

[O]ne silver bowl weighing one hundred and thirty shekels and one silver basin of seventy shekels by the sanctuary weight . . . one gold ladle of ten shekels filled with incense; one bull of the herd, one ram, and one lamb in its first year for a burnt offering; one goat for a sin offering; and for his sacrifice of well being: two oxen, five rams, five goats, and five yearling lambs. (Num. 7: 13–17)

Given Torah's propensity for and gift of terse language, why would it repeat the same description for each leader? Clearly, the names of the presenters could have been listed, followed by a single description of the "gift" each of them brought. What would lead Torah to choose the more arduous route of redundancy?

Rabbi Shmuel Avidor HaCohen writes,

There is no question that the offerings brought by each of the princes of the tribes are identical. Each of them brings the same sacrifices, the same bowl of silver, the same silver basin, and the same gold ladle filled with incense. However, even though the offerings and sacrifices were the same, the intentions and experiences of each prince were not identical. The thoughts of human beings are not the same and their particular experiences vary from person to person—even if the mechanical act is the same. Perhaps this is what Torah is coming to teach us in Parashat Naso. Yes, the technical details of each offering [are] the same. But the feeling and experience behind each offering is particular to each prince. For this reason, each prince merited a full description of their offering. (*Likrat Shabbat*, 147)

Rabbi HaCohen's exegesis is moving and insightful. Even though the material dimension of each offering is precisely the same, the spiritual and emotional dimension involved in its presentation is a unique experience for each of the leaders. What we may initially perceive as redundancy is, in fact, an effort to give honor to each of the leaders of the various tribes. We, as readers of the text, are compelled to use our imaginations and hearts—and even to imagine ourselves in the role of "givers." The essence is not simply what is given; rather, it is how it is given.



Naso 5780

נשא תש"ף



The Torah of Large-Scale Projects

Rabbi Ashira Konigsburg, JTS Alumna (RS, KS '09); Chief Operating Officer, The Rabbinical Assembly

Naso opens up with a census of the Levites, who will be responsible for transporting parts of the Mishkan. Num. 4:3 specifies that those who will be engaged in this work are to be between the ages of 30 and 50 and fit for service when the Mishkan is operating.

At first glance, the details of which family is to carry which piece of equipment seem trivial at best. Why does the Torah spend time laying out what color cloth the items are to be packed in? These passages seem akin to the whaling chapters in *Moby Dick*—perhaps included because of the author's fondness for the whaling industry, but widely considered acceptable to skip. Was the biblical author especially fascinated by the logistics of moving a portable sanctuary through a desert? By the time this text was authored, the period during which the Mishkan was disassembled and transported would have passed, so do these passages serve as mere academic detail?

The rabbinic commentators are similarly concerned with these specifics. Perhaps they take their cues from the biblical text, thinking that if the minutiae of the Mishkan's transportation are important enough to include in the Torah, they are important enough to study and explicate. It seems to me, however, that their interest offers a clue that there's more relevance to these details than we might suspect at first glance: a closer look at these passages reveals crucial lessons about how effective operational procedures, often seen as trivial, are in fact critically important. This message is especially relevant today, as we contend with a global pandemic. Let's look at these passages in more detail.

The first of the family responsibilities in the parashah is that of the Gershonites. They are responsible for the fabric that covers the Mishkan, as well as the partitions and the altar and its relevant equipment. In verse 27 we

learn that these responsibilities are “performed on orders from Aaron and his sons,” who oversee how all the items will be carried. Ramban notes that this oversight is very hands-on: Aaron or one of the other high priests assigns a specific Levite to a specific task, saying, “This particular Gershonite shall be the overseer for such and such a matter . . . or shall carry a certain number of the curtains.” Though we have no Mishkan to move, the same principles apply to us in the twenty-first century. In any massive organizational effort, it is important to develop a leadership structure and assign clear roles to avoid duplication of effort and ensure that someone is directly responsible for carrying out each task.

The second family is the Merarites. In verses 31–32 we learn that they carry the planks, bars, posts, and sockets. They are also responsible for the pegs, pins, and cords—things that are tiny, but crucial. While it is apparent that the Mishkan requires its ritual items and fabrics, its very structure depends on pins and pegs. The fact that these items are specifically listed teaches the reader that attention to detail is key—especially, in a large undertaking where it is easy to get distracted by the big, obvious, or, quite frankly, more interesting pieces. In our COVID-19 era, one such detail is that handwashing for 20 seconds is significantly more effective than doing so for shorter periods. Before February, this detail wasn’t one we paid much attention to, but now we know that a few more seconds may be the difference between staying safe or becoming infected.

The other Levite family, described in the beginning of chapter 4 (in last week’s parashah), is the Kohatites. Their responsibilities included the items from the Sanctuary: the Menorah, the Ark of the Covenant, the table of the showbread, and all the assorted vessels and utensils used for the ritual service. These items are covered and packed by the Kohanim (the priests responsible for religious rites), who then supervise the Kohatites in carrying the load. 4:15 specifies that only after the items are covered should the Kohatites carry them—if they touch the holy items, they will die! While the Bible’s concern seems to be with violating a ritual taboo, we too must entrust our safety to more qualified experts—in our case, medical professionals—who ensure our safety. We, like the Kohatites, are unqualified to take matters into our own hands. When public health experts give guidance about the best way to stem a pandemic, everyone must listen to them. These are life-and-death risks that are best addressed by those with the relevant expertise.

Though we are not engaged in moving the Mishkan, we are in the midst of an even bigger effort. While this particular pandemic is new, some key lessons are found in Numbers 4:

- Create a leadership structure and respect its authority.
- Pay attention to the smallest details, as they can determine the success of the endeavor.
- Place trust in qualified authorities, especially when it is a matter of protecting life.

Naso starts with a census, an attempt to ascertain which Levites are available for critical work. This information, and the way it is used, is key to the success of moving the Mishkan. For our global effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 to succeed, we as a society must all work together to stop the spread of the virus.

In my experience volunteering as a disaster responder for the American Red Cross in New York City, the situations that ended up working out for the best were those where the affected individual took responsibility for their own recovery. Though we can’t control when disasters happen to us, we do have control over the way we respond. By taking charge of our actions, we can change the course of a disaster and diminish its impact. In the current global crisis, each of us has the opportunity to reduce the effects of COVID-19. Though the roles we are given may feel as minor as carrying the pins and pegs of the Mishkan, Naso teaches us that the smallest of details can make a significant difference. May our collective efforts yield success.

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



The Importance of What We Give Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS

At the heart of Parashat Naso is a repetitive description of the offerings brought by the leaders of each of the tribes in honor of the anointing of the altar. Each prince, beginning with Nahshon ben Amminadav of the Tribe of Judah, brings the same exact offering: