

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

Naso

June 3rd 2017 – 9th of Sivan 5777

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Editors Notes

Changing Ones Fate – Naso 5777

One of the best-known paragraphs in the week's portion of Nasso and perhaps in the entire Torah, is that of Birkat Kohanim - the Blessing of the Kohanim where the Torah states: Hashem spoke to Moses saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them: "May Hashem bless you and watch over you. May Hashem cause His countenance to shine upon you and favor you. May Hashem raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace." They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.

Rabbi Abittan z'sl would often tell us that the moment we are blessed by Hashem through the Kohanim is an auspicious time. While people travel the world in search of blessings from great talmidey Chamamim – Torah scholars and while others travel to graves of the righteous, they fail to realize that this blessing of Birkat Kohanim is directly from Hashem and surly outshines any other blessing we might hope for. In fact, this blessing has the ability to change our fate.

While there may be chatter, although forbidden, during the repetition of the amidah, when the hazan reaches birkat kohanim, people generally quiet down and focus. In recent years we have adopted, what for us is a new yet beautiful custom where children run to their fathers to find temporary shelter under their fathers tallit and the weight of the father's hands. Every father, at this moment, while facing the kohanim with their heads covered and their hands lifted upward and outward yet hidden, and with his children's heads below his own hands, undoubtedly concentrates intensely begging Hashem that He should bestow fully this blessing upon his own children and family.

Rashi comments on the words, Amor Lahem, Say to them, that Amor is in the infinitive tense, meaning it is constant using the example of Shamor – watch and Zachor – remember the Shabbat as stated in the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In a sense this blessing of the Kohanim is constant and never ending. I can sometimes hear in my mind, my grandfather David Gindi, a'h, giving the blessing or imagine the blessing coming from my mother's uncle Haham Moshe Gindi, z'sl, who my mother speaks of very fondly. I imagine hearing the blessing spoken by my great grandfathers, Yaakov Gindi or Hayim Cohen in Aleppo a century ago. I doubt they could have imagined the world of their grandchildren and generations to come when they bid farewell to their own departing children from the piers of Beirut and a world which is for the most part forgotten and destroyed.

We are commanded to say the blessing aloud in a strong voice. I wonder how far the sound waves of those blessings of our ancestors travel. Certainly in a spiritual sense, we are the beneficiaries even a century or millennia later.

Rabbi Abittan would explain the words of his teacher, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, z'tl who noted that the commandment of Birkat Kohanim entails two separate aspects: the transmission of a direct blessing from Hashem and hashra'at ha-Shechinah (the manifestation of Hashem's presence). The Rabbi would explain that Birkat Kohanim is a direct meeting with the Shechinah that presents us with an intimate encounter in which we come [so to speak] face to face with Hashem. Rabbi Abittan certainly felt this and our custom in our synagogue while I was there together with the rabbi and while I was hazan, was for the rabbi to come up to the bimah during the repetition. When I arrived at the blessing of the Kohanim, I would pause and lower my head. The rabbi would place his hand on my head and he would call out each word of the blessings for the Kohanim to repeat. The weight of his hand and with it the feeling of a resting shechina or Divine Presence, can still be felt.

There is still a question which needs to be asked. What is the true nature of blessings and more specifically, Birkat Kohanim? Are we not blessed

or rewarded based on our actions? If we merit, are we not rewarded and if we sin, are we not punished? Do blessing really override a sense of justice? Does the presence of the shechina change things?

Rabbi Eli Mansour suggested an insight he saw in a sefer given to him by the Bobov community, Lev Aryeh. The Talmud states: Rava said: The length of one's life, the amount of his children, and his sustenance are not dependent on merit, but rather on mazal (fate). (Rava's statement is meant to explain that while both Rav Chisda and Rabah were on the tremendously high level that they could bring rain to the world, Rav Chisda lived 92 years while Rabah died at 40. Obviously, Rava feels that merit has little to do with their life span and the length of their days was dictated by their mazal, their fate, or as we have explained before, the script each of us writes before we are born.)

Thus these three items, length of life, number and type of children and our blessing are subject to our fate. And we have seen this time and again through history. One can ask why someone with obvious merit is lacking while someone who apparently has no merit has everything. This is one possible explanation.

The Lev Aryeh continues that keeping the Torah and Misvot can assist on everything else, but with regard to these three how can we change them? He suggests that Birkat Kohanim is the answer to children, life and wealth.

How? May Hashem bless you and watch over you ... Yevarechehca VeYishmereich with children with boys and girls.

Yaer Hashem Panav elecha VeYichnecha: May Hashem cause His countenance to shine upon you and favor you. As we state in the daily amidah prayer – Ki Beor Panecha Natata Lanu Hashem Elokeynu Torah VeChayim. Through the light of your countenance you gave us Torah and life.

And finally Yisah Hashem Panav Elecha VeYasem Lecha Shalom - May Hashem raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace. The Talmud teaches when there is sustenance then there is peace. And we know that when finances are tight people more often than not tend to fight. We read that when the barrel of barley is empty, there are loud noises in the house – machloket – dispute is banging on the door. On the other hand, we read Hasam

Gevulech Shalom Chelev Chitim Yasbiyaych – Hashem shall put peace at your borders, and satiate you with the fullness of the wheat. We are more often at peace when we are not lacking. We find this at home and we find this in business among partners. When the money is coming in, people don't complain and don't fight, but when the money stops, the accusations begin.

While Tosefot explains that to overcome fate takes a super human effort of merit, the Lev Aryeh is telling us that Birkat Kohanim is such an amazing blessing because it has the ability to overcome fate. What a tremendous chizuk – strength we are being given! What an incredible gift Hashem has given us through the Kohanim! We now have something amazing to focus on as we hear each of the words each day of the year. We are blessed with the Shechina resting over us and making the impossible, possible.

If you want a blessing, before you search the world, come to synagogue! Hear the blessing of the Kohanim. Feel the presence of Hashem. Hear our ancestor's words; whether a grandfather, great grandfather or Aharon the High Priest himself. Realize that this is a direct blessing from Hashem, Himself! And know that the impossible becomes possible during these precious moments.

May Hashem bless each of us, with children and grandchildren and great grandchildren who will bring us pride and joy all of our days. May we be blessed with long and healthy lives. And may we be blessed with peace and sustenance to better serve our Creator in Heaven.

Hag Sameyach and Shabbat Shalom,

David Bibi

Rav Kook on the Perasha
Birkat Cohanim

Aaron and his descendants, the kohanim, were commanded to bless the Jewish people with three special blessings:

“Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you must bless the Israelites. Say to them: May God bless you and watch over you. May God's Presence enlighten you and bestow grace to you. May God lift His face toward you and grant you peace.” (Num. 6:23-26)

The third blessing in particular needs clarification. What does it mean that God will "lift His face toward you"?

The Need for Divine Favor

While the first blessing refers to God's assistance in the material realm, the second blessing speaks of enlightenment and spiritual attainments. Greater enlightenment, however, brings with it greater responsibility. As we grow in knowledge and wisdom, we are expected to display a higher level of moral sensitivity. Our thoughts should be purer, our character traits more refined, and our lives more ethical.

If one takes into account the resulting moral demands, one may become apprehensive and even discouraged. In order to assuage this concern, the kohanim bestow a third blessing: "May God lift His face toward you."

To "lift one's face" is a Hebrew idiom meaning to give special consideration or leniency. The Torah cautions a judge, for example, not to "lift his face" toward one of the litigants (Lev. 19:15). The judge must be careful to avoid giving the impression of favoring one side. The other litigant may feel that the case is already lost and lose heart.

The kohanim bless us that, despite the expectations which come with a higher spiritual level, we should not lose heart. God will be lenient, taking into account the physical reality in which we live.

One may, however, feel embarrassed or uneasy with this Divine leniency. Therefore, the final blessing closes with the gift of peace — peace of mind. "And may He grant you peace."

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Olat Re'iyah vol. I, p. 62)

Summary of the Perasha

Naso - The Leviim are counted, Korbanot for hakamat mishkan (year 2)

- 1- The special responsibilities of benei Gershon and Merari. Benei Kehat are counted
- 2- Benei Gershon and Merari are counted
- 3- Rules regarding a tameh and where he must stay, one who steals and swears falsely
- 4- Sotah , nazir, birkat kohanim
- 5- Korbanot offered by the leaders of each tribe on the first days of mishkan (days 1-5)

6- Korbanot offered by the leaders of each tribe on the first days of mishkan (days 6-10)

7- Korbanot offered by the leaders of each tribe on the first days of mishkan (days 11-12)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR Respecting the Bearers of the Ark

Parashat Naso begins by discussing the Gershon family of Leviyim. The tribe of Levi was assigned the responsibility of transporting the Mishkan when Beneh Yisrael traveled through the wilderness, and the three families of Leviyim – Gershon, Kehat and Merari – were assigned to different parts of the Mishkan. The end of last week's Parasha, Parashat Bamidbar, discussed the role of the Kehat family, and the Torah continues at the beginning of Parashat Naso by discussing the responsibilities assigned to Gershon.

The Keli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Efrayim Luntshitz, Prague 1550-1619) raises the question of why the Torah arranged its discussion in this sequence. Gershon was the oldest of the three sons of Levi, and yet the Torah first discusses the family of Kehat before the family of Gershon. The answer that is given, as the Keli Yakar cites, is that Kehat is mentioned first because this family had the distinction of carrying the Aron (ark). The Aron was, of course, the most sacred of all the articles of the Mishkan, and thus Kehat's role is described first because it included the holiest "cargo." However, the Keli Yakar points out, this answer just leads us to another question: why was the younger brother assigned the most distinguished role? Why wasn't the family of Gershon, the oldest son of Levi, given the honor of transporting the Aron?

The Keli Yakar explains that this honor was given to Kehat precisely to demonstrate that the precedence of this family is due to the Aron. If the family of Gershon had carried the Aron, then we might have thought that the Torah discusses Gershon first simply because he was the oldest brother. God therefore granted this privilege to Kehat, so that Kehat would be presented first in the Torah, before the other two Levite families, and we would then understand that the Torah is giving honor to the tribe that transports the Aron. It had to be made clear that the family discussed first received this distinction not due to any factor other than its role as the bearers of the Aron. In this way, the Torah emphasizes the point that we should reserve the highest honors for those who carry the Aron, the Torah. The most important factor in determining who receives honor is Torah. Indeed, Halacha instructs that a Torah scholar of

undistinguished lineage takes precedence over an ignorant Kohen Gadol when it comes to certain honors. The ones who deserve the most honor are the rabbis, the Torah scholars, and it was for the purpose of emphasizing this point that Kehat – the family of the younger brother – was given the role of carrying the Aron.

The Keli Yakar's insight should remind us to exercise care in how we relate to our rabbis. Torah scholarship is what should draw our respect and reverence – not wealth or social stature. We must respect, honor and admire the Torah scholars so that we heed their guidance and gain inspiration from their devotion to Torah. They, the ones who carry the "ark," our ancient Torah tradition, are the ones deserving of the greatest honor and respect

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The Continuation of Revelation
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What would you expect the continuation of the Torah to be after the awesome experience, the revelation, at *Har Sinai*? Would you expect a series of instructions about how to maintain and possibly increase that level of spirituality? Laws about prayer, sacrifice, building a temple? Surprisingly, we find a series of civil and criminal laws, the first of which concerns the care of the lowest class of our society, the *ebed ibri*, the Jewish bondsman.

The *ebed ibri* is someone who stole, possibly to feed his family, and now must work in servitude to repay his debt. You might imagine that this *ebed ibri* would not be given special rights and privileges. Yet, one of the first terms of our *berit* is that even if the *ebed ibri* is ill for a large portion of his contract, you are responsible for his bills, and cannot dock his pay for the time he was ill. In the seventh year he goes "free," free as in *hinam*; he does not owe you anything and his debts are cleared from his contract [1].

There is one more situation of an *ebed ibri*. This is when one sells himself into servitude, which is only permissible under very specific circumstances. An individual can only become an *ebed ibri* if he has absolutely nothing, no food, or even a change of clothing. In such a situation, the Torah allows him to enter into an *ebed ibri* agreement [2]. This is an avenue of rehabilitation. This individual is given a home, food, and shelter among a well-established family who can act as a role model.

We must treat our servants like brothers, with dignity and respect, as stated in Debarim: "When your Jewish *brother* will be sold to you [3]." One cannot ask this servant to do meaningless or demoralizing labor; he must be treated as

one with rights, as it says: "Do not have him perform servile tasks [4]." We are concerned about this man's self-image and dignity.

Furthermore, you are obligated to care for the servant similar to the way you provide for yourself and your own family, as Rambam states:

The master should not eat bread made from fine flour while the servant eats bread from coarse flour. The master should not drink aged wine while the servant drinks fresh wine. The master should not sleep on cushions while the servant sleeps on straw [5].

This point is so important and is one our Hakhamim wanted us to understand well. That is why Yirmeyahu 34:8 was chosen as the *haftara* for perashat Mishpatim. There, Benei Yisrael decide to do *teshuba*, and the one thing they choose to fix is: "That every man set free his bondsman and his bondwoman, the Jew, and the Jewess..."

In Yirmeyahu, Benei Yisrael were instructed to free their Israelite servants who had worked for them for more than seven years. They were oppressing the downtrodden and those who had difficulty in their lives. That was a breach of the *berit's* first term, which clearly states that on the seventh year the *ebed* must be set free. The message is that our fellow man should be taken care of, not only our friends and those who share similar circles of interest, wealth, and class, but those who lack the means and ability to take care of themselves. It is our obligation to help them get back on their feet. Note that the *ebed* is not allowed to remain as a servant. The goal is to enable him to eventually be self-sufficient. The master must give the servant a gift when setting him free. This is a *misva deoraita* as it states in Debarim: "Provide him generously from your flocks, your threshing floor and your wine cellar [6]." This is a severance package aiming to ensure that the servant will have the means to start his own life. Not only does he leave servitude without debt, he leaves with a net gain of gifts to help him become his own man.

To be a person or a nation of God is to ensure the welfare of every member of our society. *Abraham Abinu*, our paradigm of a man of God, stood up in defense of people he had no connection with in order to protect them from a possible injustice. God wanted Abraham to express this trait and therefore told him about His plans so that his future nation would follow the path of God to do justice and righteousness, *sedaqa umishpat* [7]. We find this message throughout the Torah, Nebiim, and Ketubim. In Hoshea, we are told: "For I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings [8]." God

does not want appeasing gifts, rather proper societal behavior incorporating His traits of compassion and mercy.

Our Har Sinai experience can be likened to a climb up the ladder to God, similar to the *malakhim* in Ya'aqob's dream who went up the ladder [9]. These *malakhim*, like us, then came down the ladder to walk in God's way on earth. That is the meaning of the *misva 'vehalakhta bidrakhav,* 'to walk in God's ways [10]. The path of God is one where a person interacts with others with mercy, patience, and kindness. To know God and have a relationship with Him is to be imbued with His traits.

Knowledge of God is meant to lead to a society where there is no longer predator and prey, where the unprotected live comfortably without fear of oppression, and the unfortunate are lifted up. Imagine a world filled with this kind of knowledge of God. This is the world that we envision. This is what nebiim like Yeshayahu prophesied about.

"And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea [11]."

The revelation at Har Sinai, the pinnacle of our spiritual experience, is meant to help us create a better society, to ensure that the oppressed and downtrodden are protected and taken care of. Our spiritual experience of God is for us to learn His ways, live by them, become a model nation, and have the rest of the world follow suit.

Moadim leSimha, Rabbi Meyer Laniado

[1] Mishne Torah Hilkhoh Abadim 2:12 / [2] Mishne Torah Hilkhoh Abadim 1:1 / [3] Debarim 15:12 / [4] Vayiqra 25:39 / [5] Mishne Torah Hilkhoh Abadim 1:9/ [6] Debarim 15:13-14 and Mishne Torah Hilkhoh Abadim 3:13-14/ [7] Beresheit 18:19/ [8] Hoshea 6:6/ [9] Beresheit 28:12/ [10] Debarim 28:9 and Mishne Torah Hilkhoh Deot 1:5/ [11] Yeshayahu 11:6-9

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Rabbi Wein PRIVILEGES AND RIGHTS

The nature of human beings is to automatically transfer that which begins as a privilege – an extra perk in life – into a right, something that the person is automatically entitled to have. No one ever wants to experience the loss of the privilege or boon that one once attained. A reduction in salary, loss of a professional or commercial title, the defeats suffered in an election, all of these are painful experiences to have to absorb in one's lifetime.

Therefore, we are witness to former government and legislative position holders, even when they are no longer serving in that position, called by the former title. This is not necessarily arrogance or hubris on their part but rather an example of how something that once was a privilege now, because of time and circumstance, is deemed to be a right.

And, while it is possible to absorb and even understand the loss of privileges, human beings find it difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, when they consider denial to be a right, an entitlement. A very large portion of the governmental budget in all Western societies, as well as the State of Israel, include what are euphemistically called entitlements. Social Security, healthcare programs, Workmen's Compensation, unemployment benefits and many other types of welfare programs all began as privileges granted by the government. Today they are untouchable rights that no political party or ambitious politician would dare touch or curtail. There simply is no way to take something that people now view as a right and restore it to its original status as being a privilege.

The Western world is based on the belief that there are "certain inalienable rights" that exist for the benefit of all human beings. The American Declaration of Independence listed these rights as being life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, among other unspecified other ones. France phrased it differently as being liberty, equality and fraternity. Whatever phrases or words are used, it is obvious that all believe that there are certain basic rights that all human beings are entitled to, and that simply being alive is sufficient to acquire these entitlements for one's self.

This mental and social attitude governs much of current society. There are precious few things left in our world that we would consider to be a privilege and something that we are allowed to automatically demand for ourselves as a right. And when, for

whatever reason, one is diminished or removed from our lives, a personal or even national crisis develops.

This attitude drives much of society today especially among our young. Growing up with a sense of entitlement often leads to great complications in later life when those entitlements somehow disappear or are even only diminished. Something that we feel that we are entitled to is never quite as appreciated or valued as something that you receive as a privilege or a gift. Rights may be squandered easily while privileges somehow are more guarded and treasured.

Affluence contributes to changing privileges into rights. Pesach vacations, school trips to Poland, a gap year or two of study in Israel, a college education, major support from others while continuing to study after marriage, are examples in our current Jewish world of privileges, many of which were completely unknown in an earlier generation of Orthodox Jewish life. These have become rights, not even obligations. This attitude leads to a narcissistic and skewed society.

The basis of the Torah is gratitude – gratitude to our parents, teachers, elders and even to governmental authorities. All this is ultimately related to the gratitude to our Creator with the life and sustenance that has been granted to us. The Talmud disparages those who are chronic complainers about life and its vicissitudes by stating: "It is sufficient that the person is still alive!"

The attitude of Judaism towards life generally is that everything is really a privilege, even life itself. It is easier to deal with the challenges that life imposes upon us if one views it from the vantage point of privilege rather than that of entitlement and rights

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks The Pursuit of Peace

The parsha of Naso seems, on the face of it, to be a heterogeneous collection of utterly unrelated items. First there is the account of the Levitical families of Gershon and Merari and their tasks in carrying parts of the Tabernacle when the Israelites journeyed. Then, after two brief laws about removing unclean people from the camp and about restitution, there comes the strange ordeal of the Sotah, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery.

Next comes the law of the Nazirite, the person who voluntarily and usually for a fixed period took on himself special holiness restrictions, among them the renunciation of wine and grape products, of haircuts, and of defilement by contact with a dead body.

This is followed, again seemingly with no connection, by one of the oldest prayers in the world still in continuous use: the priestly blessings. Then, with inexplicable repetitiousness, comes the account of the gifts brought by the princes of each tribe at the dedication of the Tabernacle, a series of long paragraphs repeated no less than twelve times, since each prince brought an identical offering.

Why does the Torah spend so much time describing an event that could have been stated far more briefly by naming the princes and then simply telling us generically that each brought a silver dish, a silver basin and so on? The question that overshadows all others, though, is: what is the logic of this apparently disconnected series?

The answer lies in the last word of the priestly blessing: shalom, peace. In a long analysis the 15th century Spanish Jewish commentator Rabbi Isaac Arama explains that shalom does not mean merely the absence of war or strife. It means completeness, perfection, the harmonious working of a complex system, integrated diversity, a state in which everything is in its proper place and all is at one with the physical and ethical laws governing the universe.

"Peace is the thread of grace issuing from Him, may He be exalted, stringing together all beings, supernal, intermediate, and lower. It underlies and sustains the reality and unique existence of each" (Akedat Yitzhak, ch. 74). Similarly, Isaac Abrabanel writes, "That is why God is called peace, because it is He who binds the world together and orders all things according to their particular character and posture. For when things are in their proper order, peace will reign" (Abrabanel, Commentary to Avot 2:12).

This is a concept of peace heavily dependent on the vision of Genesis 1, in which God brings order out of *tohu va-vohu*, chaos, creating a world in which each object and life form has its place. Peace exists where each element in the system is valued as a vital part of the system as a whole and where there is no discord between them. The various provisions of parshat Naso are all about bringing peace in this sense.

The most obvious case is that of the Sotah, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery. What struck the sages most forcibly about the ritual of the Sotah is the fact that it involved obliterating the name of God, something strictly forbidden under other circumstances. The officiating priest recited a curse including God's name, wrote it on a parchment scroll, and then dissolved the writing into specially prepared water. The sages inferred from this that God was

willing to renounce His own honour, allowing His name to be effaced “in order to make peace between husband and wife” by clearing an innocent woman from suspicion. Though the ordeal was eventually abolished by Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai after the destruction of the Second Temple, the law served as a reminder as to how important domestic peace is in the Jewish scale of values.

The passage relating to the Levitical families of Gershon and Merari signals that they were given a role of honour in transporting items of the Tabernacle during the people’s journeys through the wilderness. Evidently they were satisfied with this honour, unlike the family of Kehat, detailed at the end of last week’s parsha, one of whose number, Korach, eventually instigated a rebellion against Moses and Aaron.

Likewise, the long account of the offerings of the princes of the twelve tribes is a dramatic way of indicating that each was considered important enough to merit its own passage in the Torah. People will do destructive things if they feel slighted, and not given their due role and recognition. Again the case of Korach and his allies is the proof of this. By giving the Levitical families and the princes of the tribes their share of honour and attention, the Torah is telling us how important it is to preserve the harmony of the nation by honouring all.

The case of the Nazirite is in some ways the most interesting. There is an internal conflict within Judaism between, on the one hand, a strong emphasis on the equal dignity of everyone in the eyes of God, and the existence of a religious elite in the form of the tribe of Levi in general and the Cohanim, the priests, in particular. It seems that the law of the Nazirite was a way of opening up the possibility to non-Cohanim of a special sanctity close to, though not precisely identical with, that of the Cohanim themselves. This too is a way of avoiding the damaging resentments that can occur when people find themselves excluded by birth from certain forms of status within the community.

If this analysis is correct, then a single theme binds the laws and narrative of this parsha: the theme of making special efforts to preserve or restore peace between people. Peace is easily damaged and hard to repair. Much of the rest of the book of Bamidbar is a set of variations on the theme of internal dissension and strife. So has Jewish history been as a whole.

Naso tells us that we have to go the extra mile in bringing peace between husband and wife, between leaders of the community, and among laypeople who aspire to a more-than-usual state of sanctity.

It is no accident therefore that the priestly blessings end – as do the vast majority of Jewish prayers – with a prayer for peace. Peace, said the rabbis, is one of the names of God himself, and Maimonides writes that the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world (Laws of Hanukah 4:14). Naso is a series of practical lessons in how to ensure, as far as possible, that everyone feels recognised and respected, and that suspicion is defused and dissolved.

We have to work for peace as well as pray for it

RABBI FRAND **The Lesson of “Count Also The Family of Gershon”**

Parshas Naso begins with the instruction to “count also the family of Gershon” [Bamidbar 4:22]. Levi had three sons — Gershon, Kehas, and Merari. We learned at the end of last week’s parsha that the Leviyim were counted separately from the rest of the Jewish people. Parshas Bamidbar contained the description of the counting of Kehas, one of Levi’s sons. Our parsha, Naso, picks up where Bamidbar left off, with the instruction to count the family of Gershon. This will be followed by the commandment to count the children of Levi’s third son, Merari. The Abarbanel asks why the Torah split up the counting of Leviim in such a strange fashion. We would expect that either all three branches of the family of Levi should be mentioned in Parshas Bamidbar since they already began there with the counting of the Kehas branch of the family or else Parshas Naso should have begun with the counting of the Leviim and should include all three branches of the family! What is the purpose of splitting up the counting of the Leviyim?

The Daas Zekeinim m’Baalei HaTosfos point out another anomaly. With the counting of Kehas, the Torah writes “By the word of G-d, in the hand of Moshe” (al pi Hashem b’yad Moshe). Likewise, with the counting of Merari, the Torah also writes “al pi Hashem b’yad Moshe.” However, concerning the counting of the family of Gershon, the Torah only says “al pi Hashem” — it does not mention “b’yad Moshe.”

The Daas Zekeinim concludes that apparently, the counting of the family of Gershon was done by the family of Gershon themselves! Moshe Rabbeinu just asked them to give him a number. The family performed a self-census and gave the tally back to Moshe, but Moshe himself was not involved in the counting. Why should that be?

With Abarbanel’s answer to his question, we can perhaps understand the teaching of the Daas

Zekeinim as well. The Abarbanel says a beautiful thought. Levi had three sons — Gershon, Kehas, and Merari. Gershon was the eldest son. In Judaism (and in the world in general, for the most part) the first born always receives the preeminent position. He receives a double portion of his father's inheritance. He is the bechor. He always has special importance.

However, among the sons of Levi, the family of Kehas had the most significant duties. This was the family that was assigned to carry the Aron [Ark] and the other keylim ["vessels"] of the Mishkan. Gershon did other things, but the second born received the preeminent assignment, not the first born. As the Abarbanel points out, this was somewhat of a slight to the Bnei Gershon. The Abarbanel says that even though the Almighty had His reasons for giving the Bnei Kehas the more preeminent role, it is still necessary to take into account the feelings of the first born. He must be compensated with some sort of a "consolation prize". It is necessary to make him feel good, in spite of the fact that he has been slighted. Therefore, Parshas Naso begins with the words "Count also the Children of Gershon..." Gershon gets prime billing at the start of the parsha to make him feel good.

The Abir Yosef adds that this could also explain why the counting was done by the Bnei Gershon themselves rather than "through the hand of Moshe," as was the case with the other families of Levi. This is another attempt to compensate them for the "slight" of having their first-born status bypassed in the distribution of assignments. It is telling them "you have special status, you have special integrity. We will trust you to count your own family members and report back to Moshe without requiring Moshe to go around to your tents and count noses." This too was in order to make them feel a little better.

We see this theme in another place in the Torah as well. When Yaakov Avinu gave his blessings to Yosef's sons, he gave the more preeminent bracha to Ephraim, rather than to his older brother Menashe. Yaakov wanted to put his right hand on Ephraim's head and his left hand on Menashe's head, but they were not standing in that direction. Yaakov could have said, "Ephraim, why don't you move over here and Menashe you move over there." However, Yaakov did not do that. Yaakov crossed his arms to place his hands where he wanted them to be without asking the boys to move. He did that because — despite the fact that he felt it was necessary to "slight" the bechor, asking Menashe to "move over" would have been adding insult to injury. Yaakov was sensitive to Menashe's feelings and even though he did need to "slight" Menashe, he insured that this would be done in the gentlest fashion possible.

There is a lesson here for all of us. I will share with you where I use this lesson.

I have students who are in the stage of life where they are going out on dates in order to look for their destined partner in life, their shidduch. Many times, a bochur will go out with a girl three, four, five times or sometimes even longer and then he will decide "she is just not for me." So, he will need to "deliver the news." He will need to tell the girl "Thanks, but no thanks." I tell the bochur that when he is in that type of situation (For example when a boy from the yeshiva in Baltimore has been dating a girl from New York and now wants to terminate the relationship...) that he should go into New York, look the girl straight in the face, and tell her as gently as possible, "I do not think this is going any further." This is how a person should end such a relationship. It should not be done over the phone. It should not be done through the shadchan [matchmaker]. It should be done like a mentch [gentleman].

Now, I know that travelling from Mt. Wilson Lane (the location of the Ner Israel campus) to Ocean Parkway (in Brooklyn) involves at least \$100 in car expenses — gasoline prices being what they are as well as tolls throughout Delaware, New Jersey, and New York. This is not a cheap trip for a "non-date." However, I tell them that it is worth it. It is worth it because phone calls are not the proper way to break up with a girl. "No"s are painful. When you give somebody a "No", you should try to deliver it in the gentlest way possible.

This is of course a mutual thing. When a girl drops a boy, it is very painful as well. So, do it the right way. I do not need to fire people, because I am not a boss. But I am sure that some in my audience have the need to sometimes fire employees. This is a very unpleasant experience. So, you should try to make it as painless as possible. Again, a "no" or a rejection are painful — but leaving a person a voice mail or a text message that they are fired, is not the way to go. I am not speaking of a case of gross negligence or fraud or something like that. However, there are many situations where an employer just does not need an employee anymore for no fault of the employee. It is sometimes necessary to "cut down expenses." Tough times occur. You cannot afford the person anymore. Do it right!

This is the lesson of "Count the Children of Gershon, also them..." The Torah places their census in this most prominent position in order to lessen the sting of losing out in terms of having the preeminent assignment among the family of Leviyim.