

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Naso

Order in the Parsha: The Thematic Flow of Parshas Naso

BACKGROUND:

Our parsha, the longest in the entire Torah, deals with a number of different topics. Towards the middle of the parsha, we are presented, first with the section of *sotah*,¹ and then with the laws of the nazir.² Rashi,³ citing the Gemara,⁴ comments on the juxtaposition of these two sections, explaining that one who sees the disgrace of the *sotah* is encouraged to accept a term of *nezirus* upon himself. It is interesting in light of this comment to consider the sections in our parsha which follow on *after* the section of nazir, which are:

1. *Birkas Kohanim* – the priestly blessing⁵ and
2. *Chanukas Hamizbeach* – the lengthy description of the offerings brought by the *nesiim* (princes) of each tribe on the first twelve days of the Mishkan.⁶

Let us ask: What is the meaning behind the juxtaposition of *birkas kohanim* after the parsha of nazir, and the offerings of the *nesiim* after that?

In truth, while pondering the location of *birkas kohanim* in between those two sections in our parsha, we should really be asking a more fundamental question still:

- ▷ What is *birkas kohanim* doing in Chumash Bamidbar?

There is an entire chumash devoted to mitzvos which are performed by the kohanim, namely, Chumash Vayikra. Indeed, for this very reason the Sages refer to this chumash as “Toras Kohanim” – the law of the kohanim. Surely, then, the mitzvah of *birkas kohanim* would have been better placed in that Chumash and not in the next one. And we need not remind ourselves that Parshas Naso is certainly long enough without it!

Understanding why this section follows that of nazir will begin by investigating the idea of nazir itself.

1 Bamidbar 5:11-31.

2 Ibid. 6:1-21.

3 6:2 s.v. *ki yafli*.

4 *Sotah 2a*.

5 6:22-27.

6 7:1-88.

UNDERSTANDING THE MITZVAH OF NAZIR

The institution of *nezirus* is somewhat enigmatic, represented by what appear to be conflicting signals from the Torah itself as to whether it is an entirely praiseworthy thing. Thus, on the one hand, we find that the Nazir called “holy”, while on the other hand, he brings a chatas (sin) offering at the completion of his term of *nezirus*. Why would a person need atonement for having attained a state of holiness? An approach taken by some commentators is that attaining holiness via abstention from the pleasures of the world is not ideal; rather, it is sometimes required as an extreme counter-measure for someone who is particularly vulnerable, such as this individual after having witnessed the *sotah* procedure. Therefore, although he embarks on a path toward sanctity, he brings a chatas for the methods that were necessary to employ.⁷

R’ Shlomo Fisher shlit”a of Yerushalayim⁸ explains that perhaps the chatas comes to atone for a different element of abstention employed by the nazir – namely, having seceded and distanced himself from the community. During a term of *nezirus*, the person withdraws into himself. In this regard, the hair that he grows during his term, which may not be cut, represents the insulated state he has entered.⁹ Again, for that time, it may be necessary, but ultimately, the pursuit of holiness that is accompanied by a person losing sight of the rest of the Jewish people is flawed – and when he is finished, he will need to bring a chatas. Indeed, not only is such a quest for holiness incomplete, it may even run counter to the fundamental concept of holiness itself. Rav Fisher quotes the stunning statement of R’ Shimon Shkop,¹⁰ who explains that the term “kedushah” essentially refers to a person or object that has been designated and dedicated toward a higher ideal. The highest ideal for an individual Jew is to be a blessing for the Jewish people, and full holiness comes from a person attaching himself and contributing to that community in the most elevated way he can. Thus, the nazir who has, albeit for legitimate reasons, seceded from the community to pursue a path of individual holiness, brings a sin-offering upon completing his term and re-entering the community.

Moreover, for this reason, the mitzvah of nazir is followed by in our parsha by that of *birkas kohanim*.

Kohanim, Kedushah and Community

On the surface, the nazir and the Kohen seem to have much in common. They both enjoy a status that is distinct from the rest of the people – the Kohen through birth, the nazir through choice. They even share certain prohibitions, such as coming in contact with the dead. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two, one that receives profound expression in the mitzvah

7 The Gemara in a number of places (see e.g. Taanis 11a-b) presents a dispute among the sages as to how to evaluate the nazir:

The first opinion considers him to be at fault for depriving himself of wine, explaining in this vein the verse (11) which states that he has “sinned with his soul.” Verse 5 which states “he [it] is holy” refers to the consecrated status of his hair.

The second opinion understands verse 5, “he is holy,” as referring to the nazir himself for having abstained from wine. This approach explains the later verse’s description of him “sinning against his soul” as referring specifically to a situation when he became impure through someone dying in his immediate vicinity.

It is noteworthy that both of these approaches take the added step of explaining the verse which seems to be in conflict with their view, thereby indicating that neither approaches considers both designations to be true, i.e. that he is both holy and has sinned against his soul. Either way, the question our discussion deals with – and which is independent of the Gemara’s discussion – is the fact that even if no mishap occurs during his term, the nazir is required to bring a chatas offering upon its completion, as stated in verse 14.

8 Derashos Beis Yishai, drush 54 sec 1.

9 See Commentary of Rav S. R. Hirsch to verse 5.

10 Introduction to Shaarei Yosher.

of *birkas kohanim*. The kohanim spend their time apart from the rest of the people, involved in the service of the Beis Hamikdash. There is no question that the way they spend their day is very different than the rest of the community. And yet, the final part of their avodah gives definition to all their distinct endeavors. At the end, the turn toward the people and bless them. As if to say, “We are involved in different pursuits than you, but our entire involvement in those pursuits is with your well-being in mind.” The goal of the avodah of the kohanim is to bring blessing to the entire Jewish people. In this way, the unification in purpose overrides any separation in practice.

Therefore, *birkas kohanim* is found, not in Chumash Vayikra, but in our parsha, following on from *nazir*, contrasting these two institutions of holiness and their relationship with the community.

Which brings us to the final section of our parsha – the inaugural offerings of the *nesiim*.

ALL IS IN ONE WHEN ONE IS FOR ALL

The offerings of the *nesiim* took place on the first twelve days of the month of Nisan, including the seventh of Nisan which was Shabbos. This is a highly unusual situation as the offering of an individual does not override Shabbos, only that of the community. Commenting on this, the Midrash¹¹ states that had any of the *nesiim* deviated from the formula brought by his colleagues, the offerings could not have been brought on Shabbos. The *Zayis Raanan*¹² explains that since each *nasi* was particular to bring the same number of offerings as his fellow *nesiim* in the interests of promoting national unity, this bestowed a communal quality on each day’s offerings, allowing those brought on the seventh day to override the Shabbos!

This, then, is the progression of our parsha, moving from the *nazir* – an individual who secedes from the community, to kohanim – who are distinct but act for the interests and benefit of the community, and culminating with the *nesiim* – individuals whose attachment to the community endowed their actions with communal status and potency.

The offerings of the *nesiim* are repeated in our parsha twelve times over. When the Torah repeats something it is on order to indicate that that thing is particularly beloved in Hashem’s eyes. In this instance, the Torah presents each *nasi*’s offering in all of its details, identical to those of his colleagues, for this is what is so beloved to Hashem – that each of these individuals acted with the totality of the Jewish people in mind. As far as the Torah is concerned, each day’s repetition develops the melody of unity, a melody played out over the course of a twelve-part symphony. Truly, there is no more beautiful sound.

11 Yalkut Shimoni, end of Parshas Naso.

12 Commentary on Yalkut Shimoni by R’ Avraham Gombiner, author of Magen Avraham.