

## In this Issue

- **Covenant & Conversation** by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by Rabbi Ari Kahn
- **Rabbi Frand on the Weekly Torah Portion** by Rabbi Yissocher Frand
- **Between the Lines** by Rabbi Abba Wagensberg



## The Politics of Envy

Few things in the Torah are more revolutionary than its conception of leadership.

Ancient societies were hierarchical. The masses were poor and prone to hunger and disease. They were usually illiterate. They were exploited by rulers as a means to wealth and power rather than treated as people with individual rights – a concept born only in the seventeenth century. At times they formed a *corvée*, a vast conscripted labour force, often used to construct monumental buildings intended to glorify kings. At others they were dragooned into the army to further the ruler's imperial designs.

Rulers often had absolute power of life and death over their subjects. Not only were kings and pharaohs heads of state; they also held the highest religious rank, as they were considered children of the gods or even demigods themselves. Their power had nothing to do with the consent of the governed. It was seen as written into the fabric of the universe. Just as the sun ruled the sky and the lion ruled the animal realm, so kings

ruled their populations. That was how things were in nature, and nature itself was sacrosanct.

The Torah is a sustained polemic against this way of seeing things. Not just kings but all of us, regardless of colour, culture, class or creed, are in the image and likeness of God. In the Torah, God summons His special people, Israel, to take the first steps towards what might eventually become a truly egalitarian society – or to put it more precisely, a society in which dignity, *kavod*, does not depend on power or wealth or an accident of birth.

Hence the concept, which we will explore more fully in parshat Korach, of *leadership as service*. The highest title accorded to Moses in the Torah is that of *eved Hashem*, “a servant of God” (Deut. 34:5). His highest praise is that he was “very humble, more so than anyone else on earth” (Num. 12:3). To lead is to serve. Greatness is humility. As the book of Proverbs puts it, “A man’s pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour” (Prov. 29:23).

The Torah points us in the direction of an ideal world, but it does not assume that we have reached it yet or even that we are within striking distance. The people Moses led, like many of us today, were still prone to fixate on ambition, aspiration, vanity, and self-indulgence. They still had the human desire for honour and status. And Moses had to recognise that fact. It would be a major source of conflict in the months and years ahead. It is one of the primary themes of the book of Bamidbar.

Of whom were the Israelites jealous? Most of them did not aspire to be Moses. He was, after all, the man who spoke to God and to whom God spoke. He performed miracles, brought plagues against the Egyptians, divided the Red Sea, and gave the people water from a rock and manna from heaven. Few would have had the hubris to believe they could do any of

these things.

But they did have reason to resent the fact that religious leadership seemed to be confined to only one tribe, Levi, and one family within that tribe, the Kohanim, male descendants of Aaron. Now that the Tabernacle was to be consecrated and the people were about to begin the second half of their journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land, there was a real risk of envy and animosity.

That is a constant throughout history. We desire, said Shakespeare, “this man’s gift and that man’s scope.” Aeschylus said, “It is in the character of very few men to honour without envy a friend who has prospered.”<sup>1</sup> Goethe warned that although “hatred is active, and envy passive dislike; there is but one step from envy to hate.” Jews should know this in their very bones. We have often been envied, and all too frequently has that envy turned to hate, with tragic consequences.

Leaders need to be aware of the perils of envy, especially within the people they lead. This is one of the unifying themes of the long and apparently disconnected parsha of Naso. In it we see Moses confronting three potential sources of envy. The first lay within the tribe of Levi. Its members had reason to resent the fact that priesthood had gone to just one man and his descendants: Aaron, Moses’ brother.

The second had to do with individuals who were neither of the tribe of Levi nor of the family of Aaron but who felt that they had the right to be holy in the sense of having a special, intense relationship with God in the way that the priests had. The third had to do with the leadership of the other tribes who might have felt left out of the service of the Tabernacle. We see Moses dealing sequentially with all these potential dangers.

First, he gives each Levitical clan a special role in carrying the vessels, furnishings, and framework of the Tabernacle whenever the

people journeyed from place to place. The most sacred objects were to be carried by the clan of Kohath. The Gershonites were to carry the cloths, coverings, and drapes. The Merarites were to carry the planks, bars, posts, and sockets that made up the Tabernacle’s framework. Each clan was, in other words, to have a special role and place in the solemn procession as the house of God was carried through the desert.

Next, Moses deals with individuals who aspire to a higher level of holiness. This, it seems, is the underlying logic of the Nazirite, the individual who vows to set himself apart for the Lord (Numbers 6:2). He was not to drink wine or any other grape product; he was not to have his hair cut; and he was not defile himself through contact with the dead. Becoming a Nazirite was, it seems, a way of temporarily assuming the kind of set-apartness associated with the priesthood, a voluntary extra degree of holiness.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, Moses turns to the leadership of the tribes. The highly repetitive chapter 7 of our parsha itemises the offerings of each of the tribes on the occasion of the dedication of the altar. Their offerings were identical, and the Torah could have abbreviated its account by describing the gifts brought by one tribe and stating that each of the other tribes did likewise. Yet the sheer repetition has the effect of emphasising the fact that each tribe had its moment of glory. Each, by giving to the house of God, acquired its own share of honour.

These episodes are not the whole of Naso but they consist of enough of it to signal a principle that every leader and every group needs to take seriously. Even when people accept, in theory, the equal dignity of all, and even when they see leadership as service, the old dysfunctional passions die hard. People still resent the success of others. They still feel that honour has gone to others when it should have gone to them. Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: “Envy, lust and the pursuit of honour

drive a person out of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

The fact that these are destructive emotions does not stop some people – perhaps most of us – feeling them from time to time, and nothing does more to put at risk the harmony of the group. That is one reason why a leader must be humble. They should feel none of these things. But a leader must also be aware that not everyone is humble. Every Moses has a Korach, every Julius Caesar a Cassius, every Duncan a Macbeth, every Othello an Iago. In many groups there is a potential troublemaker driven by a sense of injury to their self-esteem. These are often a leader’s deadliest enemies and they can do great damage to the group.

There is no way of eliminating the danger entirely, but Moses in this week’s parsha tells us how to behave. **Honour everyone equally. Pay special attention to potentially disaffected groups. Make each feel valued. Give everyone a moment in the limelight if only in a ceremonial way. Set a personal example of humility. Make it clear to all that leadership is service, not a form of status. Find ways in which those with a particular passion can express it, and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute.**

There is no failsafe way to avoid the politics of envy but there are ways of minimising it, and our parsha is an object lesson in how to do so.

## AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What is revolutionary about the Torah’s concept of leadership?
2. Can envy ever be harnessed in a positive way? What are the inherent risks with this emotion?
3. What conflict does Rabbi Sacks allude to that will be a central theme in the book of Bamidbar? Can you think of any examples?

### NOTES

1. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1.832.
2. See Maimonides, *Hilchot Shemittah ve-Yovel* 13:13.
3. Mishnah Avot 4:21.



## Value Judgments

The gift of holiness creates a challenge. Holiness has, if not by definition then at least by connotation, an element of "separateness;" what makes something holy is its "differentness," its uniqueness, its separateness. The new *Mishkan*, therefore, creates a challenge, and perhaps the most appropriate time to address this challenge is the moment when the nation is about to embark on its much-anticipated march to the Promised Land. While encamped, demarcations and boundaries are clear, yet even then we are warned against overstepping boundaries between holy and profane - more precisely, the Torah specifically forbids us to make personal use of something that has been dedicated to the holy Temple. It is not hard to imagine that this problem may become more acute when the camp is "broken down" and travel begins. Anticipating this problem, the Torah introduces the idea of *me'ilah*, misappropriation of holy things.

And then, in a deft segue, the Torah turns to marriage - specifically, a dysfunctional relationship riddled with suspicion, secretive trysts and possible infidelity. The shift seems sudden and strange; there seems to be only a single, tenuous thread of connection between these subjects: The same word, *me'ilah*, is used to describe a man's crime if he is guilty of

sleeping with another man's spouse. Apparently, the message is much deeper, and this slim linguistic thread contains a much larger idea: Marriage, like the Temple, is sacred. A person who tramples the boundaries and sleeps with someone else's wife is guilty of more than taking something that does not belong to him; he is guilty of misappropriating something that is holy.

This is an unabashed value judgment - and it is sorely lacking in modern life. In so many areas of our lives, we have banished the Divine, and chased away holiness. We have created a mundane world. It is subtle, often imperceptible, but we find this tendency in full bloom in literature, film, theater, popular music, and all forms of "entertainment." The plot is all too familiar: A forlorn wife, underappreciated and perhaps even the victim of abuse; temptation is introduced, most often in the form of a kind stranger (who is almost always good looking) gives her a glimmer of hope. Perhaps he offers her a means of escape from her miserable marriage, either in the form of some fleeting happiness or in the longer term. And as we read or watch the plot unfold, we are lured into the premise that personal happiness trumps all other values. Our decency dissolves as we root for the protagonist to break the Seventh Commandment.

We begin to suspect that modern values consider the Seventh Commandment more "negotiable" than the Sixth or Eighth (yes, you will have to look these up - it's worthwhile knowing what they are). To be sure, there are times that divorce is the best option; some couples are better apart than together, and the best way forward leads in two separate directions. But this is not the issue at hand. The real question posed by this parashah is, how have we become a society that does not respect boundaries? Why do we not see marriage as sacred?

When introducing the concept of *me'ilah*, the

Torah quickly qualifies the concept as one which is not exclusive to the realm of *Mishkan* or Temple. Each and every home is holy. Anyone who violates that holiness, who shatters that sanctity, is guilty of *me'ilah*.

The extension of this idea is that each of us must treat our own spouse with respect and reverence, and realize that he or she is special, and that the bond of marriage is holy. In a world without a Temple, we must recognize the points of holiness in our personal lives: Holiness is with us at all times, under the same roof. It is a part of our personal lives, and all we need do to connect to it is to appreciate it and cherish it, to sanctify our relationship and treat our spouses with the reverence and care appropriate for something holy. Perhaps this is why the rabbis taught that whoever brings joy to bride and groom is considered to have rebuilt one of the ruins of Jerusalem: Helping people rejoice in the knowledge that they have entered into a holy relationship is truly another brick in the wall of the third Temple.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2016/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-naso-for.html>



## That's a Religious Jew

Stealing from anyone is forbidden, but stealing from a *ger*, a righteous convert, is an especially despicable sin. Our Sages tell us (*Sifrei* 5:13) that the Torah considers such

people “very faithless to God.” Why is this so? Sforno explains that stealing from a *ger* is also a *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of the Name.

One can just imagine the scene. A gentile has come to the realization that the Torah is the truth and that the Jewish people are the chosen people. His heart is burning with a desire to join this exalted elite. He works hard. He envelops himself in the holiness of the Jewish people. He studies. He learns. And finally, he is accepted as a convert and comes under the wings of the *Shechinah*, so to speak. He walks into the *shul* for Minchah, puts down his briefcase and joins the congregation. He feels wonderful. He finishes his prayers and goes to retrieve his briefcase, but it is gone, obviously stolen by another Jew! What a humiliation for the Jewish people, for the Torah, for the holy *Shechinah*! This thief, whoever he was, did not only commit a crime of theft against the owner of the briefcase. He made an awful *chillul Hashem*.

People tend to think of *chillul Hashem* as a transgression of major proportions, but it is not. The Talmud tells us (*Yoma* 86a), “What is considered a *chillul Hashem*? Rav said, ‘If I were to buy meat from a butcher and fail to pay my bill right away.’” The greater the Jew, the greater the potential for *chillul Hashem* in his deeds. For someone of Rav’s stature, all it takes to make a *chillul Hashem* is a small thing like not paying the butcher on time. People look up to our great rabbis. They measure all the Jewish people and all of Judaism by the behavior of the great. Therefore, people of stature have an additional responsibility to act with great care and forethought. Hashem’s honor depends on what they do.

The Rambam writes (*Yad, Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 5:11) that not only a great rabbi such as Rav but “any great person renowned for his piety” who transgresses even slightly is guilty of *chillul Hashem*. If the people of his generation look up to him, he bears the same responsibility as Rav in his generation.

Taking this reasoning a step further, Rav Yaakov Weinberg, my *Rosh Yeshivah*, suggested that in our times every Orthodox Jew is considered a “great person renowned for his piety.” Whether we like it or not, whether we agree with it or not, millions of nonobservant Jews see all of us as holy rabbis serving Hashem all day every day, and they measure our actions accordingly. A nonobservant Jew would be shocked and scandalized if he would be cut off in traffic by a car whose driver has a beard and is wearing a black hat, and perhaps a bumper sticker promoting Shabbos or protesting *lashon hara*. This is as bad or worse than not paying the butcher on time. It is a bona fide *chillul Hashem*.

This obligation also includes treating all people with appropriate courtesy. If you work in a place together with gentiles, you most certainly should not socialize with them, but you have to say, “Good morning.”

It doesn’t matter if you are not among the great rabbis of the generation. It doesn’t matter if you are not a Torah scholar. These people don’t know the difference. They see you and say, “That’s an Orthodox Jew.” It automatically makes you a “great person renowned for his piety” as far as *chillul Hashem* is concerned.

## Nesanel’s Dilemma

Every Bar Mitzvah boy's nightmare is to have to read *Parashas Naso*, which has one hundred seventy-six verses, more than any other *parashah* in the Torah. At least, that is what I used to think when I was a boy. But in fact, *Naso* is not such a hard *parashah* after all. The end of the *parashah* describes the dedication offerings brought by all twelve princes of the tribes, and they are all identical. The *bar-mitzvah* boy would find himself reading a fairly sizable group of verses twelve times. That shouldn’t be too hard, should it?

But why is it so?

The Midrash relates that the prince of Yehudah, Nachshon ben Aminadav, brought his offering, and then it was Nesanel ben Tzuar's turn. He was faced with a dilemma. What should he bring? What would be the ramifications of his decision?

Let us use a *bar-mitzvah* as an analogy. It is not unusual for one shul to have a *bar-mitzvah* every Shabbos for twelve consecutive weeks. Now let us say that the food served at the first *bar-mitzvah* was a fruit cup, a quarter of chicken, a piece of potato *kugel*, glazed carrots and chocolate ice cream for dessert. Everything goes beautifully. Terrific.

Now comes week two. The mother of the next *bar-mitzvah* boy has a problem. What should she serve? Fruit cup is out, as is a quarter of chicken and *kugel* as well. Two weeks in a row? She would be a laughingstock in the community. So she opts for the chicken cutlet and the broccoli quiche. Everything goes well. Disaster has been avoided.

Now comes week three. The mother of this boy considers the gravity of the situation. Chicken is certainly out, as are chicken cutlet, *kugel* and quiche. Forget about the fruit cup and the chocolate ice cream. This situation obviously calls for roast beef and grilled asparagus stalks. And lemon meringue pie for desert.

You can imagine the anxiety by week twelve. What can they serve at that *bar-mitzvah* already? They would have to find the most exotic foods, and they would have to pay the most exotic prices.

this went through Nesanel ben Tzuar's mind. Not *bar-mitzvahs*, of course, but escalation. Nachshon ben Aminadav had already brought his offering. If Nesanel were to go one up on Nachshon, there would be no end to it. The pressure would mount, as would the anger, the resentment, the jealousy and no doubt the

*lashon hara* as well.

So Nesanel ben Tzuar did a wonderful thing. He brought exactly the same offering as Nachshon. This enabled all those behind him to do the same thing, and thus all their offerings were identical. Nesanel set the tone  $\frac{3}{4}$  all Jews are the same.

The Midrash concludes that Hashem showed His pleasure in an unusual way. A *korban yachid*, a private offering, is never brought on Shabbos, only a *korban tzibbur*, a communal offering. The offerings of the tribal princes, however, were brought on twelve consecutive days, including Shabbos, even though they were *korbanos yachid*.

Since these offerings were deliberately identical in order to avoid hatred and jealousy, since they promoted a sense of community and harmony, Hashem considered them as *korbanos tzibbur* and allowed them to be brought even on Shabbos.



## The Triple Pattern

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

One of the highlights of Parshat Naso is the Priestly Blessing. The text of this blessing, which the Kohanim bestow upon the Jewish people, concludes, "May God turn His face to you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26).

Our Sages speak very highly of the quality of

peace. For example, we find the statement in the Midrash (Bamidbar Raba 11:7) in the name of R' Shimon bar Chalafta, "Great is peace, for there is no vessel that can receive blessing other than peace." The Midrash brings a proof to this idea from the verse (Psalms 29:11), "God will bless His nation with peace."

We can understand this idea more deeply by taking a closer look at the phrase, "His nation." The Jewish people are composed of three categories of people: Priests (Kohanim), Levites (Leviim), and Israelites (Yisraelim). The Hebrew acronym of the words "Kohanim," "Leviim," and "Yisraelim" spells the word *kli*, which means "vessel." Once we understand that the Jewish people themselves are a vessel, we can gain a more profound insight into the Midrash's statement. The vessel of the Jewish people can receive blessing only when there is peace!

We can offer four primary pieces of advice for how to achieve peace with others:

1. Make sure that all our efforts are for God's sake. If we do everything for the honor of God, and not for the sake of boosting our own ego, we can view one another as part of the same team, pooling all of our different strengths and talents for a common goal.
2. Train ourselves to see only the good in others. Instead of being threatened or challenged by others' differences, view the differences as positive qualities.
3. The Peleh Yoetz suggests that we should focus on the reward we receive for making peace, as an incentive to pursue it. He gives a striking example. Imagine a person approaches you and asks you to make peace with someone you can't stand. Your initial reaction is to immediately turn down the offer. Then the person asks, "What if I give you \$50? Do you think you could try? How about \$100? Or \$1,000? If I give you \$100,000, could you do it? How

about two million dollars?" There is a point at which every person would give in and decide it was worth the effort to make peace. According to the Peleh Yoetz, the reward we get in the World to Come for making peace far outweighs any financial bonus this world can offer. This knowledge should be an incentive to us to make peace.

4. Making peace sometimes requires us to compromise or to give in. We can do this only if we cultivate our humility and learn to be satisfied with the minimum.

## THREE LEVITE FAMILIES

Although these four points are important, we can also suggest another approach in understanding God's expectation of us when it comes to peace. The beginning of this week's Torah portion focuses on the tribe of Levi, which is composed of three main families: Kehat, Gershon, and Merari. Based on the Shem MiShmuel and the Netivot Shalom, we can understand these three families as representing three spiritual levels.

The family of **Kehat** represents the highest, most righteous level. Their role is to carry the Holy Ark (Rashi on Numbers 4:4) - the highest component of the Tabernacle. The importance of this task underscores their lofty spiritual level.

The family of **Gershon** represents the middle level. They carry the curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:25). One side of the curtain is close to the intense sanctity of the Holy of Holies, while the other side is not. We could suggest that this curtain hints to the spiritual level of an average person, who fluctuates between moments of intense devotion and moments of feeling less connected to the Divine.

The family of **Merari** represents the lowest

level. They carry the beams and pillars of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:31), the weight of which can be burdensome. This physical weight represents the heaviness of the lowest spiritual level.

The tribe of Levi is charged with teaching the Jewish people how to attach themselves to the Divine (see Rambam, "Shmita V'Yovel," 13:12-13). The three main families in this tribe show us that we are required to serve God not only when we are on a spiritual high, like the most righteous people, and not only when we feel average, but even when we feel the lowest and furthest away from God. Regardless of the emotional state in which we find ourselves, we must commit ourselves to doing God's will with a positive attitude.

This idea will offer us a new perspective on God's expectation of peace. In addition to being at peace with others, we must learn to be at peace with ourselves - whatever level we are functioning on. When we are frustrated with ourselves, it is much more likely that we will lash out at others. Being at peace with ourselves, however, usually leads to our being at peace with others. If we can learn from the tribe of Levi how to maintain our inner equilibrium, we have a much better chance at establishing peace with others as well.

May we be blessed to cultivate within ourselves the four primary qualities that lead to peace: acting only for God's sake; seeing the good in others; focusing on the rewards earned through this behavior; and being humble and satisfied with the minimum, which will enable us to compromise. Most important, may we learn to be at peace with ourselves. May we recognize the worth of our service, even at its lowest point, and realize that, even then, we have the potential to function at the highest level.