

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

explain what they had learned. My teacher began to speak, and said maybe a sentence or two he was cut off by his very stern teacher, rebuking them by exclaiming, "You're not smelling the *sugya* (passage) right!" He kicked them and told them not to come back until they smelled the *sugya* correctly.

This story always amused me, and I have been thinking about it this week as we prepare to read Parshat Naso. Much is made in the Parsha of the *kohanim* and their roles in the Jews' relationship to God. In Temple times, priests would help other Jews offer their sacrifices and the smell of the sacrifices would rise up to the heavens and this smell would be pleasing to God (Leviticus 1:9). The *Sfas Emes* teaches that this was one of the *kohen's* essential functions—to help offer up the pleasing odors of our essence, and that by doing so, the *kohen* brought other Jews closer to God. When you know how someone else smells, when you know someone that well, that is when you can have a real impact on their lives. Think about the people in your life who you have hugged tightly—the smell of your loved ones' hair, their skin, their perfume, their aftershave, etc. When you are intimate enough with someone to smell them, the relationship is more intimate and what you can offer each other becomes greater. The same is true for us and God. When God can smell us, when we are hugged tight to Hashem, we can begin to be enlivened by the divine blessings. This is ultimately what I believe my teacher's teacher was trying to convey. When you finally get close enough to the text to smell it, its meanings and blessings will become more meaningful to you.

How do we give each other our deepest blessings when we can't get close to each other, when we can't smell each other? The priestly blessing which also comes in this week's Parsha, is often referred to as the lifting of the hands. The *Sfas Emes* elsewhere explains that the job of the *kohanim* is to raise their hands up and pull the divine flow down from the heavens. He notes that before the error of the golden calf, we used to stand tall. And from that moment on, every time we err, our spiritual posture becomes more bent. Yet through our desire to reattach ourselves to The Source of All, we can slowly straighten up again. This is the hopeful message of the *kohanim* and their hands. While we may be low and feel like we have fallen, we know that we have the ability to get up again. And that day when we will return to each other, hug each other, smell each other and learn from each other, that will be a holy day indeed. A day full of life. I cannot wait.



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## TORAH SPARKS

### *Nasso*

June 6, 2020 | Sivan 14 5780

Annual | (Numbers 4:21-7:89) Etz Hayyim, p. 791

Triennial | (Numbers 4:21-5:10) Etz Hayyim, p. 791

Haftarah | (Judges 13:2-25) Etz Hayyim, p. 813

#### Smells Like Jewish Spirit

Rav Ezra Balsler, Rabbi of Base Hillel: Loop; CY student (2003-2004, 2014-2015)

In this week's Parsha, Naso, Moses finishes the building of the Mishkan, anoints it with oil and sanctifies it and all of its vessels, along with the altar and all of its vessels (Numbers 7:1). The *Apter Rebbe*, my great ancestor, teaches that the oil actually brought the Sanctuary to life. In Judaism's mystical tradition, oil represents divine wisdom, and "wisdom gives life." I think of the sanctuaries that stand empty now during our period of isolation. How great was it to sit around the table at kiddush and listen to friends offer thoughts on Torah and the issues of our day? That wisdom is what brought our sacred spaces to life. I miss that.

When I was in rabbinical school, one of my teachers told us a story about how he learned how to study Talmud. My teacher and his classmates were instructed to spend the week studying a small section of Talmud. When the week was up, they returned to class to

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## D'var Haftarah: Stability and Reformation

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives*

Biblical society was patriarchal. Women's role was secondary legally, socially and economically. These factors are reflected in the opening lines of the haftarah: "And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and bore no children." (Judges 13:2) We are never told the heroine's name. She is simply referred to as "eishet Manoah – Manoah's wife. Furthermore, her barrenness is not referred to as a personal tragedy but rather as that of her husband, Manoah. This makes the story all the more extraordinary, since in all other ways, "eishet Manoah" is the dominant character in the story, since she serves as both a "prophetess" and the chief protagonist. In this story, Manoah's wife is worthy of prophecy where her husband initially is not. She is the one who must bear and guarantee that Samson, the future savior of Israel, is properly raised as a nazirite with all of the prohibitions it imposed on her and on the child. Her husband, Manoah, only enters the picture through his wife's intervention. He may manage the family's property but it is his wife who is aware of the larger picture to which she must insure his cooperation in order to guarantee success. In other words, she was the one responsible not only for the fate of her son but also for the fate of her husband and that of all of Israel.

The story of the birth of Samson turns societal assumptions on their head for the sake of truth. Power, in this story, is not in the hands of those normally assumed to be powerful but rather in the hands of the insightful and Manoah's wife was insightful. Her greatness was in her willingness to share her insight with her husband and her ability to shape destiny accordingly.

So we see that the dialectic element of the plot is intentional. It is not unlike what he have seen in the stories of Genesis where, on the one hand, primogeniture was a societal rule while in all of the stories of the patriarchs the younger son ironically takes on the primary position in society. The Bible seems concerned with the paradox that one must insure both the stability of society but also, at times, be willing to seek its reformation. This anomaly is one of the major challenges in each generation. Everything is a matter of proportion and timing.

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## Blessing the Blessers

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty*

**Text: Bamidbar 6:22-27**

*(22)And the LORD spoke to Moshe, saying, (23)"Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying 'Thus shall you bless the Israelites. Say to them: (24)'May the LORD bless you and guard you. (25)May the LORD light up His face to you and grant grace to you. (26)May the LORD lift up His face to you and give you peace.' (27)And they shall set my name over the Israelites, and I shall bless them."*

- This section is known as Birkat Kohanim – the Priestly blessing. It is worth looking at 6:24-26 in the Hebrew. The structure is: 3 words - 5 words – 7 words. Why do you think that it is structured in this manner?
- What does this blessing give the person blessed? This is an unusual setting – an individual, not the nation, receives a blessing. What might be a blessing for an individual? What would you consider that most important blessing of all those offered? Why?
- AND I SHALL BLESS THEM (v.27) Who is being blessed? There are different possible readings. What would be the significance of each?

**Commentary: Rashi Bamidbar 6:27**

**AND I SHALL BLESS THEM** – [I will bless] the Israelites: I will agree with the priests.

Another explanation of "And I will bless them" is: [And I shall bless] the priests.

- Rashi is sorting out a confusion. What is it and what caused it?
- Why do you think that the Torah chose to be ambiguous here?

**Commentary: Rashbam Bamidbar 6:23-27**

**THUS SHALL YOU BLESS THE ISRAELITES:** "Do not bless them using your own words, as someone might say 'May it befall so-and-so that ....' Rather pray to Me that I should bless them. As the text explains further 'May the LORD bless you ....' and I will hear your voices when you say those words, and then I will bless the Israelites."

That is the meaning of the continuation (vs. 27), **AND THEY SHALL SET MY NAME OVER THE ISRAELITES:** When the priests bless the Israelites in My Name, not in their own name, then **I SHALL BLESS THEM** –the Israelites, as the priests prayed for when they said "May the LORD bless you."

- What word would Rashbam replace the word 'bless' with in v. 23? What is the mechanism of this blessing?
- Why do you think that a human (Kohen) is involved in the process of delivering God's blessing to a person?
- For whom do you think that it is important to know that God blesses, not the Kohanim? Why?

We welcome your comments: [torahsparks@uscj.org](mailto:torahsparks@uscj.org)