

the second part of the blessing, “may God cause God’s face to shine on you grant you grace,” Rashi explains that we desire God’s happiness and favor - that which comes as a result of being attentive to our spiritual needs. Fourth, Rashi concludes by commenting on the final portion of the blessing, “may God lift up God’s Face toward you and grant you peace.” Here, we pray for God to overwhelm God’s anger with mercy.

Rashi’s commentary is profound in distilling the many dimensions of blessing. When blessing others, either explicitly or implicitly, we must bless with genuine intent and a full heart. Blessing is meaningless if done in a hurried fashion. Similarly, Rashi teaches us the importance of balance in our lives. We must be attentive to both material and spiritual needs. Offering a prayer for one’s material health is just as important as praying for one’s spiritual self. Finally, to be a source of blessing, one must be able to control one’s emotions and give others the benefit of the doubt. Optimism and self-discipline lead to blessing—for one’s self and for others.

The publication and distribution of *A Taste of Torah* are made possible by a generous grant from Sam and Marilee Susi.



Naso 5779

נשא תשע"ט



How We Build Character

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Parashat Naso begins with the appointment of the Levite families of Gershon and Merari to take care of the Mishkan, the Israelites’ portable sanctuary in the desert. While Aaron and his family were given the responsibility of overseeing the actual service of God in the Mishkan, the descendants of Gershon and Merari were defined as mere helpers, charged with the role of caring for the structure of the Mishkan, its cloths, its equipment, its posts and their sockets, its planks, pegs, and furnishings.

I have always wondered—why did God divide up the care of the Mishkan in this way? Was there some connection between the performance of a set of responsibilities related only to the external care of the Mishkan and the character formation of these Levite families? What would the families of Gershon and Merari gain from this very physical role of maintaining the structure of the Mishkan? What would they learn through this set of very repetitive and mundane motions that revolved around maintaining the structure of the Mishkan and not around overseeing the worship that took place within it?

As a parent, I often ask myself: What experiences will have an effect on my children? What responsibilities will form them as Jews and solidify their Jewish identities? I, like, many Jewish parents, look to the Jewish day school, to the Jewish camp, to Jewish programming, and, of course, to our synagogue. I presume that by placing my sons within a Jewish institution, I will be assured of success. But, when I think about my own upbringing in the context of this week’s parashah, it brings to mind the commitment of my own parents to building a makeshift synagogue in their home to mark the occasion of my bat mitzvah. To this day, I feel that it was more than a coincidence that the value

placed on the act of constructing the Mishkan in this parashah happened to be found in my bat mitzvah parashah, Naso. I learned the skill of reading from the Torah through this parashah while my family engaged in the complicated process of turning our everyday home into a sacred space, using cloths and posts and pegs and planks (literally!).

At the time when I turned 13, women were just beginning to read from the Torah on Shabbat mornings in Conservative synagogues; it was a time of transition. Our synagogue, unfortunately, despite every petition and letter and rant we could muster, would not change its ritual position. It would not become egalitarian. Risking his relationship with our rabbi and dear family friend, my father boldly suggested to me one evening that we could build our own synagogue, our own *aron kodesh* (ark for the Torah), and design our own service just so that I could read from the Torah. We could make it happen. And so, my bat mitzvah became a moment that was just as much about learning to read from the Torah as it was about building a place where I could make this happen.

As I think about the experience of my bat mitzvah today in conjunction with the charge to the families of Gershon and Merari, it reminds me that we often focus our attentions on the rituals themselves. We want to know what a ritual means, what it represents. We want the act of reading from the Torah to be transformative in the lives of a bar or bat mitzvah child. However, we often overlook the significance of the structures that must be in place in order to perform such rituals. We forget about the preparation, even the construction of particular contexts or communities necessary for performing this ritual in a meaningful way.

The descendants of Gershon and Merari had to go to great lengths to ensure that there was a Mishkan in the desert before any type of worship could occur. I see in their role what I saw in my own parents: a sense of boundless commitment to a process. I witnessed firsthand the lengths to which my parents went to ensure that I could stand before the Torah; this is what left the largest impression on me. The sense of Jewish identity that they instilled within me emerged from their commitment to building the context in which I could perform the ritual that would define me as a bat mitzvah. It was all about how they gave me the gift of Torah. I only hope that I can do the same for my own children.

This commentary was first published in 5771. The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).

A Taste of Torah



What Does a Blessing Require?

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At the core of Parashat Naso, one finds the Priestly Blessing.

Associations abound with these simple and precious words: a sentimental vignette of one's grandfather removing his shoes, enwrapping himself wholly in his tallit, and proudly echoing the words of this biblical formula; or perhaps it is a memory from one's Bar or Bat Mitzvah in which the rabbi graciously placed his or her hands on you and recited these words; or maybe your personal association is with the blessing of children recited each Shabbat evening. And while our images connected to the Priestly Blessing may abound, rarely do we think about the profound meaning behind these words that play such a central role in our tradition.

Numbers 6:22-26 teach, "God spoke to Moses saying, 'speak to Aaron and his sons saying, thus shall you bless the children of Israel: say (*ahmor*) to them, 'may the Lord bless you and guard you; may God cause God's face to shine on you grant you grace; may God lift up God's Face toward you and grant you peace.'"

The medieval commentator Rashi identifies four compelling aspects connected to this Priestly Blessing. To begin, Rashi focuses on God's command *ahmor*, which means say. Typically, this word is written in shorthand, *aleph-mem-reish*; in this instance, the Torah spells out the word in its entirety, *aleph-mem-vav-reish*. Regarding this spelling, Rashi comments that this is a warning to the Priests, "you shall not bless the people hurriedly but rather you shall bless them with the utmost of intent and with a full heart." Second, Rashi turns to the opening of the Priestly Blessing, "may God bless you and guard you." Based on a midrash, Rashi explains that this opening third is a blessing for material prosperity. "While humans typically give gifts but are unconcerned about their protection (guarding those same gifts), God gives and protects." We pray then, that God will increase our material wealth and protect that wealth from thieves. Third, with respect to