

from the High Holiday or festival services, in Israel the Priestly Blessing (also known as *dukhening*) is recited daily during the repetition of the morning *'Amidah*. As Jacob Milgrom points out,

The first part of each line invokes the movement of God toward His people, the second, His activity on their behalf . . . God initiates six actions: bless *and* protect; shine *and* be gracious; bestow *and* grant peace. However, the transitional “and” may indicate consequence: blessing results in protection; God’s shining face results in grace; the bestowal of God’s favor results in peace. Thus the Priestly Blessing may actually express three actions. (*JPS Commentary: Numbers*, 51)

What exactly do we hope for in God’s blessing?

Joseph Bekhor Shor spells out the breadth of blessing that is showered on the people: “May God bless you with many children, a healthy body, wisdom, length of days, greatness, in your going out, in your coming in, in the city, in the field, in your basket, in your kneading trough, in happiness (i.e., may your heart be full in its portion)—the word *berakhah* (blessing) is connected to all of these.” His list beautifully includes “children, a healthy body, wisdom, length of days, greatness, etc.” Methodologically, our exegete scours Tanakh for notions that are explicitly connected to the word *blessing*. Broadly speaking, the blessing connects to self, family, community, and existential happiness.

Perhaps the most challenging of the Bekhor Shor’s inventory is *happiness*, which he defines as “being content with one’s portion.” As I read this section of our commentator’s reflections, I was reminded of the congregation’s response as the priests give their blessing during the *'Amidah*. We cover our eyes as if turning away. Vision has the potential to distract us. Covering our eyes and using only the sense of hearing forces us to internalize and turn inward. As we shift orientation, physically and spiritually, the Bekhor Shor reminds us to dwell upon and create a sense of inner peace—not to let our eyes wander, seeking happiness elsewhere, but rather, to reflect on all the *berakhot* of our individual lives and respond with a feeling of *hakkarat hatov* (recognizing the good). As we approach Shavu’ot, in which we commemorate the giving of Torah, I can think of no better lesson that we as individuals and as a community need to internalize.

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PARASHAH COMMENTARY

By Marc Gary, Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer, JTS

Can the Center Hold?

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”
—William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

Last week, the Jewish Theological Seminary presented an honorary degree to Philip Roth, one of the greatest American writers of the 20th and early 21st centuries. The famous author must have received this recognition from an iconic Jewish institution with a certain measure of irony and satisfaction. After all, when his first book was published more than 50 years ago, an outraged American rabbi wrote to the Anti-Defamation League asking, “what is being done to silence that man?”

Of Roth’s 31 published books, the work for which he won the Pulitzer Prize was *American Pastoral*, the story of a Jewish glove manufacturer named Seymour “Swede” Levov, who escapes the riots and unrest of Newark, New Jersey, in the late 1960s and seeks a quieter and safer life for his family in the rural countryside. But this plan goes tragically awry when his daughter brings the Vietnam War home to their peaceful hamlet and places a bomb at the local general store. The bomb kills a popular doctor, the daughter goes underground, and Swede Levov’s hopes for a tranquil, sheltered life are destroyed. His attempt to separate himself from the harsh realities of the world proves futile.

The narrative arc of the opening chapters of the book of Numbers reflects similar themes: a community ideal tainted by the realities of life—crime and immorality—culminating in a (ritual) withdrawal from the community. Last week’s parashah, Bemidbar, describes the Israelite community as one in which holiness—represented by the Mishkan (Tabernacle)—is literally and metaphorically the center of the people’s existence. In this week’s parashah, Naso, we learn about laws that clearly show that this holy society has become corrupted: fraud, perjury, adultery, and marital jealousy and suspicion have be-

come so prevalent that divine legislation is required to address them. What follows these laws is the law of the Nazirite, an ascetic who vows “to set himself apart for the Lord” by not drinking wine, cutting his hair, or coming in contact with dead bodies (Num. 6:2). As Moshe Lichtenstein observes, “judging the camp [of Israelites] by what may be inferred from *Naso*, one would conclude that holiness cannot be achieved even when the people are encamped around the *Mishkan*, and that the only option is the nazirite ideal of withdrawal” (*Moses: Envoy of God, Envoy of His People*, 145).

But is that really what the Torah is trying to convey? In response to the dangers, temptations, and imperfections of this world—the real world in which we live—is the Torah trying to nudge us in the direction of religious extremes? In the realm of ritual practice, is more always better?

The text describing the law of the Nazirite reflects not a blanket endorsement of increased ritualism, but a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, the Torah describes one who is willing to take on the added burdens of a Nazirite as “holy” or “consecrated” to God (Num. 6:8); but on the other hand, the law also requires that the priest offer a sin offering on behalf of the Nazirite (Num. 6:11, 6:14).

What is going on here? A person voluntarily undertakes special religious obligations in order to separate himself from the immorality of the world and identify more closely with the divine, and does so at not inconsiderable cost (after all, he gives up wine!)—and in return he is branded a sinner? What sin has he committed?

Nahmanides offers a common sense way to reconcile the “holy” with the “sinful” characteristics of the Nazirite ritual: the Nazirite is holy for the limited period of time when he abides by the Nazirite prohibitions, but when he terminates his Nazirite status and returns to “worldly passions, he requires atonement.”

But Maimonides takes the exact opposite view. For Maimonides, the sin is committed when the person becomes a Nazirite, not when he stops being one:

[The Torah] advocates no mortification. Its intention was that man should follow nature, *taking the middle road*. He should eat his fill in moderation, drink in moderation. He should dwell amidst society in uprightness and faith and not in the deserts and mountains . . . On the contrary, the Torah explicitly warned us regarding the nazirite. (*Shemonah Perakim*; emphasis added)

According to Maimonides, one should abide by the Torah, but not resort to

religious isolationism or excessive ritualism. In his *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot De’ot 3:1), Maimonides reiterates the point that a person should not withdraw from society or “inflict on himself vows of abstinence on things permitted him.” Religious moderation—“the middle road”—is the desired path.

In today’s Jewish world, Maimonides’s call for moderation in religious matters needs to be renewed. The Pew Research Center report on American Judaism last year shows that the extremes are gaining ground—those who reject religion entirely and those who identify as ultra-Orthodox. The vital religious center (the “middle road”) represented by Conservative Judaism in particular, but also including the committed Reform community and Open Orthodoxy, is striving against strong currents of religious abandonment on the one hand and religious isolationism on the other. The critical Jewish question of our time is, Will the center hold?

What is at stake is not just the future of a movement or denomination; it is the reaffirmation of the importance of religious engagement with the world. Those who stand firmly in the center and travel with Maimonides on the middle road embody the notion that the best response to the injustices and moral deficiencies of our society is not the rejection of religious values or the obsessive focus on ritualism in a closed community, but rather a deep and faith-driven commitment to confronting the imperfections of our society based on the demands of a just God in a not-yet-just world. As JTS Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel famously remarked, “Our concern is not how to worship in the catacombs, but how to remain human in the skyscrapers.”

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A TASTE OF TORAH

By Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, The Rabbinical School, JTS

The Blessing of Happiness

One of the centerpieces of Parashat Naso is the Priestly Blessing. God speaks to Moses and commands him to communicate the text of the ritual blessing with his brother Aaron: “Thus you will bless the people of Israel. Say to them, ‘The Lord bless you and protect you! The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you! The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!’ Thus you will link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:22–27).

While those in the Diaspora may be familiar with the ritual of Birkat Kohanim