

Parshah *Naso*

Michael A. Tyler – June 5, 2009

On Shavuot a week ago, we received the Torah at Sinai. We said *na'aseh v'nishmah*, “we will do and we will understand.” And here we are now, a week later, and our parshah is *Naso* – which comes from the Hebrew root meaning “take, carry, lift,” and in Modern Hebrew usually refers to transacting business. In short, “You will do this.”

The anticipation is building up, and we're eager to find out what this first set of instructions after Revelation is all about, so that maybe we can get our first glimpse at understanding. But it's apparently none of the big stuff, nothing that we often cite as hallmark elements of Jewish practice.

Instead, it's all about counting and shlepping. That key word *naso*, “you will do this” – well, here's what we will do: we will do a census of the Gershonite and the Merarite clans, and *they* will do the dismantling and carrying of the Tabernacle as the Israelites wander through the wilderness. In other words, they're roadies.

I'll come back to them in a bit, but I should mention at least in passing that this happens to be a very long parshah, though this will not be a very long drash. *Naso* has an entire chapter devoted to removing the unclean people from the camp, including a detailed description of how the priests were to use a magic potion to determine whether a woman had committed adultery.

Then there's another entire chapter devoted to the rituals of those who take a Nazirite vow to separate themselves from the camp voluntarily. The Priestly Blessing seemingly pops out of nowhere here, and then we get what may be the longest single chapter in the entire Torah, 89 verses describing the consecration of the Tabernacle and the gifts brought by the twelve tribes. All twelve gifts were identical, by the way, each tribe giving the exact same collection of gold soup ladles, silver bowls, livestock, grains, and so on. It's spelled out in great detail and then it's repeated twelve times.

So what does all this mean? Why are we spending our first full week after Shavuot getting smothered in counting, shlepping, and shunning the unclean before we get to an accountant's report of who brought what to the consecration?

Some of the traditional commentaries ascribe meaning to the sequence of the chapters: First assign the grunt work to get the show on the road, then get rid of the unclean, and let some others leave voluntarily. Then the priests bless those who are left, and finally consecrate the Tabernacle. Only those who are ritually pure get to enjoy the blessings, at least according to this reading. The rest of us have no recourse.

To me, that way lies madness, specifically the madness of economic caste systems, magic potions, and, if we stretch it a bit, racism and homophobia and xenophobia. As a Jew, I cannot believe that this is the message that God wants us to get from this text.

Other commentaries point out that the seemingly endless repetition of the twelve tribes giving identical gifts is evidence that we are all equal before God, regardless of where we come from and regardless of how much money any of us may have. I can buy that, but it's a fairly simple and obvious lesson from an incredibly long passage. I think there's got to be more to it than that.

Let me offer a different interpretation: If you want to receive the priest's blessing, if you want to find spiritual healing inside the sanctuary, you can't just stroll in and expect a freebie. You've got to earn it. You've got to *do* the census, you've got to *do* the shlepping, you've got to *do* the gifts of time and treasure. *Naso*: You – by which I obviously mean *we* – we shall do.

The esteemed Harvard sociology professor Chuck Willie, who was a college classmate of Martin Luther King Jr. and who is also a personal friend of mine, teaches that it takes three things to change the world today: numbers, resources, and organization. And that's my sense of what this parshah is all about.

Numbers, resources, and organization. Let's look at current events as a case study. Legal same-sex marriage is not going to be presented to us as a gift. Joining Facebook groups won't make it happen. Signing an email petition won't do it. Here's what you and I – all of us, together – have to do first:

- Numbers. We have to count our numbers. *Do* the census. Get out there and find the voters, and keep counting until we have enough votes.
- Resources. We have to build our resources. *Do* the gifts. We spent more than \$40 million last time, and it wasn't enough. In parshat *Naso*, each tribe's total gift is identical to each of the other tribes', but a hidden message is that *within* each tribe the components varied widely in value. Some of us can only afford to give a soup ladle, others can spring for an ox or two. We need to give what we can of our time and our talents and our money to make things happen.
- And last, we have to organize. That's the second hidden message of the identical gifts of the tribes: it didn't just happen by chance. Someone had to organize the tribes, negotiate a deal that each tribe could agree to, and then make sure they all did their part to produce twelve identical gifts. We need to *do* the organizing, with some us *doing* the roadie work, some of us *doing* the canvassing to gather ballot signatures, some of us *doing* the negotiating to get endorsements, and so on.

There's one other aspect to this long parshah that I want to touch on briefly, and that's the priestly blessing. "God told Moses to speak to Aaron and his children, and to tell them to bless the people of Israel in these words: God will bless you and protect you. God will turn toward you and treat you with kindness. God will bestow love toward you and give you peace. Thus shall God's name be linked to Israel for a blessing."

These six verses come *before* the 89 verses about consecrating the sanctuary. I think that's odd. Wouldn't it make more sense to receive this beautiful blessing *inside* the Tabernacle, *after* it's been consecrated? Wouldn't that be a more logical climax to the parshah?

Guess what? *Naso*. “You will do this.” Torah tells us that we are created *b’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image. So we will *do* in God’s image. *We* will bless and protect each other. *We* will turn our faces toward one another, and treat each other with kindness. *We* will bestow our love toward one another, and *we* will give each other peace. When we aspire to *do* with each other as we wish God to do for us, then we can enter the Temple and receive God’s blessing, because *that* is *tikkun olam*. Thus shall we be linked to God for a blessing.

To come full circle to my first comment, *Naso* is indeed the quintessential Jewish concept: We are what we do. Actions matter. *Do* the numbers, the resources, the organization, so that we can and we will change the world.

May we have the strength and the courage and the stamina to do the hard work necessary to make the world a more loving, accepting, welcoming place for all of us. *Kein y’hi ratzon*.

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