

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Naso Part I Numbers 5–6

### 1. Purity of the Camp

With G-d's presence represented to dwell in the Israelite camp, all matters associated with the camp – particularly those that reflect on the honor and respect due G-d – assumed great importance. Accordingly, following the instructions concerning organization of the camp, travel-formation and how the Tabernacle was to be transported (Num. 1–4) the Torah turns to maintenance of the camp's ritual purity.

The nation is commanded to “send out” from the camp three classes of impure individuals, man or woman, “that they not defile their camp in whose midst I dwell,” the *וְאִשָּׁמָא לְנֶפֶשׁ* (*one stricken with certain skin disorders, abnormal genital discharges or who had contact with a human corpse [Num. 5:1-4]*). These three are severe impurities that require a seven-day purification process; until the individual who has contracted any of them undergoes purification (after the condition clears up in the case of the first two) he or she may not reenter the camp.

Although such individuals are required to exit the camp on their own, the law is addressed to the Israelites – *וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ*, that they shall “send out” or perhaps “expel” (formulated as a plural) – to establish communal responsibility for sanctuary purity. (The grammatical possibility to translate *וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ* as “let go” is unsuitable to the context.) The passage concludes “The Israelites did so and sent them out of the camp.” This should be understood as indicating that the public internalized the law and saw to its fulfillment.

One wonders why this legislation was not included in Leviticus with the many laws pertaining to impurities? The explanation seems to be that since this is a case of establishing public responsibility for maintaining the purity of the camp and instructions for the

organization of the camp had not yet been given there. Such responsibility was a natural continuation of those instructions. Leviticus did state as regards the *sara'at*-stricken individual: “all the days that the plague is upon him he shall be impure...he shall dwell apart; outside the camp shall be his dwelling” (*בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב*) (Lev. 13:46). But that only concerned the individual. Also see Leviticus 14:8 and Numbers 12:14-15.

Regarding one with abnormal genital discharges, there is no explicit statement in Leviticus that he or she must exit the camp. However, at the conclusion of the regulations regarding such discharges the Torah calls for separating the Israelites from their impurity “that they not die in their impurity by defiling My Tabernacle that is in their midst” (Lev. 15:31). Although this statement does not explicitly call for physical separation it does link the impurity with defilement of G-d's dwelling place, intimating that such an individual may not enter the sanctuary area before undergoing the purification process. The laws concerning a corpse-defiled individual are not given in Leviticus.

The sages expounded our passage in Numbers 5 in a nuanced manner. They interpreted the word *mahaneh* (camp), which appears four times in the passage, as possessing multiple connotations, in accordance with the various zones that had been prescribed in the instructions for organization of the camp. In its most limited sense it was understood to refer to the sanctuary precinct proper. All who were impure were excluded from that “camp.” The repeated use of this term was explained as referring to two additional areas with differing characteristics. One was the Levite district that surrounded the sanctuary, from which those with *sara'at* and abnormal genital discharges were prohibited, but in which a corpse-

defiled person was permitted to be. The third area was the outer Israelite region, from which only one with *sara'at* was prohibited. In later times, these distinctions were applied to the temple precinct, the Temple Mount and the city of Jerusalem (*b. Pesah.* 67).

The reason the corpse-defiled individual was treated more leniently than the other two may reflect the fact that, unlike the others, this individual did not possess an actual bodily condition of defilement.

In accordance with the Leviticus instruction concerning one struck with *sara'at* that “he shall dwell apart; outside the camp shall be his dwelling,” such an individual was required to exit whichever city in Israel he lived in (see 2 Kings 7:3). When King Uzziah was so struck, he moved out of his palace in Jerusalem and, as he was never cured, dwelled for the rest of his life in *bet hah* □ □ *ofsheet* (2 Kings 15:5; 2 Chr. 26:21). Scholars consider it likely that this structure was located in the outer city of Jerusalem. This may indicate that the ancient tradition did not require banishment except from what is considered the outer perimeter of the city proper, perhaps understood as the area within the walls of Jerusalem.

## 2. Regarding Purity in the Military Camp

The laws of maintaining the ritual purity of the military camp (Deut. 23:10-15) are more demanding than those in our passage that concern the national camp. The military camp also presumably contained the holy ark, implied in the statement there: “For Hashem your G-d travels in the midst of your camp...and your camp shall be holy” (Deut. 23:15; see Num. 31:6). The additional stipulations include the requirement to designate an area outside the camp where every man was to go when necessary to relieve himself. Each man was to carry a spike to facilitate this requirement and cover his excrement with earth. A man impure from a nocturnal emission was required to remain outside the camp for the day and return at nightfall, upon washing (ablution). The Torah does not explicitly provide the reason for these stringencies.

Ibn Ezra suggests that these differences from the national camp result from the nature of the military

camp: it is comparatively small, everyone is located in the immediate proximity of the ark, there are no partitions that separate the ark from the soldiery and children are not present. In the national camp, a more significant distance separates the ark from the people, there also are intervening partitions, and women and children are present. In the latter case the Torah's pragmatism came into play. The law limited those that must exit the national camp to impure individuals whose purification requires a seven-day process and who transmit impurity to others through contact, namely, those with *sara'at*, those who have an abnormal genital discharge and those who had contact with a human corpse.

What about the impurity of the new mother, which also is of an extended period? Going beyond Ibn Ezra, it may be that women who gave birth as well as ordinary menstruants were not included with the other three, since their impurity was natural and expected within the context of good health. The impurity of *sara'at*, abnormal genital flow and contact with a corpse all denote disease and death (*Olam HaTanakh*). This accords with the most basic explanation concerning the meaning of the Torah's laws of impurity (see our study on *Parashat Tazria Part I*).

The Ramban suggests that the military camp required an extra measure of holiness (expressed through the stringencies of who must exit the camp) in order to increase the soldiers' consciousness of their dependence on G-d. This would help prevent the setting in of an immoral disposition that is common especially among a successful soldiery, to feel proud of their prowess and to excessively rely on it. He also points out that the greater emphasis on holiness counteracts practices that generally prevailed in the armies of other nations, practices that included all types of debauched and unethical behavior.

## 3. The Call to Repent from Sins

In the next passage the Torah prescribes procedures associated with repentance for transgressions of a monetary nature between man and man (Num. 5:5-8): “When a man or woman commits any of the sins in the human realm [כִּי יַעֲשֶׂוּ מִכָּל חַטָּאת הָאֲדָמָה], committing sacrilege against Hashem [לְמַעַל מֵעַל בְּה'], and that individual realizes his guilt [וְאִשְׁמָה הִנָּפֵשׁ הָהוּא]...” The

individual must confess the sin, make restitution to the wronged party, pay that person a penalty of one-fifth and make an atonement sacrifice of a ram.

A passage strikingly similar to this one, with a great deal of comparable wording, appears in Leviticus 5:20-26. It also speaks of a person who committed sacrilege against Hashem [וּמַעַלְהָ מַעַל בַּה']. There, the passage provides explicit examples of the type of transgression it is addressing: "...and had dealt deceitfully with his fellow in the matter of a deposit or a pledge, or through robbery or by defrauding his fellow, or by finding something lost and lying about it, and he swore falsely regarding any one of the various things that a man might do and sin [מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר] [יַעֲשֶׂה הָאָדָם לְהַטֵּא בְהִנְיָהּ].” When he realizes his guilt (or was found guilty) [כִּי יִחָטֵא וְאָשָׁם] he must make restitution, add a fifth and bring a ram for an atonement sacrifice. It should be noted that the specified examples, a virtual catalogue of monetary transgressions between man and man, correspond closely to the formulation in the Leviticus section of holiness laws: “You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name...You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery” (Lev. 19:11-13).

The Talmud assumes, followed by most commentators, that the law in Numbers 5 is identical with the one in Leviticus 5, except that in our formulation an application was added, the case when the person who is to receive restitution died without leaving an heir. (The sages explain that this refers to a proselyte who left no postconversion progeny, since every individual born into a pedigreed Israelite family necessarily has relatives.) In that case the payment is to go to the officiating priest. The question is asked, could not this single detail have been incorporated into the more expansive Leviticus formulation rather than necessitate repetition of the whole paragraph in Numbers? (Before suggesting an answer it should be pointed out that incidental to the case of the man who died without leaving an heir two verses are attached detailing other cases of gifts that go to the priest. But these laws do not explain the reason for the relatively lengthy repetition of the primary law. )

The reason that the Leviticus 5 formulation was repeated in Numbers 5 seems to be because in

Leviticus that law was part of the introductory sacrificial law section that described situations and conditions that required various offerings and prescribed the procedures that the priests must oversee. The passage there was technical, part of sanctuary protocol and priestly responsibility. It did not contain an official call to the sinner to repent despite the fact that this case constituted the rare instance of the Torah granting an intentional sinner the opportunity to bring a sacrifice as part of the repentance process. In our Numbers context, on the other hand, the law is directed to the sinner, providing the procedures associated with repentance. It prescribes concerning sinners וְהִתְוַדּוּ אֶת חַטָּאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ (“they are to confess the sins that they perpetrated”), a crucial detail that did not fit in the Leviticus formulation and accordingly necessitated restatement of the passage.

One wonders why the false oath that was so prominent in the corresponding Leviticus passage is not explicitly mentioned in our Numbers passage. Some suggest that the Torah relied on the Leviticus formulation for this detail. But why would such a detail be omitted? Perhaps such sins as referred to here were usually accompanied by a false oath and therefore assumed to have been present here as well. In Leviticus 19:12, which, as we have pointed out, is linked with the Leviticus 5 formulation of these violations, the prohibition of swearing falsely is placed in the midst of the stealing and defrauding sins, since it is so closely associated with them.

Others are of the opinion that the phrase in the opening formulation of our passage, לְמַעַל מַעַל בַּה' (“committing sacrilege against Hashem”), hints at a false oath, for a false oath always involves profanation of His sacred name, which could be considered the sacrilege. However, the syntax does not appear to support such an interpretation. And in the Leviticus 5 passage the parallel phrase וּמַעַלְהָ מַעַל בַּה' is stated as a description of the basic transgression the individual committed, while the false oath is mentioned many clauses later.

“Committing sacrilege against Hashem” in both our context and in that of the corresponding Leviticus passage seems to be making the monumental statement that one who sins against his fellow man also breaks faith with Hashem. Even if the legal

interpretation of our passage is determined to be modified by the Leviticus formulation and the law will be applied only when there was an accompanying false oath, the literary formulation proclaims its message and must be heeded, for אֵין מִקְרָא יוֹצֵא מִיָּדֵי פְּשׁוּטוֹ (“A verse does not depart from its straightforward meaning”).

This message is consistent with the concept inherent in G-d’s recurrent insertion of the *Ani Hashem* (“I am Hashem”) backdrop formula in the Leviticus 19 laws of human interaction. Leviticus 19 enhances the covenant laws with an expanded holiness dimension. The *Ani Hashem* statements there signified G-d’s keen concern for social justice and honesty in human affairs; it was His reiterated proclamation that sins against man are affronts to Him. This is an explicit renunciation of that philosophy of religion that considered service of G-d primarily fulfilled through ritual acts and viewed the sphere of human interaction as of lesser religious significance. (It should be noted that, excluding the superscription, the three Leviticus 19 verses being referred to – 11 through 13 – are the three central verses in that 22-verse “paragraph,” a feature often found to have significance.)

Thus, our Numbers 5 case is an extension of a key portion of the Leviticus program. As the laws of purity and impurity lead to the Holiness Code in Leviticus, the Numbers legislation that appears after camp organization begins with protecting the sanctuary from impurity followed by augmenting a key aspect of the call to holiness. As we shall now see, this reflection of the Leviticus program continues with the two remaining Leviticus-related subjects that follow in Numbers and explains their location in the text.

#### 4. The Suspected Adulteress

The next passage in Numbers deals with the jealous husband who suspects his wife of adultery (Num. 5:11-31). In Leviticus, the chapter 20 exhortations against the prohibited sexual liaisons begin with the major interdiction against adultery. This follows shortly after the chapter 19 cluster that prohibits the various forms of stealing, which had been the frame of reference of the preceding Numbers passage. The suspected adulteress passage does not contain legal or moral instruction per se regarding adultery. Rather, it addresses a husband’s burning suspicion of his wife in

a case lacking legally acceptable evidence. Though recognizing the sanctity of the marriage bond, the Torah also recognizes that circumstances often require a “cooling off” period and wise counseling to achieve a favorable resolution. Hence, this passage is a sort of addendum to the Leviticus law, and continues the progression of passages reflecting the essential Leviticus themes in sequence, adding features to them.

In the ancient Near East, a man with suspicions regarding his wife’s fidelity but with only circumstantial evidence – frequently based on gossip, hearsay and rumors – was given great latitude in chastising his wife. Often there was no deterrent to a man in a jealous rage maiming and even killing his wife. If the family or community had suspicions they sometimes formed a lynch mob against her themselves. The wife had little protection. Remnants of such practices exist in a number of present-day societies.

The Torah mandated death for the adulterous wife – as well as for her paramour – but as is the case for all capital punishment, it may be applied only in a court of law with due process and with two witnesses who must be thoroughly checked for reliability (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Rabbi S. D. Sassoon was of the opinion that our passage was designed to protect the innocent woman from her possibly irrational, violent husband. It may have been too difficult for an agitated and emotionally distraught man to abide by the Torah’s legal system regarding his wife. Convinced that she is guilty but fearing there will not be acceptable witnesses, he may take the law into his own hands. The Torah’s requirement to bring the suspected wife to the priest, who would subject her to an “ordeal” that would result in her punishment if guilty, might assuage the husband’s jealousy. Meanwhile, the priest will investigate the situation and may improve the situation for the couple.

Rabbi Sassoon understood the intention behind our law as similar to that behind the law concerning the בֶּן סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵד (“the wayward and rebellious son” [Deut. 21:18-21]). In that case the Torah provided protection for a boy who might be living in a dysfunctional and potentially violent family.

In contrast to widespread ancient Near Eastern practice that included a significant number of ordeals,

the case of the suspected adulteress is the only law in Torah legislation for which the appearance of an ordeal is specified. However, unlike the standard types of ordeals of the time, this is not truly an ordeal; it does not subject the woman to a physically challenging situation from which she must extricate herself to prove innocence and prevent her being harmed. In ancient law a suspected adulteress might have been cast into a dangerous river stream and asked to swim to safety. Here, she drinks water from a vessel containing some earth with a written oath dissolved into it and accepts the oath with attendant curses upon her if guilty.

In other words, the suspected adulteress is subject to G-d's supernatural judgment. At no point may a human hand be raised against her or may she be subject to a "natural" ordeal. If guilty, G-d will cause consequences to ensue in a supernatural way. The physical punishment described for the guilty woman is *וְצָבְתָהּ בִטְנָהּ וְנִפְלְתָה יָרְכָהּ* ("her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag" Num. 5:27, NJPS), effects that are predicted to materialize for a guilty woman from her drinking the water potion. Whatever the exact translation of these phrases in *peshat*, (perhaps, assuming she is pregnant, they mean that if she is guilty she will miscarry), they do not refer to death. Although guilt means she committed a capital transgression, since after all is said and done she was not found culpable in a human court and she cannot be punished by death. If G-d intervenes and the supernatural effects occur, she will be derided as an "object of curse among her people" (Num. 5:27).

## 5. The Nazirite

The laws concerning the Nazirite (Num. 6:1-21) follow the case of the suspected adulteress. To a certain extent the Nazirite is a non-priest counterpart of a high priest, one who chooses at his or her own initiative to live in a more sanctified state for a period of time, emulating in private life some laws and practices of a high priest. The root meaning of the word *nazir* is "to be separate" or "crown," (apparently because the wearer of the crown was separate from others), and by extension, "the elect" and "the consecrated one." In the blessings of both his father (Gen. 49:26) and Moses (Deut. 33:16), Joseph is termed *נָזִיר אֶהְיֶה*, variously translated in accordance with each of the possible meanings.

Despite the Nazirite's holy motivation, this passage does not belong in Leviticus since there is no actual connection with the priesthood. Its placement following the suspected adulteress case parallels the sequence in Leviticus where the laws of holiness pertaining to priests and high priest (Lev. 21) follow the section that contains the prohibition against adultery (Lev. 20).

In addition to conceptual similarities between Nazirite and high priest, there are several striking correspondences between the two sections, indicating linkage. Both high priest and Nazirite, and only those two classes of people, are prohibited from becoming defiled even as concerns funerary rites for an immediate family member, including father and mother. Regarding the high priest, the Torah's explanation of this law is *כִּי נֶזֶר שְׂמֹן מִשְׁחַת אֶקִּי עָלָיו* ("for the crown of his G-d's anointing oil is upon him" [Lev. 21:12]); regarding the Nazirite, this law is explained with *כִּי נֶזֶר אֶקִּי עַל רֹאשׁוֹ* ("for the crown of His G-d is upon his head" [Num. 6:7]). The "crown" in the case of the Nazirite is his uncut hair, the sign of his status.

Regarding the holiness of the priests, it states *קְדוֹשִׁים יִהְיוּ לַאֲלֹהֵיהֶם* ("They shall be holy to their G-d" [Lev. 21:6]); regarding the Nazirite, *קָדוֹשׁ הוּא לַיהוָה* ("He should be holy to Hashem" [Num. 6:8]). The Nazirite prohibition against wine and intoxicant (6:3) is reminiscent of the prohibition for priests against drinking wine or intoxicant at the time of sanctuary service. The fact that the Nazirite prohibition is more comprehensive and applies at all times as well as to all that is made from grapes (Lev. 10:9) implies that such an individual should view himself at all times as a priest doing service. Interestingly, in Leviticus 22, which continues with laws addressed to priests, the prohibition for impure priests to come into contact with consecrated offerings is introduced with the unusual word *וַיִּנְזְרוּ* ("and they should separate themselves"). A similar mind-set underlies both institutions.

## 6. The Priestly Blessing and Return to the Dedication Day

Upon concluding the four passages we have just surveyed, passages that recall in sequence essential features of the Leviticus purity-holiness program, the

Torah turns to the priestly blessing (Num. 6:22-27), and prescribes the formula Aaron and his sons are to use in blessing Israel. Some have seen the placement of this passage as linked to the preceding passage of the Nazirite. Although the Nazirite is considered holy, he or she is not authorized to pronounce the official blessing to Israel; it is only the priests who may do so.

Undoubtedly, there was always the fear that individuals from the community-at-large might introduce ideas at variance with the Torah's program. In His introduction to transmitting the prescribed blessings for the priests, G-d states, "Thus shall you bless the Israelites, say to them." In specifying the details of the blessing He hopes to ensure that the priests do not introduce subjective notions into a highlight of their service that defines the larger goals. In concluding His transmittal, G-d states "they shall place My name on the Israelites and I will bless them." Ultimately, it is not the priest, the religious leader or the holy man who imparts blessing; it is only G-d who does so. The priests must view themselves as channels for G-d to impart His blessings.

The blessing is comprised of three verses containing three, five and seven words, in that order, and formulated in the singular, although the passage is introduced as the blessing for the public. Each verse has two parts. The first verse calls upon Hashem to bless the assembled worshipers and protect them. "Bless" includes all the basics of human welfare: livelihood, health, children, satisfaction. To protect, in this context, is generally taken as referring to that which Hashem has granted.

The second verse calls upon Hashem to "shine His countenance upon you," which usually has the meaning of expressing a friendly disposition, and "to be gracious toward you." In other words, He should

treat the recipients of the blessing well, judge them with compassion and not be strict with them.

The third verse asks Hashem to "lift His countenance toward you." This term usually means to look upon favorably, to bestow favor. The blessing concludes with, "and provide you with peace."

The Sifra assumes that this passage was the text of the blessing Aaron pronounced at the conclusion of his sanctuary service during the dedication day procedures (Lev. 9:22), a blessing which was not there detailed. Judging from what follows, the priestly blessing may have been placed where it is as a literary technique to take the reader back to the sanctuary dedication day of the previous month (see the following verse) and introduce the conclusion of the account of the day's ceremonies. The Torah had abruptly curtailed the narrative at the point of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. As the sages say, "There is no earlier or later in the Torah." The main topic in the resumption concerns the role the chieftains played in the sanctuary dedication (Num. 7:1-88), a matter not at all touched upon in Leviticus.

As the lay, political leaders of the nation, the chieftains were not given a role in Leviticus. Throughout the millennia, their counterparts in other nations as well as in Israel, have often had their own self-serving agendas and were repeatedly in competition with the religious leadership. Indeed, the chieftains' contributions to the sanctuary that are recorded in the next chapter were not officially solicited. However, they stepped forth at their own initiative with sincerity and generosity and G-d instructed Moses to accept their gifts.