

Parshat Naso - June 11, 2022 (Jonah Remz and Jenna Silver's Aufruf)

By Arlene Remz

Shabbat shalom...My name is Arlene Remz

Sandy and I have been Newton Centre Minyan, and now Minyan Ma'or, members for more than 35 years, but it took the occasion of Jonah and Jenna's aufruf for me to push myself beyond my comfort zone and do this drash—my first in the minyan.

So, in reading this week's Torah portion, Naso, I was looking for themes that I could connect to today's aufruf, and to Jonah's and Jenna's upcoming wedding on July 3 in Baltimore.

I'm going to focus on counting—that is, the census of the Israelites. It may be a bit of a stretch to make the connection from census to the upcoming marriage of Jenna and Jonah, so I ask for your indulgence.

The first section of Parshat Naso describes the special census of the Levi'im. But wait—didn't we just read about a census of the Israelites during their journey in the wilderness last week in Parsha Bamidbar? And before that, we read about taking a census of the Israelite men in parsha Ki Tisa, way back in Shmot, in February. And there were many other references to counting the Israelites—as they prepared to leave Egypt in Parshat Bo, and when the adult males all gave a half-shekel toward the building of the Tabernacle, in Parshat P'kudei

Rashi's commentary on why there are repeated countings notes that the counting of the people was an act of Divine love:

Because they (the children of Israel) are dear to Him, God counts them often. He counted them when they were about to leave Egypt. He counted them after the Golden Calf to establish how many were left. And now that He was about to cause His Presence to rest on them (with the inauguration of the Sanctuary), He counted them again.

The Hebrew phrase for “take a census”: is NaSO et rosh which literally means ‘raise up the head’

In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z'l,

A Divine census is, as Rashi says, a gesture of endearment. That is why it cannot be described by the usual verbs of counting — limnot, lifkod, lispor, lachshov. Only the phrase naso et rosh, “lift the head”, does justice to this kind of enumeration, in which those entrusted with the task are commanded to “lift the head” of those they count, making every individual stand tall in the knowledge that they are loved, cherished, held special by God, and not merely a number, a cipher, among the thousands and millions.

There are significant differences, however, in who was counted in the different censuses in Bamidbar and Naso.

In Bamidbar, every able-bodied man over the age of 20 (otherwise referred to as all those who are able to bear arms) was counted.

These men were counted by their ancestral tribes, and the same wording was used for each tribe

However, only 11 of the tribes were counted. The descendants of Levi—the Levi'im, were not countedIn Bamidbar it is written: Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites” Levites were not listed among the other tribes counted in Bamidbar because they are exempt from military service.

So despite the many paragraphs of counting of the members of the tribes, what is notable in last week's parsha, Bamidbar, is all of those who are NOT counted: women, minors, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Anyone who knows me, and my past work at Gateways, as well as my involvement in egalitarian minyanim over the past 50 years will understand why this exclusion strikes a very negative chord.

While that could be the entire subject of my drash, I'm going to put that to the side as I move on to Parshat Naso and I focus on multiple interpretations of counting.

In the first part of Parsha Naso, the Tribe of Levi is subject to an additional special census separate from the greater Israelite community

Actually there were 3 censuses, for the 3 clans within the Tribe of Levi. Each clan had separate responsibilities vis a vis caring for the Tabernacle and its associated sacred objects, described in Chapter 4 verses 21-49—ie workload of shlepping setup and cleanup of the Tabernacle was allocated between the 3 clans, and described in great detail in this parsha.

And because of their service of the Tabernacle, the Tribe of Levi was exempt from regular military service

Just like in old days of NCM—we had certain exemptions from shlepper jobs for those who took on certain leadership roles. For example, being a high holiday coordinator gave you and your family a year of exemption from the much cherished setup and cleanup jobs.

So, to reiterate,

In the Bamidbar census my takeaway is that despite the charge to “lift up your head and be counted” what is most notable is who was excluded

But now, in the Levite census in first chapters of Naso— focus is on what is special, unique about the Tribe of Levi and the Kohanim

Special counting, special roles, special responsibilities, special privileges that the descendants of Levi were subject to because of their lineage.

Now let's fast forward to the end of Parshat Naso

After the Tabernacle was set up, The chieftains of the tribes brought offerings of carts and oxen.

In Chapter 7 verse 6-9 we read:

Moses took the carts and the oxen and gave them to the Levites. Two carts and four oxen he gave to the Gershonites as required for their service and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the Merarites, as

required for their service—under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. But to the Kohathites he did not give any; since theirs was the service of the sacred objects, their portage was by shoulder.

So in these first verses of Chapter 7 we see the continued theme of differences, this time in the quantity and quality of gifts....in this case—differentiation based on perceived need.

In contrast, beginning with chapter 7 verses 10-88

There is a significant shift away from special or differentiated responsibilities and privileges and gifts to uniformity amongst the tribes

These verses describe, in great detail, the tribal chiefs' identical gifts in honor of the consecration of the Tabernacle

The tribal chiefs all gave the exact same gift for the dedication of the altar
(hence the very repetitious torah reading)

The focus here was the equality of the tribes. They didn't try to one up each other in what or how much they gave. They each gave the same amount of the same exact items, apparently based on what was needed for the altar to serve its ritual function.

They were working together for the communal good.

How was it that they all ended up giving the exact same gift?

- There is no commandment from G-d to "bring a specific gift"
- Did one tribe start with a gift and then everyone else fell in line and gave the same?
- Was there a negotiation amongst the leaders about what the gift should be?
- Why didn't the chieftains of the larger, wealthier tribes give more?
- Was this a form of a regressive tax whereby this strict equality was essentially unfair?

We do not know, and can only speculate how and why that came to be.

However, each tribe, through its chief, was given a separate day in which to bring its offering, seemingly underscoring the individuality of each gift. One can ask how the sequence of the offering was decided, as it was not based on birth order. For example, Nachshon, of the tribe of Judah, made the offering on the first day. The Midrash says that he merited this honor because he was the first to plunge into the

Red Sea during the Exodus. So, even given the uniformity of the offerings there was differentiation in the order of presentation.

So as I reflect upon the various recountings and interpretations of census in this parsha and the weeks before, there are two key themes that keep recurring

- Exclusion vs inclusion
- Differentiation vs egalitarianism

This is a tension we find in so many areas of our life

Rabbi Sacks— in his book *Lessons in Leadership*, talks about envy

For example,

- Envy within the tribe of Levi, since the priesthood had gone to just one man, Aaron, and his descendents. Moses dealt with this potential sense of envy by giving each of the clans of Levi special role in the carrying of the items of the Tabernacle as I described earlier
- Moses also dealt with individuals who aspire to a higher level of holiness but were not Cohanim or Leviim— by implementing the special restrictions of the Nazirites
- Finally, the potential that the leaders of the other tribes would be envious that they and their tribes were left out of the service of the Tabernacle. Sachs says that the highly repetitive accounting of the gifts, with each tribe having its special day and accounting, gave each leader and tribe its moment of glory.

Sacks concludes the dvar torah on Naso with the following:

“There is no way of eliminating the danger (of envy) entirely, but Moses in Parshat naso tells us how to behave. Honor 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.”

These themes of

- Exclusion vs inclusion
- Differentiation vs egalitarianism

Carry over to many parts of our life

- Here in our Minyan—as everyone has assigned jobs, but members are free to volunteer for additional roles
- In our work lives, as we negotiate job titles, roles and responsibilities, and moments in the limelight
- In social situations—as we deal with the sometimes fine line between inclusion and exclusion
- And on a more personal family level how we treat each member of the family as an individual as well as part of the family unit.

So as I think about Jenna and Jonah’s upcoming marriage, these themes resonate in many ways

- In planning your wedding
- In your relationship to each other, how you respect each other, how you recognize each other’s strengths and qualities without the need to one-up each other, and how you approach division of labor
- In your relationships to families of origin and to your families by marriage
- In your relationships, hopefully someday, with children
- In your relationships with your extended circles of friends and family

In particular, the principle which I mentioned earlier of working together for the collective good, while still maintaining individual identity is such an important component of a couple building a new life and home together.

Before I close, I want to note the 50th anniversary of dear friends Linda and Bruce Stanger who exemplify this principle of a couple who work together for the collective good while still maintaining their individual identities.

Finally, on behalf of Sandy and of our entire family I want to thank the Newton Centre Minyan for being such an incredible community within which to raise our children. Although you haven't seen much of him in recent years, Jonah was a true child of the minyan, coming early to shul every week to play with his toys in the back of the Everts room of the First Baptist Church, and to play ball and run around rather energetically with his friends, resulting one shabbat with both the Remz's and the Kling Levines in the emergency room of Newton Wellesley Hospital. Jonah and his siblings Tamar and Adina, were blessed to grow up in such a warm and connected and caring minyan community.

So, Jenna and Jonah, as we are—at long last— in the final countdown of days before your wedding, may we all learn and grow from the lessons of counting—of Naso et Rosh—of lifting up our heads to be loved and cherished.