

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Naso Part II Numbers 7

### 1. On Placement

Numbers 7 opens with an elaborate reference to the Tabernacle dedication procedures, which we will translate literally despite its awkwardness in English, to bring out a point that might otherwise be missed:

On the day that Moses had finished setting up the Tabernacle, and anointed it and consecrated it and all its utensils, as well as the altar and all its utensils and he had anointed them and consecrated them. (v. 1)

This verse is unusually long, run-on, and does not complete its thought. From an informational standpoint, all that was necessary was to provide the date, since anointment and consecration were already detailed in Leviticus 8 (Ibn Ezra). Its drawn-out construction, with many clauses, signals that it should be viewed as a celebratory account that reflects the great jubilation associated with completion of the Tabernacle. Repetition and prolongation are fit devices to help transmit joyous feelings, allowing the reader to linger on the particulars and enjoy the phrases. In accord with its intention, the translation proffered above utilizes commas and conjunctions, rather than placing a period in the middle and smoothening the bumps, as does the NJPS translation.

The rest of the chapter deals with the tribal chieftains' gifts to the Tabernacle and their participation in the altar dedication. Verse 2, which introduces the chieftains, is also a celebratory account of sorts, and it, too, employs "syntactic license." The verse's first word וַיִּקְרִיבוּ ("and they brought forth") is a transitive verb that requires an object that is not furnished. (The chieftains brought something forth, but what they brought forth is not stated.) Upon introducing the chieftains the narrative flow is halted while they are

announced with three additional nominal clauses. Thus, verse 2 depicts them in various aspects of their leadership roles: "The chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the chieftains of the tribes, those who were in charge of enrollment" (NJPS). It is as if the verse is heralding them with the honor that customarily accompanies them, furnishing them a grand entrance to the sanctuary precinct. With the lengthy interruption after the word וַיִּקְרִיבוּ, the following verse resumes with a substitute transitive verb, וַיָּבִיאוּ ("they brought").

The Torah had last discussed the Tabernacle dedication ceremonies in Leviticus 9. There, immediately following Aaron's dedicatory service and the favorable divine response, the Nadab and Abihu tragedy occurred, dampening the proceedings. Upon concluding the account of the latter episode and its aftermath, the Torah abruptly turned to its legislative program and continued with it through the end of Leviticus. Perhaps the narrative of the dedication day ceremonies was so terminated as a sign of respect for Aaron, but that was in the writing of the Torah and as concerns the sensibilities of the reader. The sanctuary service of the day, however, most likely continued, in accordance with Moses' explicit instructions to Aaron and his remaining sons concerning such service (Lev. 10:6-7, 12-15). Aaron's explanation as to why they did not eat from the hattat sacrifice that day only concerned the eating of meat. In the next section we will present another opinion as to the omission of the chieftains' participation in the Leviticus account of the sanctuary dedication ceremonies.

In any event, one of the last items of service related in that Leviticus context was Aaron blessing the people (Lev. 9:22), an account that did not include the specific wording of the blessing. The priestly blessing passage in our *parasha* (Num. 6:22-27), which

introduces the resumption of the dedication ceremonies, contains the formal phraseology for the blessing. Possibly, this was the formula Aaron used for his dedication day blessing (Sifra, Ibn Ezra). But even if not, it henceforth comprised the official text of that blessing and was thus an appropriate vehicle to introduce the return to the sanctuary dedication discussion. (As pointed out in our previous study, the placement of the priestly blessing where it is may be connected to the preceding passage of the Nazirite.)

The opening verse of Numbers 7 also connects with the Exodus 40 account of the Tabernacle completion. The last verse there prior to that book's closing coda read: וַיָּקָם...לְמִשְׁכַּן...וַיִּכַּל מֹשֶׁה אֶת הַמִּלְאָכָה (“And he set up...for the Tabernacle...and Moses completed the work” [Exod. 40:33]). Here, the passage begins: וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם כִּלּוֹת מֹשֶׁה לְהַקְדִּים אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן (“And on the day Moses completed setting up the Tabernacle”).

The book of Numbers had opened on the first day of the second month of the second year, and the opening verse of Numbers 7 resumes where the Leviticus Tabernacle narrative left off, which was in the first month of the second year. Accordingly, the Tannaitic sages take this passage as an example of the principle אין מקדם ומאחר בתורה (“There is no early or late in the Torah”); that is, the Torah is not arranged in strict chronological order throughout. (Since chronological order clearly obtains for large portions of the Torah, this principle should not be invoked without careful consideration.) Some commentators have a different approach to our passage and to the chronology issue as we shall later see.

## 2. The Chieftains, Their Gifts and Chronology

In the Exodus and Leviticus instructions for the sanctuary dedication there was no provision made for any role for the chieftains (נְשִׂאִים); indeed, there were no instructions for any form of chieftains' involvement in the sanctuary. The only mention of them in Leviticus is in regard to the sacrifice brought when one of them sins (Lev. 4:22). Leviticus focuses on sanctuary service, the priests who were placed in charge of it, plus the sanctuary-related legislation of purity and holiness designed to heighten Israel's consciousness of G-d's presence. Perhaps it does not deal with the chieftains because they are political leaders – they are those who in other settings

comprise the king, princes and nobility. This element of society generally works to protect its privileges and interests, invariably with its own agendas and rationalizations. Chieftains may not always be willing to scrupulously abide by the standards of the G-d-Israel covenant. Here, however, they are inspired and choose to get involved.

Numbers 7:3 begins the description of the offerings brought by the twelve tribal chieftains. Two distinct sets of gifts are described. The first comprised six wagons and twelve oxen (vv. 3-9). The text clearly indicates that Moses did not ask the chieftains for these gifts, but they volunteered them, recognizing a transport need. Moses was unsure about accepting them, but we read in the following verses that Hashem instructs him to do so, saying “Take [them] from them and they shall be for doing the work of the Tent of Meeting. Give them to the Levites” (v. 5). Moses accepted the wagons and oxen and distributed them to the Levites in accordance with their transport assignments.

The chieftains' other set of gifts comprised altar sacrifices; regarding these, G-d instructed Moses that each of the twelve chieftains should bring his offering on a separate day. In this case also no prior command to or request of the chieftains was mentioned; G-d's directives to Moses regarding the twelve-day ceremony appears to have been ordained only after the chieftains volunteered and came forward with their animals on the first day (vv. 10-11), perhaps in a disorganized fashion.

The narrative of the wagons and oxen gifts confronts us with a chronological problem. We know from Numbers 1-4 that the Levites were not officially selected, and their responsibilities surely not assigned them, until the second month of the second year, subsequent to the census of that month. But our passage – dated to the sanctuary dedication day – apparently took place in the first month, yet it manifests knowledge of the specific transporting assignments of the different Levite branches.

Perhaps the narrative of Moses' giving the wagons to the Levites is a case of attaching subsequent details to a narrative of an earlier event. When the chieftains brought the wagons, the Levites had not as yet been officially selected. (They may have been designated

for their roles in a general way, apparently from the time of their commendable behavior associated with the golden calf episode, as hinted at in Exod. 32:28-29 and Deut. 33:9). But since the Israelites were soon going to travel, sanctuary servitors were necessarily going to be selected and the Tabernacle was going to be transported. So it may be that G-d instructed Moses to accept the wagons for future use by the Tabernacle servitors. When Levites were selected and responsibilities assigned, Moses distributed the wagons to them in accordance with their duties. The full account of the gifts was not necessarily written at the time of their presentation. When the full account was recorded the later details were subsumed into the narrative of the earlier event.

Or perhaps the problem should be resolved by limiting application of “there is no early or late in the Torah” as concerns our narrative returning to the first month (see the end of the previous section) to verse 1 and, subsequently, to verse 10 onward. Verses 2-9, the story of the wagons/oxen gifts, may be a description of what occurred in the second month but was incorporated in the midst of an account of the first month because it also concerns a gift of the chieftains. In other words, although verse 1 flashes back to the first month, that is by way of introducing the new section, but the wagons/oxen gifts may have been proffered in the second month, after selection of the Levites. Indeed, wagons and oxen for transport do not constitute a very appropriate gift on the day of dedication and it is surprising that they would be presented before gifts for the altar. But they are most fitting gifts afterwards.

It should be noted that when the chieftains were introduced in verse 2, one of their accolades was that they were the ones who “stood over the enrollments,” a term that seems to refer to the taking of the census, consistent with a second-month setting. Verse 10 would begin the account of the chieftains’ gifts that were presented on the dedication day and chronologically that verse would connect to verse 1.

The wording of verse 10 is consistent with the latter interpretation: “The chieftains brought forth the dedication of the altar on the day it was anointed; the chieftains brought forth their sacrifices before the altar.” This introduction to the gifts that will be described in the following verses specifically states

that they were brought “on the day it was anointed,” a detail not mentioned with the wagons/oxen gifts. By the fact of this being stated where it is, the text contrasts the altar gifts with the transport gifts, and thus indicates that the latter were not presented at the same time, the altar gifts having been given earlier.

As the chieftains gave two sets of gifts within a short time span, the Torah combined them in one passage. The reason it began with citing the wagons and oxen would be in accordance with its well-attested style to first provide the short account so as to then concentrate on the lengthy account. It should also be noted that the next dated section – beginning with Numbers 9:1 – also refers to the first month.

### 3. Another Approach

Abarbanel, followed by a number of present-day scholars, addresses the chronological issue in Numbers 7 in a different manner. He maintains that all the chieftains’ gifts were brought in the second month, subsequent to the Levites’ selection, and the passage is in chronological order. He interprets the *בְּיוֹם* (literally “on the day”) attestations of verses 1, 10 and 84 not as “on the day” of Tabernacle completion but “during the time period of,” not pointing to a specific day but referring to the second month, a time not so much later than Tabernacle completion. Thus, the entire chapter 7 chronologically follows the previous chapters. He cites verse 88, which states that “this was the altar dedication after its anointing,” as evidence that all the activity of this chapter took place after the anointing, not on the day that it was done. A number of scriptural usages of *beyom* do not appear to mean “on the day,” but “during the time period of” or “when” (Gen. 2:4; Exod. 32:34; Jer. 7:21; etc.)

At first sight this approach appears attractive within the context of the chronology of the book of Numbers. However, it does not fit well with the Exodus and Leviticus sources. The Tabernacle was officially set up on the first day of the first month. Aaron had offered official sacrifices on the altar on the eighth day of the first month following the altar activity of the seven days of priestly initiation. (Some sages assume that eighth day to have been the eighth day of priestly initiation, which they presume to be the first day of the first month.) What would then take so long before implementing the next step of dedication that it

had to be in the second month? Abarbanel answers that it took the rest of the first month to complete the anointing of the Tabernacle and furnishings. But did Aaron perform his eighth-day service on an altar that had not been anointed? And how many furnishings and vessels were there to require so much time to anoint? How can it be that attention was turned to the census, and elaborate travel preparations were made, while finalization of the sanctuary dedication was pending?

Further, our chapter's last verse (v. 89) informs us about Moses' entering the Tent of Meeting in order to receive prophetic communication. It was attached to the conclusion of the chapter's dedication ceremonies with a conjunctive *vav*, indicating that it occurred after the dedication described in the chapter. It is highly unlikely that this depiction of Moses receiving prophecy was in the second month. What about G-d's call to him from the Tent of Meeting in Leviticus 1:1, clearly a continuation of Exodus' conclusion, which presumably was on the first day of the first month? Did all the attached Leviticus legislation precede the anointing of the Tabernacle and furnishings?

True, verse 84 states, "This was the dedication of the altar *beyom* (on the day) it was anointed by the chieftains of Israel" despite the fact that the chieftains' activity was spread over twelve days. But contrary to Abarbanel's reading, the verse 88 phrase "after its anointing" appears to be in contrast to the *beyom* of verse 84. The two thus comprise an *inclusio* that concludes the section and reflects the fact that the offerings started on the day of anointment and continued over a period of twelve days. Once that *beyom* means "on the day," it is reasonable to assume that the others are similar.

In addition, if the *beyom* of 7:1,10 and 84 does not refer to the day of completion of the Tabernacle and its anointing but "around the time period of," the word appears to lose its effect, while the passage appears to impart impact with the statement, referring to "that day." Why would it say *בְּיוֹם הַמְּשָׁח אֹתוֹ* (literally: "on the day of its anointing") in verses 10 and 84 merely to repeat the verse 1 statement that it occurred around that time period? It would be a superfluous phrase!

A *beyom* usage similar to that of our passage appears in Numbers 9:15: "On the day that the Tabernacle was

set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle." This verse introduces a passage that is a thematic and literary expansion of a similar passage at the end of Exodus. As the Exodus passage clearly refers to the actual day, so also should we understand the *beyom* of Numbers 9 and the *beyom* of our passage.

In conclusion, it is highly improbable that the altar was left undedicated for a month, especially considering that the sanctuary was such a major enterprise and so much legislation was linked to proper cultic service.

#### 4. General Remarks

Numbers 7:10 indicates that the tribal chieftains came forward on the day of the Tabernacle's completion with great enthusiasm and generosity. They had not been commanded to bring any offerings but voluntarily chose to participate as they did. A careful reading of the verse indicates that initially they all came together; apparently, all had decided to come on the first day. No chieftain wanted to be left out and they did not know that the ceremonies of dedication would be extended over a number of days. It even appears that the twelve-day procedure was established in response to their coming forward as they did. The verse appears to be describing a circumstance of all the chieftains having brought their various animals near the altar at the same time, a situation that probably had been creating confusion. This necessitated G-d communicating to Moses that one chieftain, and only one chieftain, should make his offering each day, thus adding order and dignity to the ceremony and honoring each chieftain and tribe individually.

Each chieftain's gift was substantial. This implies that the political leadership, although not in charge of the sanctuary, not given any leadership or functional role in it and apparently not even specifically called upon to participate in dedicating it, was fully supportive of it. The gifts of all twelve chieftains were identical, reflecting prior discussion and mutual accommodation. Wealthier and poorer tribes were equal in their relationship to the sanctuary, thus extending the concept previously formulated for individual Israelites in the *מִתְּצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל* (half shekel) legislation. Rather than summarize the gifts, the Torah celebrates the extraordinary unity, amity and

commitment by repetitively recording each chieftain's gifts individually. Each should be fully savored. This is related to the style we recognize well from Exodus by which Tabernacle furnishings were often itemized instead of being grouped together in a single clause and construction instructions were repeated in detail in the fulfillment.

With the conclusion of the chieftains' offerings, the dedication of sanctuary and altar were complete and the text immediately indicates that the Tabernacle purpose was fulfilled. Numbers 7 concludes with a description of the new, awesome, ongoing situation: G-d was present in the holy sanctum and Moses would receive divine communication from Him in the Tent of Meeting (Num. 7:89). In an unusual syntactical flourish, the verse employs various strategies to avoid explicit mention of G-d's name, perhaps reflecting the indescribable status of the new reality. The verse employs phraseology strikingly similar to Exodus 25:22, the verse that had originally expressed the divine purpose at the very beginning of the Tabernacle undertaking. That verse had explicitly stated that the holy sanctum would be the meeting place where G-d would communicate to Moses that which He commands Israel. Our verse, which comprises the realization of that plan, thus confirms the successful conclusion of the sanctuary enterprise. The supreme importance of the prophetic function is emphasized by its being highlighted in this manner.

The next passage concerns the lampstand and includes the statement that Aaron fulfilled the sanctuary service of kindling it as instructed. Thus, immediately following the dedication by the chieftains we have the prophet and high priest functioning in their roles, portraying a fully and smoothly operating sanctuary.

Rabbi S. D. Sassoon pointed out that the text appears to reflect the chieftains' sincerity in their commitment to the one G-d and the covenant. This is indicated by

use of the number symbolism associated with their gifts, in accordance with the meaning of the numbers thirteen, eight and twenty-one, and their multiples, which signify levels of spiritual attainment.\* Thus, the weight of each chieftain's silver bowl was one hundred and thirty *sheqalim*. His silver basin was of seventy *sheqalim* (as we have pointed out a number of times, the number seven or seventy was a signifier of the "old" order), and with the golden ladle of ten *sheqalim* added to it, the unit comprised a covenantal eighty. The golden addition to the silver that transformed the seven to eight highlights the categorically increased value brought about by the covenant over the previous order.

The items brought in these vessels reflect the difference in their status. The silver bowl and silver basin were brought filled with flour for the grain offering, a service performed on the bronze altar, in the courtyard. The golden ladle was brought filled with incense, a service performed on the golden altar, in the holy section, which was associated with the "Ark of the Testimony" (as indicated in Exod. 30:6). Each chieftain's total number of animals was 21, or 13 + 8. It also appears significant that the national totals of silver and gold, 2,400 and 120 *sheqalim* respectively, are both multiples of eight.

Modern scholars point out literary antecedents to the style of this passage in pre-Torah temple inventory catalogues. Once again we note that the Torah adopted the external form of the neighboring societies in the process of transforming the substance.

### **Endnote**

\* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*