenly there's a knock on your door and it's a poor person. You take \$10 out of your wallet and you give it to this poor person. How much money do you have left? It sounds like a joke, right? What's your answer? Probably you'll say '\$90.' No, you have \$10 left. Why? Because the other \$90 you are going to spend on your groceries, you're going to pay your bills, you're going to waste it on whatever. But those \$10 that you gave to the poor person, they stay with you forever and ever and ever” (Emunah with Love and Chicken Soup, p.160-161).

To illustrate this idea, Rabbi Dr. Twerski relates the following instructive story: It is related that a Jew held a high ministerial position in government, and some anti-semites sought to discredit him before the king. They told the king that this Jewish minister had embezzled huge sums of money from the royal coffers. Although the king did not wish to believe this, he nevertheless asked the Jew for an accounting of his possessions.

When the Jewish minister presented the figure, the king said, “This cannot be. You own far more than what is recorded here.’ The Jew responded, ‘Your Majesty, I know why you requested an accounting of my belongings. My enemies have slandered me to you to make me suspect in your eyes. If Your Majesty were to believe them, you will confiscate everything I have and all that I own. When Your Majesty requested an account of my possession, I calculated how much I gave to charity. That can never be taken from me, hence that is my only real possession and my true worth’ (Twerski on Chumash, p.282).

When we live a life of giving as the Torah instructs us to do, then we will merit to see the promise of: “וְאִישׁ אֶת-קִדְשׁוֹ, לֹא יִהְיֶה - *A man's holies shall be his*”, with the acquisition of infinite blessings from the One to Whom the whole world, and all that is in it, is truly His.

Live, Love, and Prosper

Rabbi Steven Gotlib

The Talmud (Megillah 32b) writes that Parshat Bechukotai is read before Shavuot so that the curses recorded within it are read at the end of the year. For the same reason, we read the rendition of the curses in Parshat Ki Tavo before Rosh Hashanah. Thus, the new year can be started without them. A mishnah (Rosh Hashanah 1:2) clarifies that Shavuot is, in fact, considered the new year – more precisely, the day of judgment for fruit of the tree, and therefore the same rule applies.

Rabbi Baruch Simon (Imrei Baruch: Bamidbar, Naso 1) quotes from the Kozhiglover Rav, Rabbi Aryeh Tzvi Frumer, that Parshat Naso is specifically read immediately after Shavuot in order to start the new year with the blessing of birkat kohanim. [Rabbi Frumer also writes that the same idea underlies reading Parshat V'zot HaBerachah around Shemini Atzeret, which is understood as the closing of judgment from Rosh Hashanah.]

In our parshah (Bamidbar 6:23), Hashem commands Moses to “speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel,” thus establishing the mitzvah of birkat kohanim. Before its recitation today, a blessing is said in praise of Hashem, “Who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless His people Israel with love.” Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (Magen Avraham OH 128:11:18) notes that its very unusual to end a blessing with “with love,” and he suggests that the reasoning may be based on the Zohar (3:147) which says that any kohen who is not merciful to his people and whose people are not merciful to him should not perform this mitzvah. Those who recite birkat kohanim, therefore must love (and be loved by) the Jewish people whom they are blessing.

This idea is further expanded in the name of Rav Simcha Bunim of Gur (Sefar Pardes Yosef HaChadash, Naso). Rav Simcha Bunim writes that Jews are able to be closer

to Hashem than angels because Jews can experience God after reciting only two words (Shema Yisrael Hashem ...) while angels only experience Him after three (Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh, Hashem ...). kohanim, however, are the closest since they experience Him after only one word (Yivarechecha Hashem ...). The catch is that experiencing Hashem as a kohen comes in the context of blessing the entire Jewish people. Without a sense of love and compassion for his fellow Jews, a kohen is unable to recite birkat kohanim and therefore cannot get close to Hashem.

The centrality of love for all Jews for kohanim is consistent with the words of Hillel (Pirkei Avot 1:13): “Be like the students of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.” When one loves peace, they pursue bringing more of it into the world. When one loves another human being, they seek to bring completeness into their lives through the light of Torah. Likewise, a result of loving God is wanting to spread Torah and to seek to sustain the world He created by maximizing peace throughout society. To be a kohen is to be a student of Aharon in the truest sense, blessing the people of Israel towards peace. But that can only be done when their money is where their mouth is. A kohen who does not love his community and is not loved by them cannot say birkat kohanim because they are not a genuine representation of what it means to be a kohen in the first place.

We need not all be kohanim (though I happen to be one) in order to love peace, pursue peace, love our fellow humans, and bring them closer to Torah and mitzvot. Just as Shavuot is the new year for fruit, it is also a new opportunity for us to take an accounting of the fruits of our Torah learning. As a result of what we've learned in the past year, have we grown in our love of Hashem, love of Torah, and love of the Jewish people?

The Reward for Stopping the Downward Spiral

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Parshas Naso discusses the procedure followed in the case of a sota – a woman whose husbands suspects her of infidelity, and who warns her not to be secluded with the man in question. If the woman is

seen violating the husband's warning, she is brought to the Beis Ha'mikdash and given special water to drink. If she is guilty, then she – and the man with whom she committed adultery – die. If she is innocent, the Torah writes, then

זרע – she will bear children (5:28). Rashi, based on the Gemara, explains that if she had heretofore delivered babies with great difficulty, she will now experience easier childbirths; if she had until now borne children with defects, she will now bear perfect, unblemished children.

We must ask, why should the woman be rewarded? Even though she was not guilty of an adulterous intimate relationship, she is certainly guilty of very inappropriate behavior – acting flirtatiously to the point of arousing her husband’s suspicion, and then violating her husband’s trust by secluding herself with the man whom he suspected of having an affair with her. Why should she be rewarded?

Rav Eliyahu Lopian, in *Lev Eliyahu*, answers by citing the Mishna’s teaching in *Maseches Makkos* (23b), כל היושב ולא עבר עבירה נותנין לו שכר כעושה מצוה – one who has the opportunity to commit a sin, and abstains, receives reward as though he performed a mitzva. Refraining from sin when given the opportunity, or experiencing the desire, to sin, not only avoids punishment, but earns one credit as though he actually performed a mitzva. The sota certainly acted wrongly by arousing her husband’s suspicion and then going into seclusion with the man, and she is punished by having to undergo the humiliating, public process outlined here by the Torah. At the same time, however, she is deserving of reward for abstaining from the

sin of adultery. She was wrong for going into a room alone with this man, but since in the end she withstood this difficult challenge, and did not commit an adulterous act, she earns reward.

This is such a powerful and relevant lesson for all of us. When someone has begun falling into a downward spiral, he could easily despair, and figure that once he has reached this point, there is no value to stopping, and he might as well just continue. But the Torah is teaching us that one who has fallen into a pattern of sinful conduct receives great reward for breaking the pattern, for extricating himself from the downward spiral, and stopping before allowing the situation to get worse.

If a person watches inappropriate material on the computer, and then finds the strength to stop, Hashem says, “Wow, I love you! Look what you did!” Certainly, he should never have started. But he will be rewarded for stopping once he did. Similarly, if a person is sitting with someone and divulging lashon ha’ra about people, and then, overcome by his conscience, he realizes that this is wrong and he stops, he will be duly rewarded for stopping the downward spiral. Even when we’ve begun to act wrongly, if we had the chance to compound the situation, to sink faster, but we desisted, this decision is precious in God’s eyes, and will earn us reward.

Mishkan Duties of B’nei Gershon and B’nei Merari

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

Parshas Naso commences with the command for B’nei Gershon and B’nei Merari - families of two of Levi’s sons - to carry the Mishkan’s curtains, boards and ancillary objects upon travel. It seems surprising that the parshah commences with this topic, as Parshas Bamidbar concludes with the mitzvah for B’nei Kehas (another of Levi’s sons) to handle the Mishkan’s most holy keilim (articles) when journeying. Why are the duties of all three Levite families - Gershon, Kehas and Merari - not grouped together in the same parshah?

I believe that the answer can be found by examining the remaining topics of Parshas Naso.

The parshah introduces the requirement to send forth teme’im - those who are impure - from specific encampments. It then addresses the rules of me’ilah - unlawful use or taking of items owned by or dedicated to the Beis Ha-Mikdash. The parshah subsequently turns to

the rules of Sotah and Nazir, after which it presents the mitzvah and text of Birkas Kohanim (the Priestly Blessing) and details the inauguration of the Mishkan, in which the Nesi’im (Princes) brought korbonos and gifts.

Do these varying segments have a common theme?

The general message of these topics centers around the need to stay on the correct spiritual course and not assume a position or carry on with a way of life which is deviant or out-of-bounds. Temei’im cannot be present in holy venues during their state of impurity, as entry to these venues by those who are tamei is a desecration. Such people must know which places are appropriate for them when their bodies are impure. Me’ilah is a misappropriation of holy funds or property for personal use, whereby the line between personal and holy property is violated. A sotah has diverged from her marital status and bond of betrothal, crossing the boundary of permissible relationships. The

nazir has deviated from normative behavior, and one opinion in the Gemara considers him a sinner for his actions. (The other opinion deems his lifestyle as noble; in any case, it is a change of course from a regular lifestyle.)

The families of Gershon and Merari were charged with transporting objects of lesser holiness. The greatness of these Levi'im was that they did not protest or complain that they should have been granted the right to handle the most holy vessels, which was the task of B'nei Kehas. B'nei Gershon and B'nei Merari were content to fill the posts assigned to them and not deviate from their missions, and this is their praise. Their fidelity to their charge in the face of any temptation to try to change course was the essence of their glory.

This is the connection between the Mishkan duties of B'nei Gershon and B'nei Merari and the rest of the parshah, and it is precisely why the assignments of B'nei Gershon and Merari are reserved for Parshas Naso, rather than appearing in Parshas Bamidbar along with B'nei Kehas.

The narrative of the offerings of the Nesi'im forms the conclusion of the parshah, for it details the appropriate manner of "deviation" in serving Hashem. Although the Nesi'im's offerings were voluntary, spontaneous and without prior precedent, the Nesi'im did not bring these offerings until Hashem authorized them to do so. (Bamidbar 7:4-11) The Nesi'im desired to add to what is required in Torah observance, but they dared not do so without sanction. So, too, one who observes the disgrace of a sotah is actually encouraged to become a nazir as a deterrent to sin (Rashi on Sotah 2A). In this case, the undertaking to become a nazir serves as a reinforcement for Torah rather than as an alternative and novel form of religious expression.

It is no coincidence that the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim appears right before the offerings of the Nesi'im, which served to inaugurate the Mishkan. The Torah records (Vayikra 9:22) that Aharon concluded his initial avodah in the Mishkan by blessing the people, and Chazal identify this blessing as Birkas Kohanim. (V. Rashi ibid., from Toras Kohanim.) Chazal further explain (v. Rashi ibid. on v. 23) that Aharon was initially apprehensive, lest Hashem be angry with him and reject his avodah due to his role in the Chet Ha-Egel (Sin of the Golden Calf). The inceptive recital of Birkas Kohanim by Aharon, whose avodah was indeed accepted upon its conclusion (v. Rashi ibid.), signaled that the Mishkan and Aharon's avodah successfully atoned for the Chet Ha-Egel.

The Chet Ha-Egel represented mass deviation from Hashem. The Mishkan embodied the reverse - total adherence to Hashem's commands and a desire to be close to Him in the manner that He mandated, rather than through a manmade contrivance (the Egel) that led to idolatry. Birkas Kohanim is thus the foundational text of an eternal relationship of ultimate fidelity and allegiance to Hashem - the antithesis of deviation - and it is therefore a fitting introduction to the offerings of the Nesi'im in the Mishkan as the climax of Parshas Naso.