

## **Parashat NASO**

**June 16, 2000**

**by Ginger Jacobs**

**Beth Chayim Chadashim**

Shabbat Shalom! Please join me in a Shehechanyu for my first Drash at BCC. I want to thank Josh for asking me to do the drash. I wanted to do one but never quite got around to asking. And to be able to give the drash on a night of great importance to Josh means even more.

In preparation for tonight I read Parasha NASO to see what it said. It includes a wide range of ways to handle ordinary events and make them sacred or spiritual. The Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing, is also found in this parasha.

I read the parasha and I re-read about the parasha. I wrote my drash, I re-wrote my Drash, and then I finally wrote it yet again. None of the previous versions seemed just right and I wasn't satisfied.

One reason why it didn't seem quite right has to do with a central fact of my life: I ask a lot of questions. I don't, however, always answer those questions but I keep asking. I also think that a drash should offer some answers.

I looked for common threads, a unifying theme. I brought Naso to my Torah study buddies. (You met us last week for Sandy's drash and Bat Mitzvah.) Why are there many seemingly disparate themes in this parasha? What unites them, why are they here? Ahavah suggested the theme of setting apart. The portion is filled with acts of setting apart. And they are done to develop, increase and maintain a spiritual awareness, a closeness to God.

Marie Jeanne and Sandy urged me to figure out what spoke to ME. Michael read a line from the Plaut Commentary that hit all of us: "The sacred is never divorced from the ordinary because God's people stand constantly before God." I looked back at the parasha and saw it differently. I picked up a line immediately after the duties of the Levites are detailed: "Each one was given responsibility for his service...."

Here was the verse that spoke to me. We are each given responsibility for our service. So what does this mean? The connection to BCC was obvious to me and I will come back to it. Then I heard Marie Jeanne and Sandy asking me what the parasha meant to me. I looked within myself and saw a connection. Bamidbar, the Hebrew name for the Book of Numbers, means wilderness. A good part of the book deals with census, counting both people (really the male people) and goods, all the material possessions. Here the Israelites are wandering in the desert, the Bamidbar, recently freed from slavery, receiving all sorts of laws, and God instructs them to do an accounting. Why at this time? What for? And why do I need to know about it? What does it tell me?

I am coming out of my bamidbar, my personal wilderness. The past year has seen major changes in my life, my journey. I was married; widowed, (just completing my year of mourning) sold my

home of 28 years, bought a new one, and started a new (and vastly different) job. This has been a perfect time to do several accountings of my life, all of my life, the material and the spiritual.

I started with the material, do I want to move this, and can I give that away? Where will I put everything? "Out of the Closet" filled a whole truck of things. Things I had once thought of as important, but were no longer needed.

I continued with my new home. I wanted it to be mine, a place where I would find comfort, where I could share and celebrate and study with my family and friends. My home was to be my sanctuary, my safe place. I may not have used quite as much precision as the Israelites did in building the tabernacle, but the results are perfect for me.

I then moved to the "spiritual". I needed to give back to the community, which has been so much a part of my life, especially this past year. BCC and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations are my Judaic mainstays, not only the institutions, but also, more importantly, the people within them. I needed a job, but I didn't want to work full time, I wanted time to devote to both BCC and the Union. I wanted time to study, to be a more knowledgeable Jew. I wanted time to BE.

So my personal accounting was first material, then spiritual. was able to assess what I had, what I wanted, where I was going, where I belonged. Just as God instructed the Israelites in the desert, we, as a community, need to do periodic accountings of what we have; who we are and where we belong.

BCC is in the midst of renovating our building so we can worship in the beauty of holiness. The parasha outlines the riches that were given to the priests for maintenance of the tabernacle. Have we given what is ours to give? What more can we give in goods, money, or services? How can each of us help to maintain the material needs of the temple?

Recently, we each received the outline of the visions for our temple, where we are and where we think we should go, our own accounting of BCC's spiritual needs and directions. While the plan does not detail what each of us personally must do, it does imply that "Each one was given responsibility for his service...." We each must decide our own responsibility and what we will do and give for our "tabernacle".

"And if not now, when?" asked Hillel. America is doing a census. We are constantly reminded about all the services we might get if we complete the forms: new hospitals, parks, more protection, more representatives in the House. The PR tells us to complete the survey for all that can then be done for us. The census in Bamidbar tells the Israelites where they belong, where they will camp and the hierarchy they will establish. The biblical census brings the people the security of knowing their place in the community, their place before God.

What do these two different censuses tell us? The first is material; the second is spiritual. Again, the linking of the spiritual and the material.

This linking brings us back to the Birkat Kohanim. Why are these holy and important blessings in this parasha? Are they here to give more credibility to the individual parts of the parasha? Are they here to remind us that even during ordinary (though infrequent) events we are not removed from God's presence? I wanted to understand what they mean, particularly in their original context.

In Hebrew, the 3 blessings are singular, written for each of us individually, since there is no one blessing that would benefit everyone. If you pray for rain, the farmer would be happy but the person about to embark on a trip would not. Only God knows what is appropriate for each of us, so the blessing is singular, God will bless each of us according to our needs.

But we are also blessed as a people. We stand as individuals and as part of a community. We are always linked with each other and with God. Adonai bless you and keep you! Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you! Adonai bestow favor upon you and grant you peace! Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

Ashkenazi use only the first 3 lines as the full blessing, while the Sephardic include the closing line as well. Interpretations abound for the meanings of these blessings. I was surprised to read in several texts that there was a material component to the blessings.

***1. Adonai bless you and keep you!***

God blesses us with material possessions. "And keep you" means the material things and keep us from all evil, and keep our soul. God will protect us.

***2. Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you!***

Deal kindly is to experience the radiance of the divine presence. God will be with us always, even in the mundane, everyday world.

***3. Adonai bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!***

The last word of the 3rd blessing is Shalom, peace. This has been interpreted to mean internal peace, physical peace, and friendships.

Nechama Leibowitz said "The first blessing is material, the second blessing is spiritual, the third combines both." "Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

So I have come full circle, the parasha started with accounting and rules and responsibilities. It included the material and the spiritual. It included us as individuals and as members of a community. It included all of us. What joins these, the material and the spiritual, the individual and the community? God!

And God will bless us.

Shabbat Shalom. Let's join with Fran in chanting the Birkat Kohanim for Josh and Julie Rose.