

פרשת נשא

OVERVIEW

The text completes the counting of Israel's tribes with the listing of the three groups that form the tribe of Levi. It defines the three sectors surrounding the sanctuary in relation to the degree of sanctity: the central site of holiness, the encampment of the Levites and the outer sector occupied by the other tribes.

If a conflict arises in a Jewish marriage and suspicion, based on certain facts, threatens to undermine the mutual trust, the law of "Sotah" can be invoked before the priest within the confines of the sanctuary. - There follows the law of the "Nazir", a self-imposed status of purity and sanctification.

The priestly blessing is an integral part of our tradition, expressing the intimate bond between G-d and mankind.

The Sidrah concludes with the dedication of the sanctuary and a description of the gifts of homage donated by the princes, the heads of the tribes.

COMMENTARY

The three Levite Families

In the order of the encampments there is emphasis on the three Levite

families. Yaakov's third son, Levi, had himself three sons, Gershon, Kehat and Merari. They are assigned permanent tasks during the people's wanderings in the desert: Kehat, encamped on the south side of the sanctuary, is responsible for the sacred vessels, the Holy Ark, Menorah and Shulchan (table). Gershon, on the west, is in charge of maintenance of the sanctuary structure and the portable walls of the forecourt. Merari, on the north, supervises the transport of carpets, bolts and pillars.

This division of responsibilities appears to correspond with the sanctuary's central concept of the union between the spiritual and the material under the imprint of divine guidance. With Kehat responsible for the spiritual aspect of the sacred vessels, Gershon the custodian of the physical structure, Merari coordinated the work between them. The eastern central side of the sanctuary was reserved for the Aharonites whose encampment served as the access road for those who wished to be admitted to the sanctuary.

Suspicion

A healthy balance in married life between the two parties is guaranteed by mutual trust. Once this trust is shaken by certain circumstances and turns into festering

mistrust, moral if not actual separation may follow, resulting in the breakup of a Jewish home. At this point, and only then, the Torah prescribes an extraordinary measure to obtain the true facts and restore the domestic peace. The rules surrounding this law point to special character underscored by the ceremonial act taking place within the confines of the sanctuary.

Significantly, this act cannot be performed without the express approval of the wife. She will welcome the opportunity to put an end to the suspicion nurtured by the wagging of evil tongues. Rather than demeaning her dignity as wife and woman, this act is designed to restore the husband's respect and sense of reciprocity towards his wife, and his concern and that of the community for the health and creativity of the Jewish family.

The priest, confronting the woman who is suspected of adultery, pronounces a provisional curse over her. Her reply is the twice-repeated "amen" with which we respond to every blessing. Its meaning is that "I confirm what has been said". Another interpretation traces its etymological origin to "omen", guardian or educator (see Megillat Esther 11:7), "I rely on him who has my confidence". "Amen" signifies the complete understanding of the preceding statement. The saying of the sages "he who pronounces "amen" with the full intensity of his

soul witnesses the opening of the gates of paradise" clearly shows that a public demonstration of gratitude and homage to G-d is an act of such greatness that it changes the very foundation of heaven and earth. – The vindication of the accused wife is the object of this "Sotah" law – it is G-d Who will restore the peace and trust between husband and wife.

The Nazir

There are various ways of serving G-d. Some choose the approach of placing the stamp of the divine will on the practical aspects of daily living. Others, devoted to a more contemplative existence, seek a closer proximity to G-d by attempting to circumvent the obstacles of human frailties. In its profound understanding of the human soul, the Jewish law reckons with men who find fulfillment in the lonely stillness of meditation. It facilitates their desire by way of certain rules designed to guide them towards the goal they wish to achieve without committing fatal excesses.

Thus the Nazir may voluntarily adopt a way of life - for an average period of thirty days - that brings him closer to the life of the priest. He must avoid any contact with impurity, abstain from wine and physical enjoyment and neglect his appearance (no cutting of hair), no contact with a dead body. By his abstinence the Nazir aims at achieving a closer proximity to G-d

but he also hopes to avoid the daily confrontation with the challenges of human living.

The Nazir status must never serve as an example for others to follow. On the contrary, at the conclusion of the Nazerite period he must bring an atonement offering, a sign pointing to a certain measure of wrongdoing. The history of the "Essaeim" shows Judaism's refusal to integrate a sect which negates the physical and material aspects of life instead of conquering them.

The priestly-Blessing

The priests have neither the duty nor the authorization to pronounce the blessing. "Thus you shall bless the children of Israel - it is to be said to them". The request has to be put to them by the "Shliach Tzibbur – the emissary of the congregation" in its name. The priests repeat each word of the blessing that is dictated to them by a representative of the congregation that wishes to be blessed. Jewish blessing is no magic potion. It is not the priest who bestows it. Thus the custom not to look at the priests when they pronounce the blessing. It is not from their lips, from their benevolence, that the blessing emanates. The priests are the spokesmen, as it were, of Him Whom we entreat to bless us.

"G-d shall bless you and guard you" refers to the prosperity and protection of our material possessions

that we owe solely to G-d's mercy. Any material acquisition obtained by means that G-d would not condone, is bound to oblivion. G-d will bless you and only then will this blessing be preserved for you.

"May G-d shine His face upon you and bestow His grace upon you". The divine spark, our intelligence, leads us to spiritual wholeness if it is constantly "illuminated" by the divine word.

"May G-d turn His face unto you and find peace for you". Material-physical and spiritual well-being will continue to bring you the peace that you crave and will elevate you towards G-d.

The priestly blessing is the focus of our Sidrah. Our liturgy contains the same text but the manner of its recitation varies according to different customs. Ashkenazic Minhag includes it in the repetition of the "Shemonei Essrei" and only on festivals (according to some variations, only provided they do not fall on the Sabbath) is it recited by the Kohanim. According to Sephardic Minhag - also in the holy land - it is pronounced daily by the Kohanim. A number of rules apply: the Kohen takes off his shoes, he must stand during the blessing with his hands raised and fingers spread apart.

The three central points of the priestly blessings are: G-d's protection, G-d's mercy, and G-d's

peace. These three blessings are indispensable for our moral and material security and well being.

1) G-d's protection: this concept refers primarily to physical dangers threatening us such as illness, poverty, war. But it also conveys the warning that your possessions shall not possess you, i. e. rule your thoughts and conduct. We need G-d's protection to help us overcome the corruptive effect of wealth and power.

2) G-d's mercy: "may He bestow His mercy upon you as well as the compassion of your fellowmen".

3) G-d's peace: peace is not a negative concept such as the absence of war or an armistice. True peace is active, action, pooling of all efforts and endeavors towards a constructive and moral goal.

The Sidrah concludes with the enumeration of sacrifices to be offered by each of the princes. Considering the Torah's usual brevity

it seems puzzling too have the same listing of offering repeated twelve times. Yet it is the almost monotonous and solemn style that emphasizes the full equality of each prince of each tribe. Far from every day of offering being identical with the previous or following ones, the repetitive account mirrors the enthusiasm of the prince and his tribe that infused "their" day. While every tribe, every individual, have their own qualities and shortcomings, it is the sincerity of the offering and the integrity of purpose which transformed these offerings before G-d into a diadem of identical pearls each distinguished by its own unique mark.

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