

SHABBAT SHALOM

INSIGHTS INTO LIFE, PERSONAL GROWTH & TORAH



PARSHAT NASO

DEDICATED WITH DEEP APPRECIATION TO **EDWARD SELIG**

GOOD MORNING! There is a well-known axiom of life that has been attributed to the famous Greek philosopher Heraclitus: *The only constant in life is change*. Plato illustrated this point as, “You can never step into the same river twice.” The water of a river is constantly flowing; therefore, no two steps into a river can ever be the same. Benjamin Franklin put it another way: “When you are finished changing you are finished.”

As we go through life we are constantly buffeted by winds of change. This is why, I believe, part of the human condition is to establish for ourselves fixed points – concepts that we see as unchanging truths – that we can continually use to navigate ourselves to a place of safety in an ever-shifting world.

Unfortunately, we also have a tendency to discard (and often discredit) valid philosophies that do not fall into our desired worldview. The philosophical divide of America’s political parties – a divide of Grand Canyon proportions – is a prime example of this myopic vision. Politicians choose to believe what they want, while mostly ignoring what the American people actually believe (though serving their constituents should be one of their fixed points). Thus, the parties and political figures who purport to represent “the people” end up only representing themselves.

Reflecting on this manifest dissonance, I began to think about what it means to be self-centered. The general understanding of self-centeredness is that it describes a state of being, one wherein a person is totally preoccupied with his own selfish desires – blithely ignoring (or not caring) about the needs of others. To the self-centered person the world revolves around him, and him alone.

But I have recently begun contemplating a somewhat different version of self-centeredness. I think we can also define a person who is self-centered as someone who always imagines himself to be in the center. That is, he sees himself as being in the “just” middle with anyone to the right being an evil fascist, and anyone to the left being a mindless progressive.

To some extent, we all do this. I am reminded of the late comic George Carlin who once observed, “Have you ever noticed that anyone who drives faster than you is a maniac, and anyone who drives slower than you is an idiot?”

The real depth of this insight is that the only people you ever really take notice of are those who pass you or those whom you pass – you hardly ever pay attention to anyone else. This is because everyone else's existence is only relevant to you as it relates to your own self-centered universe. This is why those who are preoccupied with themselves end up living in tiny worlds; nobody else can really exist in them (and nobody would want to either).

While reviewing this week's Torah reading a similar thought occurred to me: as Jews, we too can fall prey to self-centeredness.

This week's Torah reading is called Naso, and it happens to be the longest portion in the Torah. The last seventy-two verses in Naso describe the gifts contributed by each tribe to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) on the day of the inauguration of the Altar.

Oddly enough, even though each tribe brought **exactly the same** offering, the Torah saw fit to recount, in repetitive detail, each tribe's contributions. These seventy-two verses are a big part of the reason that this week's portion is the longest in the Torah.

(Here's a fascinating piece of trivia for you to consider: the longest portion in the Torah contains 176 verses, the longest chapter in Psalms contains 176 verses, and the longest tractate in the Babylonian Talmud ends on folio 176 – coincidence? Obviously not, and we shall leave it as a discussion for another time.)

These repetitive verses are difficult to understand, after all, we know that the Torah doesn't even have an extra letter, so why would the Torah go to such great length to repeat each tribe's identical contribution?

Nachmanides (*Naso* 7:13) answers that the idea to bring an offering occurred to each tribal leader independently, and each one had his own specific reasoning for his contribution. In fact, the sages (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:15) explain why each tribal head brought what he did. We learn from here an extraordinary lesson; the exact same act, done with a different intention, is an entirely different act.

But there is another aspect to these tribal gifts that I wish to explore. The famous medieval Biblical commentator known as Rashi explains the unique meaning that the gifts signified. He explains that the numerical value of the words "silver tray" is equivalent to 930, which corresponds to the number of years that Adam lived. The 130 *shekalim* that the tray weighed refers to the age that Adam was when he fathered his son Seth (*Genesis* 5:3). The numerical value of "one silver bowl" is equal to 520, which was the age when Noah fathered his children (500) and the 20 years that preceded it when God informed him that a flood was coming. The 70 *shekalim* weight of the basin refers to the 70 nations of the world who descended from Noah.

All of these allusions to non-Jews during the inauguration of the Altar seem very strange. After all, this event was celebrating the Altar of **our** *Mishkan*; what does **our** *Mishkan* and **our** Altar have to do with the non-Jewish world?

The great codifier of Jewish law known as Maimonides states, "we have a tradition that the place that the Altar was constructed (in the Holy Temple) was the place that Abraham built an altar and bound Isaac upon it. In addition, this was the very same place that

Noah built his altar when he exited the ark, and this was the exact spot that the children of Adam, Cain, and Abel, brought their sacrifices. Lastly, it was the very spot that Adam was created from. Our Rabbis have thus taught 'Adam was created from the spot that he receives atonement'" (*Beis Habaichira* 2:2).

Maimonides is teaching us something truly remarkable. All of mankind is connected to this specific place in the universe. The Jewish people tend to look at our Holy Temple and the Altar as things that are only for the Jewish nation. Our natural discomfort and distrust of the non-Jewish world, borne out of thousands of years of oppression and great suffering at their hands, sometimes makes it difficult to comprehend that the nations of the world also have a connection to the place of the Holy Temple.

To many, it is an anathema for us to contemplate that the other nations of the world are deeply connected to "our" Holy Temple and Altar. This is because for millennia the Jewish nation has been persecuted in almost every civilized area of the world. Yet somehow we conveniently forget that the terrible suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the various nations of the world was really just the Almighty punishing us for our wrongdoings; as the Torah had forewarned us would happen.

Of course, it goes without saying that much of that pain was inflicted by certain nations who enjoyed the process of torturing and killing us a little too much.

But we must never lose sight of the fact that we brought these painful retributions on ourselves. All of the suffering was because we failed to follow the Torah, and fulfill our primary responsibility of bringing the awareness of God into this world. This is the job that our forefather Abraham took upon himself, and it's precisely why he is considered the first Jew. He went on a crusade to make sure that people were aware of the Almighty's existence and that it is to Him that we owe our fealty.

It is the responsibility of the Jewish nation to bring the presence of the Almighty into this world and to make the rest of the world aware of His immanence. This is readily evident in the words of our prophets and in our own daily prayers. The Jewish people are not the final purpose of creation, rather we are a means to the end and it is our responsibility to see that the purpose of creation is realized.

After all, the Jewish people are barely a quarter of one percent of the world's population – it would be the height of self-centeredness to actually believe that we should solely focus on ourselves because we are the entirety of the Almighty's purpose in creating the world. Our mission is to manifest the presence of the Almighty into this world. The Holy Temple – may it be speedily rebuilt – is the nexus of this in this world.

The Altar is the place where all of mankind connects with God and is empowered to serve God through sacrifices. Thus, it is no small wonder that the main religions of the western world all feel intensely connected to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount in particular.

We must remember that we are caretakers appointed by God and it is our responsibility to make sure that the entire world is aware of the Almighty and give everyone a place to worship and connect to Him. That is our fixed point. It's not only about us – it's about connecting the Almighty with all of His children.

SHABBAT SHALOM,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

TORAH PORTION: TORAH PORTION: Naso, Numbers 4:21 - 7:89

This week's portion includes further job instructions to the Levites and Moses is instructed to purify the camp in preparation for the dedication of the Mishkan, the Portable Sanctuary.

Then four laws relating to the Cohanim are given: 1) Restitution for stolen property where the owner is deceased and has no next of kin goes to the Cohanim. 2) If a man suspects his wife of being unfaithful, he brings her to the Cohanim for the Sotah clarification ceremony. 3) If a person chooses to withdraw from the material world and consecrate himself exclusively to the service of the Almighty by becoming a nazir (vowing not to drink wine or eat grape products, come in contact with dead bodies, or cut his hair), he must come to the Cohen at the completion of the vow. 4) The Cohanim were instructed to bless the people with this Priestly Blessing: "May the Lord bless you and guard over you. May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift up His Countenance upon you and give you peace."

The Mishkan is erected and dedicated on the first of Nissan in the second year after the Exodus. The leaders of each tribe jointly give wagons and oxen to transport the Mishkan. During each of the twelve days of dedication, successively each tribal prince gives gifts of gold and silver vessels, sacrificial animals, and meal offerings. Every prince gives exactly the same gifts as every other prince.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: Jerusalem 7:07 | Miami 7:52 | Cape Town 5:26 | Guatemala 6:11 | Hong Kong 6:48 | Honolulu 6:53 | Jo'Burg 5:04 | LA 7:44 | London 8:58 | Melbourne 4:49 | Mexico 6:55 | Moscow 8:50 | New York 8:06 | Singapore 6:51 | Toronto 8:38

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

THE EMPTIEST PEOPLE ARE THE ONES
THAT ARE FULL OF THEMSELVES.

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