Naso 5784 Volume XXXI Number 39

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

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. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

"When a man or woman shall commit any sin that people may commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty; then they shall confess their sin which they have committed."(Numbers 5:6–7) According to Maimonides, this verse, which obligates confession, is the basic source for the commandment of repentance; repentance is incomplete without verbal confession. Writing in his Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Teshuva 1:1), he rules that "every commandment in the Torah… if a person violates any one of them either intentionally or accidentally, his act of repentance must be accompanied with confession before God, because it's written in the Torah 'then they shall confess their sin which they have committed.'"

Detailing the nuts and bolts of repentance, Maimonides divides the process into four pragmatic steps: recognition of sin, confession, the act of resolving never to repeat the sin, and – in order to effectuate "total" repentance – resistance from repeating the transgression when faced with a similar temptation under similar circumstances. Hence guilt, the inevitable accompaniment of sin, can be dealt with by means of repentance, which has the power to totally obliterate the act of wrongdoing.

In contrast, Freud, when he discovered the Oedipal complex, assigned mankind a guilt so profound that his message of the "haunted soul" permeates the modern sensibility, from the bleak no-exit landscapes of the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman to the comic-cosmic ones of Bergman's disciple Woody Allen. According to them, not only are we doomed to repeat the sins of our parents, but we are also limited – and even crippled – by the transgressions of our past. All of us, the theory goes, suffer from primal guilt. The past is inescapable. And inevitably, being born into a situation beyond our control, guilt is coupled with gloom. At best we learn to acknowledge our past, and make do. The past controls our present as well as our future!

But in Judaism, as we began to see from Maimonides, a violation of any of the commandments – whether it was purposeful or accidental, conscious or unconscious – may be repented for and forgiven. That and more: a sin may become the means – a sort of pogo stick – for creative betterment; a transgression may be transformed into a good deed, a black mark into a brilliant jewel – a sort of alchemy for the soul. No, Dr. Freud, not only is our present not controlled by the past, but our present has the ability to change the past. As Professor Mordechai Rotenberg of the Hebrew University establishes in his work Rebiographing and Deviance, repentance is built into the theology of Judaism, allowing us not only to escape from the permanent scars of past misdeeds but through a transformative ascent, our sins become virtues – not just in the metaphoric sense, but in real psychological and interpersonal terms. Through the gift of repentance, each individual can re-biographize the events of his life, transforming transgression into a virtue.

Sources for such transformation can be found in a wide range of classic texts. For example, the Talmud (Yoma 86b) cites Resh Lakish, himself a repentant armed robber, as saying that "when true repentance takes place all transgressions are turned into merits," and Rabbi Abbahu (Berakhot 34b), who taught that "where the penitent stands is higher than that of the completely righteous individual."

How is this possible? After all, "of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" How can we recreate, recast, the past? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, discusses this issue in his classical work Al HaTeshuva (On Repentance, edited by Pinchas Peli), and he explains it on the basis of the realization that it is usually only when one loses something – an object or a relationship – that one truly appreciates its value. Hence, tragically

perhaps, only when one has lost his closeness to God and the Jewish tradition can one truly re-embrace them in depth, and then with even greater fervor and appreciation than before. As the great Psalmist King David cried out, "From the depths [of despair] do I call upon you, O God" (Psalms 130:1); it is precisely the depths of my despair that provide me with a jump-start, a push upwards to achieve a close relationship.

I would like to suggest a further insight. After all, the pen used to rewrite our lives (rebiographing) is called repentance, as we have just seen, and it itself is one of the 613 commandments in the Torah. And to repent means to turn back, to turn ourselves back to the period before we sinned, to turn the clock of our lives back as well. Even though Maimonides divides the process into four steps, confession must be particularly important to him because, in his first law in the chapter of repentance, a paragraph of eighteen lines (in my edition of Mishneh Torah, published by Mossad Harav Kook), the Hebrew word for confession, vidui, is repeated no less than thirteen times.

Perhaps by repeating "verbal confession" so often, Maimonides provides us with a clue as to the process by which Judaism turns sins into virtues.

Confessions which lead to a change of heart and personality (recognizing a sin and truly determining, and garnering the strength, never to repeat it again) differ qualitatively from confessions when lying on a psychiatrist's couch or in a dark confessional booth. Authentic confession must be expressed directly to the individual one sinned against. Such a verbal confession – when the lips utter the words to be heard – becomes not only an "at-one-ment" between two individuals who had become alienated and estranged from each other, but it also makes the individual "at-one" with himself, the self he would like to be and the self he has sadly become. It also brings together and makes "at-one-ment" between conflicting parts of a person's consciousness: heart and mind, internal feeling and external communication. It allows the individual to confront and verbally express his sin, his imperfection, his failure, to conceptualize what he has done, first to himself, and then to the other he has wronged. It enables him to reconnect with his full self as well as with others, without the mask of self-deception and without the curtain of separation. Only from such a brutal and truthful encounter with oneself as well as with other can the difficult process of change begin.

A sin (ḥet) is literally a missing of the mark, a disconnect, a failure to make the proper connection and reach out to the other in love. It's clear that Erich Segal's ridiculous message that love means "never having to say you're sorry" is in direct opposition to the Torah's view. Much the opposite! Saying you're sorry to another is recognition of the other, of realizing the pain of the other. Saying you're sorry in a relationship is an admission of love, a cry from one heart to another that one feels and sees the hurt that one has caused the other, that one has the courage to admit one's smallness, one's selfishness, one's self-centeredness in the presence of the other, whose love will empower the beloved to become whole, to grow, and to give again.

Words are the first tangible, external expression of a new reality; real change can only be proven by different external actions. If verbal confession cannot be spoken, if the individual cannot bring him or herself to at least face and express the crime against the other with words of sorrow and remorse, change will never be effectuated and the relationship between the two will never be repaired. Words can at least begin to create new realities, and a new reality can hopefully create a new individual and a new relationship.

Many years ago, a married woman with two children came into my office, confessing that she had encouraged a relationship with a single man; they had stopped just short of adultery, her husband had found out and he now wanted to divorce her. She confronted her guilt, recognized who she had become and how much she had sacrificed for momentary lust, and spoke of how she truly loved her husband and desperately wanted to save their marriage and make amends for what had happened. After meeting with both of them, it also became clear that the husband had been neglecting his wife, that his business had taken him away from home much more often than he should have traveled, and that he too shared in her guilt – although not to the same extent. Each confessed wrongdoing to the other, each recognized the need for change, and not only did the marriage continue but it became much improved. In a very real way, the woman's transgression became transformed into a merit; it served as a spark-plug and wake-up call for two individuals to learn how to live with one another in love, consideration, and mutual commitment. Their present repentance redeemed the past and dramatically changed their future. There is no greater tribute to and confirmation of human freedom than the possibility of change, of growth, of renewal – than the mitzva of repentance. *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid.*

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"In the third month of the Jews' exodus from the land of Egypt, on this day they came to the Wilderness of Sinai." (Shmos 19:1) Normal grammar would have required the posuk to say, "on THAT day," they arrived at Sinai. Instead, though, it says, "on THIS day." Rashi tells us "this day" was Rosh Chodesh Sivan, and the Gemara in Shabbos learns this from the same usage of the word "hazeh" in "Hachodesh hazeh lachem," regarding Rosh Chodesh.

Then he comments further. The Midrash, quoted by Rashi, explains: Words of Torah should be as new (some say beloved) to us as if they were just given "bayom hazeh," today. The excitement of new knowledge, of a new gift, often wears off. However, when it comes to Torah, the thrill should remain, says Hashem.

It's curious, though, that this lesson should be taught almost a week before we received the Torah. We had not been given the Aseres HaDibros yet, not experienced the lightning, thunder, and awesome majesty of Hashem communicating with us. We hadn't even gotten to the foot of Har Sinai yet! Why did Hashem not wait until we got the Torah to tell us the excitement shouldn't wear off and that we should feel like we got its messages today?

Perhaps, then it would have been too late. The introduction to Torah had to begin earlier than the event. We had to be told what a treasure we were going to be given, a source of pleasure in this world and the next, which contains fabulous secrets and fountains of knowledge. We were being prepared to not take this gift for granted; to appreciate it.

From the day we reached the Wilderness of Sinai, we recognized we were in the place where Hashem would betroth us, cast His shadow of protection over us, and commit to our relationship for eternity. That love and anticipation is what keeps the words of Torah fresh and alive within us, just as spending time with the person you love reignites the sparks and fans the flames of passion. This is why we were taught the lesson of feeling Torah is fresh and new even before we got the Torah, because the fact that Hashem wanted to give it to us was the greatest gift of all.

An islander known to be the shrewdest trader in the region became the subject of mirth when he was "bested" by a simple farmer. You see, this fellow wished to marry the farmer's daughter and the custom on their islands was to provide the girl's father with a dowry. An average girl received three cows, an extraordinary one would bring her father four cows, and the most amazing young women were worth five cows. The trader asked for the farmer's daughter's hand in marriage and they settled on a dowry of eight cows!

She was rather plain, and walked with a slouch. She was also somewhat dull. That's why people were shocked that he paid the highest dowry ever heard of in the islands when he definitely could have paid less. A fellow who heard the story traveled to the trader's home on an outlying island to see this wonder for himself. As he sat talking with the trader, the wife walked in to place flowers on the table. She was beautiful and carried herself with confidence and dignity. She no longer slouched and was pleasant and charming. When she left, the visitor asked if this was the same woman the merchant had paid eight cows for. He answered "Yes, it is the same woman."

"I know I could have gotten her for three cows; maybe even two. But I wanted my wife to know how much she was worth to me, and I paid eight cows for her. She knows that of all the women in the islands, only she is an eight-cow wife, and this has uplifted her greatly. She may have only been worth three cows when I married her, but today, even the eight cows I paid for her hand would be far too little."

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The idea of the nazir always raises questions and problems. The idea of monasticism is certainly not a basic Jewish value. Just the opposite seems to be true from the ideas and statements of the rabbis in the Talmud and from Jewish societal behavioral patterns over the centuries.

Jewish society, in its divisions and manifestations is vitally and socially gregarious to the extreme, with a brashness of involvement in all fields of human endeavor, thought and progress. Yet the Torah describes for us quite clearly and vividly the necessity for some necessity of monasticism, be it permanent or temporary, in Jewish life and social order.

Yet even this monastic situation is not meant to separate the nazir from active participation in communal life. Shimshon, the prime example of the nazir in our Tanach is nevertheless the leader of Israel, its chief judge and commanding warrior. There are halachic restrictions placed upon the nazir but locking himself away from Jewish society is certainly not one of them. There are restrictions regarding retaining purity and cutting one's hair, avoiding any sorts of defilement and on consuming wine and affiliated beverages. These restrictions amongst others certainly remind the nazir of his special status, but the nazir is still positively a member of the general society in all senses of participation in normal human life. If anything, a nazir now becomes a model for others for the attempt to achieve probity and purity in a world of the impure and sometimes wicked. So even though the rabbis are not happy with someone becoming a nazir, neziirim and nezirut are a necessary piece of the human puzzle that the Torah describes for us.

The Talmud also teaches us that the impetus for becoming a nazir is also societal. It stems not from the inner wish of the individual to forego certain pleasures and norms of life as much as it stems from the wish for a protective shield from the dissoluteness and licentiousness of the surrounding society. Apparently, in a perfect world, the whole concept of nezirut would be unnecessary. But the Torah judges human life, even Jewish life, as it really is in our imperfect world and not as it should somehow be. And, therefore, the nazir becomes a necessary ingredient in our Torah society.

Over the ages there have been outstanding people who have chosen the way of the nazir for

themselves in their lifetimes. However, the reticence of the rabbis and Jewish tradition on this matter has prevented nezirut from becoming widespread or even accepted behavior. The Torah does not seek to impose burdens upon one's life as much as it intends to guide and temper our choices and behavior within the framework of a wholesome complete life. This is also part of the lesson of the parsha of nazir to us. In essence, by knowing that becoming a nazir is an acceptable last resort in dealing with immorality and heartbreak, we can avoid this by living daily according to Torah precepts and values and shunning foreign and immoral influences in our lives and communities.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

An old rabbinic joke tells of a young man who requested to become a Kohen (Jewish priest). When the board of the congregation refused, the young man offered a million dollars to attain this important status. The board capitulated. Days later, the congregation's rabbi approached the young man, saying, "I know you wanted to become a Kohen, but a million dollars, isn't that a bit much? Why were you so desperate to become a Kohen?" "I'll tell you," the young man said, "my father was a Kohen, my grandfather was a Kohen – so I figured why shouldn't I become a Kohen as well?"

Of course, being a Kohen is inherent. You're either born a Kohen or not. But in the portion of Naso, the Torah discusses the laws of the nazir, who can be viewed as assuming similar responsibilities to a Kohen (Numbers 6:1–21).

For example, much like a Kohen, the nazir is not permitted to have any contact with the dead. Additionally, as there are restrictions on a Kohen's alcohol intake while serving in the Temple, a nazir is enjoined from drinking wine. And, much as a high priest is restricted from doing with his hair as he wishes (i.e., he may not dishevel it), a nazir is forbidden to cut his hair (Leviticus 10:9; 21:1, 2, 10, 11).

Life in many ways is the sum total of our being in a particular place at a particular time. Judaism defines three corresponding categories of holiness, sometimes emanating from God and sometimes initiated by humans:

• Kedushat gavra (holiness of person). There is a person, a Kohen, whose holiness is endowed by God. There is also the holiness of the person that emerges from the self – like a nazir who decides to assume priestly responsibilities.

• Kedushat makom (holiness of place). There is a place, the Holy Temple (and for that matter, all of Jerusalem), that is holy because its sanctity comes from God, from the Shechinah itself. As the Shechinah is eternal, so the Temple's holiness lasts forever (Maimonides, Yad, Laws of Beit Habechira, 6:16). Yet there are other places whose holiness stems from human input, such as the holiness of a synagogue. It is as holy as we make it.

• Kedushat zeman (holiness of time). There is a holy day, the Shabbat, made holy by God, irrespective of human contribution. And there is the holiness of the holidays, whose dates are declared by humans (by the Jewish court).

The challenge is to make all of life holy: for every day to become like Shabbat, for all places to become holy, and for every person to become priestly. Unlike in our satirical rabbinic anecdote, doing so doesn't cost anything. Instead, it requires a commitment to reach spiritually high, to reach for kedushah.

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

In Sefer Bamidbar, all communication between G-d and Moshe seems to occur in the Mishkan (see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni on Bamidbar 1:1). However, Ramban (3:14) tells us that the Sinai Desert is mentioned when G-d told Moshe to count the Levi'im because Mt. Sinai had been mentioned several verses earlier (3:1), and in order to make it clear that the commandment to count the Levi'im was communicated in the Mishkan and not on Mt. Sinai, the Sinai Desert is mentioned again. However, there are two other communications (3:5 and 3:11) between the mention of Mt. Sinai and the clarification that the counting of the Levi'im was commanded in the Mishkan, implying that these two weren't in the Mishkan. Otherwise, the Sinai Desert should have been mentioned introducing the first communication after Mt. Sinai was mentioned, not the third.

Admittedly, this is not so straightforward, as Ramban doesn't say it was the commandment to count the Levi'im that was communicated in the Mishkan, but the commandment to choose the Levi'im, and the two commandments in between are about choosing the Levi'im! To complicate matters further, the Levi'im seem to have been chosen at Mt. Sinai, before the Mishkan was built (after the sin of the golden calf, see Shemos 32:28-29 and Rashi on Bamidbar 3:12). Abarbanel presents it more cleanly, with the Torah telling us that even though the Levi'im were chosen after the sin of the golden calf, the Torah is teaching us that the commandment to count them took place in the Sinai Desert, i.e. in the Mishkan. But this indicates that the two previous communications didn't take place in the

Mishkan, despite being in Sefer Bamidbar.

Parashas Naso includes the gifts of the Nesi'im, which brings us back to the first day the Mishkan was fully operational (see Rashi on 7:1), allowing the communications taught before this to have occurred earlier, outside the Mishkan. In fact, Birkas Kohanim immediately precedes the Mishkan's inauguration (6:22-27), and Aharon gave this blessing to the nation before G-d's divine presence filled the Mishkan (see Rashi on Vayikra 9:22). If G-d didn't communicate with Moshe from the Mishkan until after His divine presence filled it, then the communication regarding the Priestly Blessing could not have occurred in the Mishkan.

Despite Birkas Kohanim being communicated before the Mishkan was built, Sifre Zuta (7:11) tells us that it was communicated on the very day the Mishkan became fully operational. This communication would seem to have occurred in Moshe's tent, which he moved outside the camp after the sin of the golden calf (Shemos 33:7), and where G-d communicated with him (33:9), before the Mishkan was built. But there's more to the story, at least according to some Midrashim.

When Moshe accounted for all the material donated for the Mishkan, the word "משכן" is mentioned twice (Shemos 38:21). The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 51:2 and Tanchuma 2/5) explains that Moshe asked G-d what he should do with the extra material, and G-d told him to use it to make a second Mishkan. Several suggestions are made as to what the purpose of this second Mishkan was, including: it was put in the קדש הקדשים around the ארון (Eitz Yosef); it was where the broken Luchos were kept (Anaf Yosef); it refers to Moshe's tent, which he called "אהל מועד" (Shemos 33:7), with the extra material used to expand it (Maharzo).

Yalkut Shimoni (737) tells us that this second Mishkan was the same exact size as the regular Mishkan, negating the first possibility (unless the same miracle that allowed the ארון to take up no space in the קדש הקדשים also applied to the second Mishkan). Midrash HaGadol (Shemos 38:21) refers to the regular Mishkan as the "משכן שכינה" (the Mishkan where the Divine Presence stayed) and the second Mishkan as the "משכן לבית מדרשו של משה" (the Mishkan for Moshe's Beis Midrash), telling us explicitly (37:7) that this was Moshe's tent, where the extra materials that were donated were used. [This doesn't negate the possibility that the broken Luchos were kept in Moshe's tent.] But there's still more.

Midrash HaGadol (Bamidbar 9:1) is among the sources that teach us that when the Torah says G-d communicated with Moshe in the Sinai Desert, it means in the Mishkan, adding a short list of other commandments that were taught in the Mishkan (using the term "אהל מועד"): "In the אהל מועד he was told to make (or to anoint) the Mishkan; in the אהל מועד he was told to burn the [reddish brown] cow; in the אהל מועד he was told to put up the tent; in the אהל מועד he was told about all the ritual impurities." How could Moshe have been commanded to make the Mishkan from inside the Mishkan?

Even if the commandment to "put up the tent" refers to expanding Moshe's tent, and "making the Mishkan" refers to putting it together on the day it became fully operational (or the wording is "to anoint the Mishkan," as some Midrashim have it), which would allow these communications to have happened during the seven days of training – when the Mishkan was put together and taken down numerous times – how could the Midrash be saying that G-d spoke to Moshe in the Mishkan before His divine presence transferred there from Mt. Sinai (see Rashi on Beitza 5b and Ta'anis 21b), which didn't happen until the "eighth day"? [If that's what the Midrash is saying, then the communication about the Priestly Blessing could have occurred in the Mishkan too, even though it was before the Mishkan was fully operational.] On the other hand, if this Midrash is referring to Moshe's tent (the other Mishkan) being where these communications occurred, how could it include the other commandments as being taught there – and not just those listed, but those alluded to (such as the commandment to count the nation)? Were all these commanded in Moshe's tent rather than in the (regular) Mishkan?

Although I will make a suggestion, I recognize the magnitude of the חידוש, and am open to hearing other possibilities (please email them to RabbiDMK at gmail dot com).

The other Midrashim refer to the regular Mishkan as the "אהל העבודה" (the tent of the service, referring to the offerings brought there), and the second Mishkan as either the "אהל הדברות" (the tent of the communications) or the "אהל העדות" (the tent of the testimony). While the "דברות" could refer to Moshe teaching G-d's communications to the nation, I would suggest it refers to the communications between G-d and Moshe that occurred there. Not just those communications that occurred between the sin of the golden calf and the regular Mishkan becoming fully operational, but also communications that occurred afterwards, with the following caveat: any communication that occurred in Moshe's tent after the Mishkan was built must have only been relevant for that generation. Once the Mishkan was fully operational, every commandment that was relevant forever (i.e. the 613 commandments, which had already been taught at Sinai) was taught there. But any communication that had to be taught to the nation before the Mishkan was fully operational – even if it was relevant forever – as well as those that were only relevant for that generation, took place in Moshe's tent (i.e. the other Mishkan).

The census at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar was only relevant for that generation, so was commanded in Moshe's tent – as were the other communications "in the Sinai Desert," such as bringing the Korbon Pesach that second year – which didn't apply

the other 39 years. The anointing of the (regular) Mishkan was commanded in Moshe's tent. So was the פרה אדומה, which needed to be taught before the Mishkan was built. Like the Priestly Blessings, it was taught on the day the Mishkan became fully operational, albeit before it was. Therefore, even though they applied to later generations too, they were taught in Moshe's tent. [I've previously discussed the details of ritual impurities being taught before the Mishkan was fully operational because they took effect then too.] The 70 elders being chosen? Only relevant to that generation, so G-d spoke to Moshe in the other Mishkan (as these Midrashim say explicitly). The commandment to count the Levi'im was only relevant to that generation, so was commanded in the Sinai Desert (i.e. in the other Mishkan), but the Levi'im being chosen was relevant for future generations, so was communicated at Sinai and/or in the regular Mishkan.

Having a second Mishkan, built to scale, allowed for the communications that were only relevant for that generation to be taken as seriously as those that applied to future generations, which were communicated in the regular Mishkan. Nevertheless, since this other Mishkan wasn't as important for us, it was only hinted at in the verses, but expounded upon in the Midrashim.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

For some time now I have been mulling over the concept of mixed blessings. To be sure, every great power comes with the innate potential for both great achievements and disastrous consequences. From the simple example of a knife with the power to both create and destroy, to the realms of technology and communication, which give us access to all sorts of information but also open the door to disinformation. Artificial intelligence, we are told, has the potential for some of the greatest advances the world has ever seen, but some fear it may also lead to the end of humanity as we know it.

Charles Dickens captured this duality in his novel A Tale of Two Cities: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." This line encapsulates the profound contradictions of that era, underscoring how progress and suffering seemingly have to coexist. I think that is part of the axiomatic and essential balance of everything in the universe -- good and evil and the continuous push-pull tension between the two.

We find examples of this universal balance in our personal lives as well. One's children can be the source of the most sublime pleasure, but they can also be a source of anxiety and heartache -- and are often a heavy dose both. If we look at things objectively, we will find that this is also true for most everything in our lives. In this way, we all tend to live in a universe of mixed blessings. Unfortunately, many people take the blessings in their lives for granted and tend to focus on everything that is "wrong" instead.

It seems like part of the human condition is to believe that if only our lives would get "better" we would find a lasting state of happiness. The famous actor Jim Carrey once said, "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer." Perhaps Oscar Wilde captured it best when he wrote, "When the gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers."

I am reminded of a joke about a group of seniors who were sitting around drinking coffee and discussing their various ailments. "My arms have gotten so weak I can hardly lift this cup of coffee," said one. "Yes, I know," said another, "My cataracts are so bad, I can't even see my coffee." "I often forget where I am, and where I'm going," said a third. "What? Speak up! I can't hear you!" shouted the fourth. "I guess that's the price we pay for getting old," winced another old man as he slowly shook his head.

The others nodded in agreement. "Well, count your blessings," said the last member of the group, "Thank God we can all still drive!"

Most people strive to make their lives better in the hope that they will find joy. But, in reality, it is quite the opposite; when a person has more joy, he has a better life! The question is: How do you begin to acquire joy?

We find an illuminating verse (Job 5:7) that describes the very essence of man: "Man was born to labor [...]." According to the great Biblical commentator Rashi (ad loc) the context of this verse is the challenge mankind faces in contradistinction to angels who don't sin. In other words, angels dwell in the heavenly realm, while mankind lives in the universe balanced by the polar forces of good and evil.

So, while angels do not sin, they also do not have potential for personal growth. They simply exist in the state in which they were created. Man, on the other hand, is dynamic; man is given the potential to achieve and become much more than the state in which he was created. However, this potential for growth also enables him to falter and sin -- the challenge of living in a universe with polar extremes.

Thus, the very essence of man is driven by a desire to accomplish, which therefore defines much of his existence. This is the reason people define themselves by what they do; personal growth is at the very core of our being. This is also why many men who retire from work and choose to lead a purposeless life (aside from driving their wives crazy) begin to emotionally and physically deteriorate quite rapidly -- often leading to an earlier demise.

We find this concept in this week's Torah reading as well, which includes perhaps the most well-known blessing in Judaism, the "Priestly Blessing." God instructs Moses to entrust his brother Aaron and his sons

-- the Cohanim (priestly caste) -- with the responsibility of blessing the Jewish people. This blessing, known in Hebrew as Birkat Cohanim, is:

"May God bless you and keep watch over you. May God's countenance be illuminated towards you and endow you with grace. May God direct His providence toward you and grant you peace." The Torah continues, "They will thus link My name with the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6:24-27).

In Hebrew, the word for blessed is "baruch" and a blessing is called a "bracha." The Hebrew language is a holy one and words aren't merely happenstance. According to Jewish tradition, there is a deeper, more mystical meaning to the root of the word blessing.

As explained in prior editions of the Shabbat Shalom Fax, each Hebrew letter has a numerical value assigned to it. Many people are familiar with the importance of the number 18 in Judaism; this is the numerical value of the Hebrew word for "chai -- life." The Hebrew root word for blessing is comprised of the three letters bet -- reish -- chaf.

These three letters are unique in that they are the only letters in the Hebrew alphabet that are a precise doubling of the numerical value of the previous letter (ex: bet is 2 while aleph is 1; in English that would be like A = 1 and B = 2, but also Q = 100 and R = 200). Thus, when you give someone a blessing (bracha) you are in essence giving a blessing that they should receive a multiple of what they have. But this needs further clarification. A multiple of what?

It is interesting to note that while there are many explanations as to what precisely this blessing refers, Rashi -- the preeminent commentator on the Torah -- understands the first line of the Priestly Blessing to be referring to a blessing of wealth and a special protection from the Almighty not to lose it (see Rashi's comment on Numbers 6:24).

This is rather difficult to comprehend. First of all, it is awfully stereotypical to claim that the most important thing to Jews is money. What about a blessing for family or good health? There seem to be many things that should precede an emphasis on monetary wealth. Moreover, we find some teachings related to wealth that are downright negative: In the second chapter of Pirkei Avot (Ethics of Our Fathers) we find the teaching, "One who increases possessions increases worry" (2:8).

It's absolutely true: money is not a magic elixir. It cannot reverse one's age, cure paralysis, reverse mental decline, or magically create happiness. Similarly, one cannot buy "better" parents, siblings, or children. Sadly, the vast majority of people view the value of wealth in a superficial, empty, and self-absorbed manner. The sages' teaching that an accumulation of possessions also equals an accumulation of worries applies to a person who mindlessly focuses on acquiring many homes, cars, and other expressions of wealth to impress others.

The true power of money lies in its extraordinary potential to act as a multiple. Because we all have an innate desire to accomplish, the real value of money is the potential good that one can accomplish by using it properly. For a person whose main focus and desire is to help improve the lives of others, their wealth can be put to use in a way that they can essentially clone themselves, so to speak, to do far more good.

For example, if a person has an innate desire to feed those who don't have access to healthy and nutritious food, there are only a limited number of people for whom a person can prepare and distribute food. If a person is a doctor and wants to help people get healthy, there are a limited number of patients that he or she can actually see in a day. If a person's goal is to enlighten people with education, there are a limited number of hours in a day that they can spend teaching.

This is true no matter what good works a person pursues, because their individual time and resources are finite. However, with the proper resources (i.e. wealth) a person can, in effect, "multiply themselves" and achieve very lofty goals that they would be otherwise unable to achieve. They can fund a food bank that will feed hundreds weekly, build hospitals that will care for thousands monthly, and set up schools that will educate generations to come. This is why the root for the word blessing (bracha) hints to its real power -- that of being a multiple.

In this way, money is a unique blessing to an individual; it has the incredible power to create a multiple of oneself, something that cannot be accomplished even by having a large family. In fact, show me a person who looks at his children as an extension of himself and I will show you a person with a terrible relationship with his children.

Thus, the ultimate blessing that a person can get, in terms of actualizing one's life, is the blessing of having resources to multiply one's good works. For this reason, it is the focus of the Priestly Blessing for the Jewish people and the blessing that Jewish parents give their children every Friday night.