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Putting Wisdom into Action

In this week's Torah portion we find the episode of the *sotah*, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery. She is brought to the Temple in Jerusalem, the *Beis Hamikdash*, and given a choice: Accept guilt, or drink the "bitter waters," which serve as a miraculous test. If she is guilty, she will die on the spot, and if she is innocent she can return to her husband.

What immediately follows is the discussion of the *nazir*, who takes a vow of abstinence that prohibits him from drinking wine or coming in contact with the dead for a specified period of time. The Sages explain that the laws of the *nazir* are juxtaposed with the laws of the *sotah* because one who sees a *sotah* in her state of degradation, and perceives firsthand what frivolity and wine can cause, should immediately take a nazirite vow prohibiting himself from drinking wine (*Sotah* 2a).

Now, isn't the person who witnessed the ordeal of the *sotah* the last one who needs to

become a *nazir*? He has seen upfront the horrific consequences of too much wine. So why does the Torah teach that specifically he who has seen the *sotah* should become a *nazir*?

The Mishnah says, "Anyone whose good deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom will endure" (*Ethics of the Fathers*, 3:12). This means that if everything a person understands he immediately puts into action, his wisdom will endure. But if he understands something and does not put it into practice, his wisdom will disappear. As the Mishnah continues, "Anyone whose wisdom exceeds his good deeds, his wisdom will not endure."

If you have an insight but don't act on it, you are going to lose that insight. That is the nature of the human condition. Therefore, the person who has seen the *sotah*'s degradation must immediately react and do something to fortify himself against similar transgression. That is the only way for him to hold onto his clarity. In contrast, if one does not translate his new awareness into some concrete action, the inspiration will fade and he will forget the lesson he learned, making himself susceptible to the dangers of intoxication and escapism.

A Generation of Ingrates

One of the more problematic areas where a failure to act leads to denial is gratitude. When I started my first yeshiva, Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, my rosh yeshiva in Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin, gave me a startling piece of advice. He said, do not expect that your students will have any *hakaras hatov*. They will not have any gratitude. It's not in the mindset of this generation.

I was taken aback, but it did not take too long to discover that Rabbi Hutner, of course, was right. Today, young people do not even think they owe their parents anything. "What do I owe my parents?" they say. "Did I ask to be born?" This lack of gratitude comes from not

acting on the realization that they do indeed owe their parents, and it, in turn, leads to the perverse situation of children feeling betrayed by their parents for not giving them what they crave. "What do you mean I can't have the car? You're not even using it!"

In previous generations, no one's parents owed them anything. You owed your parents. Regardless of what they did to you, they gave you the gift of life and brought you into this world. You didn't expect anything from them because you owed them.

I remember that when I was a child, two brothers stopped talking to each other because one of them convinced their elderly father to move in and stay with him instead of sharing the burden with his brother and having the father move every other week. The brother was upset about losing the opportunity to take care of his father. Today, siblings will fight over whose turn it is to visit their parent in a nursing home. "It's your turn to visit! I can't go." That's what happens when we don't put into action the gratefulness we should have toward our parents. We soon forget we even owe them and then start thinking how much they owe us.

Taking it to Heart

In contrast, let me tell you a story about a remarkable man who took to heart what he understood and completely turned his life around. He was a young, athletic man when he was shot at a university in Chicago and became a quadriplegic. He told me that when he lay in the hospital bed, realizing that he would never move his arms and legs again, what flashed through his mind was: What is life really all about? Is it worth living? If you can't move your hands and feet, if you can't go anywhere, if you can't play sports, what then does it mean to be alive?

He spent an entire hour pondering these questions and thinking about the meaning of

accomplishment. *How can I make a difference in life? I'm never going to run a mile; I'm never going to feed myself. So what is life all about? Is it about attaining wisdom and understanding? What is there to understand?*

He was fascinated by these questions, and he spent the next hour thinking about the meaning of life. Then, all of a sudden, he had an epiphany. *If I had never been shot and forced to confront these questions, I never would have stopped to think about the purpose of my existence. I've been running too fast, going nowhere.* With great determination, he decided to go figure out what the true meaning of life is.

He then began to think about what human beings are really seeking. *What do I want? Who am I? What are the genuine pleasures that life has to offer? How can a human being be utterly preoccupied with making money, or jumping from one sensory pleasure to another, or consumed with what people think of him, and ignore his own quest for meaning?* He told me that he realized then how insane we can all be.

Then he had another epiphany. Which is a greater tragedy: not to be able to move your arms and legs for fifty years, or to spend seventy years running around and conquering the world without knowing what life is all about? Which is a greater tragedy: living a full 70 years in possession of all your faculties and not knowing the true meaning of life, or being a quadriplegic and knowing what it is that makes life meaningful?

He told me that the answer was immediately obvious: what a tragedy to spend a lifetime not knowing the purpose of your life.

And then he said, "You know, it's a good thing I was shot." He didn't thank God at that point because he didn't know yet that there is a God. But he appreciated that it was good to be alive, even if you cannot move your arms and

legs. He understood that life is precious and meaningful. And he spent the rest of his life pursuing meaning, eventually becoming an observant Jew, immersing himself in Torah study, and making an incredible *Kiddush Hashem*. All because he acted on his insight.

A person who witnesses the shocking death of a *sotah* must transform the startling lessons he learned into action. He has to take a step and make a change; otherwise, he will have squandered a great opportunity. Nothing changes if nothing changes.



The Same, But Different

Day after day, it reoccurs. Dawn precedes sunrise, and morning gently morphs into afternoon. The descending sunset lingers as twilight fades to dusk. Finally, evening recedes into the shadows of a dark night. Another distinct day has passed. Day after day the sequence repeats. The same components, yet each one is unique—and so too is every individual.

Toward the end of this week’s Torah portion, the Torah describes how, over the course of 12 days, the prince of each of the twelve tribes of Israel brought his own set of identical offerings. This process began on the much-anticipated day in which the *Mishkan* was inaugurated. Each prince donated exactly the same things. The description of these identical gifts is repeated twelve times. Why is the

Torah so seemingly redundant here? The Torah could have enumerated the offerings of the first prince and then stated that each of the others brought the same donation. Why didn’t it? This repetition is alerting us to a profound underlying lesson.

Each prince had two types of intentions: his own unique intention, and that which he shared in common with the other princes. Although outwardly, each offering appeared to be the same, each individual’s intentions accorded it special meaning. Though the twelve leaders brought identical offerings, they each had different inner intentions and thoughts in their choice of components. Here’s an example: Each prince brought a silver basin weighing seventy shekels. For one prince, it symbolized the seventy Jews who descended to Egypt from Canaan. To another, it represented the seventy nations that descended from Noach. While the offerings were the same materially, each had its unique significance and each was equally honored and valued.

This is the fundamental lesson that we can learn from the repetition of each prince’s contribution to the *Mishkan*. How can each of us apply this major lesson to our own lives? There are numerous ways. People may come to feel lost in the crowd, especially when doing the same mitzvah as many others. One may feel subsumed by the group—erased and insignificant. This lengthy section of repetition is presented to make a crucial point. Each and every person’s mitzvah is unique. Even the same mitzvah embodies the unique expression of the individual who performs it.

We each can bring distinguishing traits, unlike those of anyone else, to our every action. Each of us has a different background and family history. One person’s upbringing may have been spiritually privileged, while another’s was deprived of meaningful Torah instruction or positive role models. Each person has his or her own disposition and inner struggles. We

each are a composite of diverse experiences and are shaped by all of them. Performing the same action or mitzvah is never the same. While the offerings of each of the twelve princes were physically the same, the individual rationale for bringing them made each prince's offerings unique and meaningful.

This lesson underscores the intrinsic value that Judaism places upon each person. The Torah's enumeration of the identical offerings of the twelve princes emphasizes how every person's actions and motivations matter greatly to God. Both importance and meaning are attached to every positive action that we take and every negative action from which we refrain. Such teachings bring about positive consequences. The Torah accords every person dignity and self-worth, because he or she is loved by God.

A Mishnah in *Pirkei Avos* (Ethics of the Fathers) states that "man is beloved because he was created in the image of God." The Mishnah goes on to relate the essential importance of every person. It explains that "Adam, the first man, was created alone to teach that whoever destroys one soul...is as if he destroyed an entire world," and conversely, "anyone who saves one soul...is as if he saved an entire world."

Mistakenly, those unfamiliar with the Torah's teachings assume that the structure and self-discipline of a Torah lifestyle limits self-expression. These same people admire athletes and performers, who never could have achieved professional success without structure and self-discipline. It is through a Torah-structured lifestyle that one is able to uncover and reveal his or her greatest spiritual and personal potential. By doing so, one's personal self-expression is accentuated and galvanized.

The Torah's assistance in helping people develop their own self-discipline doesn't limit one's self-expression. Rather it enhances self-expression, channeling it to achieve one's

most lofty life's goals.

Social comparison is pervasive in our times. This only leads to negative emotions, either low self-esteem or haughtiness. Try going a day without comparing yourself to anyone else. Don't compare your life, clothes, cars, houses, or achievements to anyone else. Rather than focusing on how you compare to others, direct your energy to what you are capable of now. Focus your efforts on upgrading your personal and spiritual profile.

Freeing yourself from the shackles of negative comparisons, you can concentrate on what counts most: who you are in the present moment. Rather than comparing yourself to someone else, compare yourself to who *you* were this morning. Are you better than you were when you woke up? If not, you've not used the opportunities of living another day. Why squander the many opportunities presented throughout the twenty-four-hour day to strengthen your relationship with God, with others, and with yourself? Think of how you can improve and grow in relation to who you were yesterday.

When you stop comparing yourself to others and focus inward, you'll start to see positive results. People who frequently make social comparisons are more likely to experience feelings of sadness, envy, and overall dissatisfaction with life. Comparing ourselves to others can be toxic for many reasons. Most damaging is what it does to our sense of self-worth. We will feel "less than" or that we're "not good enough." This is an unhealthy place to be and it leads to anxiety and depression.

Society oftentimes measures a person's value by what he possesses rather than by that which he is. The narrative of the offerings of the tribal princes clearly illustrates that it's not *having* more but *being* more that really matters. Instead of focusing solely on the physical and material content of each day, consider each day as a new opportunity to

focus *souly*: to develop your inner, spiritual potential. Spiritual growth presents us with dynamic opportunities to become more—to develop into the best versions of who each of us can be. Without envy or jealousy, we can feel assured that our spiritual growth and deeds have significance and value.

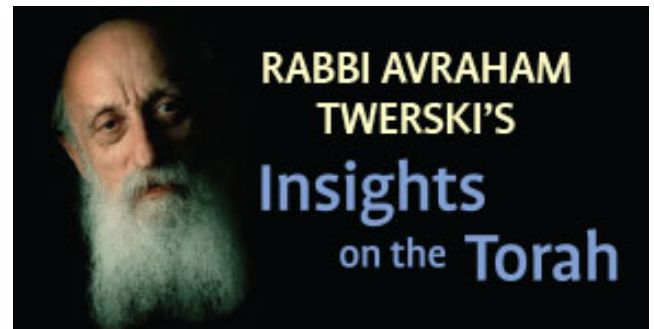
Day after day, the sun rises to greet the new morning. As each sunset approaches, ask yourself this question: Did my thoughts and my actions increase or decrease the value of this day? Tomorrow, push the reset button to reactivate another chance to get it right. Every individual can transform the never-ending flow of time into a purposeful journey of progress.

Throughout the generations, individuals have contributed their unique gifts to the tapestry of the Jewish People. Each different colored thread has enriched and fortified the collective sum of its parts. No two are exactly the same. We share a collective journey that began thousands of years before us. It continues through the actions of you and me. Moving forward toward a Divinely designed destination, each of our actions (or inactions) matters. Every day truly matters. Each day is the same—with a sunrise and a sunset—but we see it differently from day to day. We all can do the same acts and mitzvot, each in our unique way. The reality is that we are all the same—only different.

Making It Relevant

1. Strive to become mindful of the many daily opportunities for spiritual growth. Make each morning, afternoon, and night count.
2. Spiritually upgrade your day by setting specific time for Torah study and prayer. Try to be consistent and focused.
3. Evaluate your own progress and growth. Did you strengthen your relationship with God, with others, and with yourself today? Make sure that

you do so in your own unique way.



Appreciate Your Godliness

Why does the Torah forbid a Nazirite to come near the dead? The Ralbag explains, “The reason why a dead body contaminates is because it represents the defectiveness of the physical, and the Nazirite should avoid the physical things to which he may be attracted.”

Rabbi Henschel Lebovitz comments that to the contrary, being confronted with human mortality motivates a person to spirituality, as King Solomon says, “It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for that is the end of all man, and the living should take it to heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). We find repeated references in the Talmud that the contemplation of one's mortality discourages a person from physical indulgences. Why, then, does Ralbag say that the Nazirite, who takes a vow of abstinence in his quest for spirituality, should avoid contact with the dead?

Rabbi Lebovitz explains that there are two paths whereby one can strive for spirituality. One way is to focus on man's sharing of physical drives with lower forms of life, and that when he indulges in gratification of his bodily desires he is acting out his animalistic traits. The Midrash states that when God admonished Adam for his sin, Adam wept, “Now my mule and I will be eating from the

same trough." This is a humbling awareness that should motivate a person toward spirituality by distancing him from physical gratification. The second way is to realize the holiness of the Divine *neshama* (soul) that he possesses, which is inseparable from its source in God. The realization of his potential for Godliness should motivate a person toward the pursuit of spirituality.

Both approaches are valid, and each has its place. The ethicists cite the phrase, "His heart was high in the way of God" (II Chronicles 17:6) as meaning that although pride is vanity, one may be motivated by pride to become more spiritual. Awareness of one's Godly component should make a person reach for the stars, because there is nothing spiritual that is beyond his grasp. As Rambam says, "Every person can be like Moses" (Hilchos Teshuvah 5:2). The dignity of man should make him pursue perfection.

The Talmud tells of a young man who had beautiful long hair. Seeing his handsome reflection in the water, he feared that he might be drawn to physical indulgences. He promptly took a Nazirite vow, which would require shaving his head. "I swear that I will cut this hair in the service of God" (Nazir 4:2). One who accepts Nezirus for such a purpose is the ideal.

A Nazirite who is so dedicated to the achievement of spirituality should focus on the Godliness of his soul. He should be thoroughly absorbed in the spiritual greatness that is within his reach. There is no need for him to concentrate on his lowly physical component and be distracted from his potential greatness (Chi-dushei HaLev, Bamidbar p. 31).



When We Lift Others, We Become Uplifted

As I scrunched my oversized bag into the tiny overhead compartment on the flight to Cleveland, I heard an angry grunt from behind me. Quickly realizing that my hat box attached to my backpack was smacking a grown man in the face in the seat behind me, I turned to see a hardened, tattooed, 60-ish military veteran glaring back at me. I began apologizing profusely, then briefly glanced up at the seat number. 19E. I was 19F.

I turned back to him and smiled "Oh man, now you have to sit next to me for the whole rest of the flight!"

A reticent but sincere smile crossed his face. "Oh great, isn't that perfect" he grumbled, still wearing the smile.

I continued to poke fun: "At least you can elbow me back for the next two hours!" By the time I sat, we were on our way to amicability, possibly friendship. I asked him about his tattoos - he was a combat medic - I thanked him for his service and told him my dad was in the Navy.

As our conversation progressed, he told me about his Catholic sister-in-law turned Reform Rabbi. I asked him if he was a practicing Catholic, to which he responded, "I don't need to talk to a man if I want to talk with God." I gave him a friendly punch in the arm - "Now that's what I'm talking about!"

Seeing I was dealing with an opinionated, well-thought-out man with a lot of life experience, I pressed on and asked him, "What was your big takeaway from being a combat medic?" He replied "To have a heart of service."

I love that expression. "A heart of service." Let's keep this theme in mind as we delve into this week's Torah portion.

An Uplifting Census

God commands Moses, "Take a census of the sons of [the Levite family of] Gershon."¹ The Hebrew word for "take a census" is *Naso*. Or is it? The word *Naso* in almost every other context means to "carry" or "lift up," as seen in the very next verses where the Torah uses "*Nasu*" to mean "They shall carry (the panels...)." ² Therefore, Rashi goes out of his way to explain that "*Naso*" doesn't ONLY mean to raise up - it ALSO means to count! ³

This isn't merely linguistic coincidence. The Torah could have used the word "*pekudei*," like in other places, if it merely wanted to convey counting.

The Maharal of Prague explains that the choice of "*nasso*" signals something significant - the Levites weren't simply being counted; they were being elevated. ⁴ Appointed to transport the sacred vessels of the Tabernacle, these men received not just a task but a transformation. Their identity shifted as they accepted the weight of divine service on their shoulders—quite literally, as they carried the disassembled sanctuary through the wilderness. ⁵

This count elevated these men to a new level of responsibility for bringing God's presence into our world through their service of carrying, assembling, and breaking down the Tabernacle.

Servant Leadership

This theme of uplifting appointment continues later on in the Parsha when the tribal princes bring gifts to the Tabernacle. Interestingly, the word the Torah uses for prince is *Nasi*. Sound familiar? It should - it comes from the same root letters as *Naso*, which we defined as an appointment to a higher level of responsibility.

A *Nasi*—a Jewish leader—is not just charismatic or ambitious or strong. A Jewish leader is someone who takes responsibility for his fellow man - who lifts up the people around him. By lifting others, he becomes uplifted.

The Torah verifies this definition by giving the background to these princes: "The princes of Israel... they were the princes of the tribes" (Numbers 7:2). Why specify "they were the princes of the tribes"? Rashi explains: "[These princes] served as taskmasters over the tribes in Egypt, yet accepted beatings to spare their brethren." These leaders earned their positions by putting their lives on the line to protect others.

The Torah's message is unmistakable: he who takes responsibility for others, even at the expense of his own life, becomes lifted up - becomes a leader - becomes a "*nasi*."

Carrying Your Marriage

When I became engaged, I was struck by Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe's advice to grooms about where to place their focus on their wedding day. Instead of suggesting thoughts about love or future children, Rabbi Wolbe told his students to simply contemplate the Hebrew word for marriage: "*Nisuin*." Like *Naso*, this word means to carry, to lift up, to bear with patience. That's the role of a husband in his marriage. ⁶ When he gets married, his wife's moods, needs, and peculiarities become his sacred responsibility. ⁷ He learns to bear them not as burdens but as privileges—opportunities to transcend his natural self-focus. Through bearing with patience (*savlanut*), he becomes someone capable of true intimacy and growth.

This responsibility transforms him. The man who emerges from years of marriage has developed muscles of compassion and forbearance impossible to gain any other way.

Concentric Circles of Responsibility

This theme of expanded responsibility follows through the life cycle of every Jew. A child is born completely selfish and dependent on others, but the Torah guides us through expanding circles of obligation at each stage of life.

- At Bar Mitzvah, he begins the process of taking responsibility for himself.
- At his wedding, he takes responsibility for his wife.
- At the birth of his children, he takes responsibility for his family.

Ultimately, if he seeks to become a true leader - a *Nasi* - he takes responsibility for the entire Jewish Nation. A life lived according to Torah values progresses from a heart of selfishness to a "heart of service."

Cultivating an Expanded Self

Though Judaism offers many paths for cultivating this "heart of service," I'd like to suggest one particularly accessible practice that is already built into our daily routine: praying in the plural.

The *Amidah*—Judaism's central prayer—uses "we" language throughout. "Forgive us." "Heal us." "Bless our year." If we pray consciously, this daily habit reshapes our consciousness. By consistently placing ourselves within the community through language, we gradually rewire our instincts from "me" to "we." It's a spiritual neuroplasticity exercise—small but transformative when practiced consistently.⁸

This week, try this micro-habit: before your

next *Amidah*, take a moment to remember that your prayers include the entire Jewish nation and ultimately affect all humanity. Then step forward, carrying this expanded awareness into each blessing.

May we each acquire a "heart of service" and become the *Nasiim* for our generation!

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

Inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, Rosh Yeshiva of Machon Yaacov and Founder and CEO of Meor

1. Numbers 4:22
2. Numbers 4:25
3. See Rashi on Numbers 4:2
4. Gur Aryeh on Bamidbar 4:22:1
5. Uplifting counting actually starts even earlier in the book of Bamidbar, with the very first lines of the book using the same term of "raising up" to count the whole Jewish Nation. This count is also an uplifting of responsibility because each member of the Jewish Nation is receiving his or her placement within the camp in order to best serve the nation as a whole in its mission to enter and conquer the Land of Israel and bring the Torah out to the world.
6. The wife also must do this carrying for her husband, but in Judaism, it is the man who takes responsibility for his wife. The marriage contract they sign before the chuppah states explicitly that he must support her physically, emotionally, and financially; not vice versa.
7. This is not about unhealthy codependency, but rather about developing the inner strength to remain steadfast and supportive through life's challenges.
8. If you don't have a consistent prayer practice, start small: find a time throughout your week to simply read the words of the *Amidah* prayer and connect to their meaning. For me, starting at 26 years old, I found these ancient prayers of our sages surprisingly powerful and pertinent to my life today, as if they'd been written just for me.