

NASO
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The portion of Naso is one of the most interesting in the entire Torah. It contains a potpourri of topics from the numbering of Levites to the law of the Sotah, the ordeal of jealousy imposed upon a suspected adulterous wife, from the rules of the Nazirite to the blessing of the Priests. It seems that one topic has very little to do with another. Yet, one of the medieval commentators, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, Gersonides, known as the Ralbag, of 14th century France saw the coherence in the flow from one topic to the next. He writes, “The reference to the guilt offerings is to remind Israel to remove the evils from the camp which bring on quarrels and strife. This represents the community. The ordeal of jealousy cites the need to remove enmity from the family home because Shalom Bayit [harmony within the home] is a precondition for peace within the nation. The discussion regarding the Nazirite is to quiet the self-destructive temperament of the individual nourished by the physical drives within him which lead to sin.” Rabbi Herbert Feder suggests that this prescription offered by the Torah and interpreted by the Ralbag leads to a three-part continuum - from community, to family, to self, and at the same time, from self, to family, to community. “Such a continuum” he writes, “it is hoped, will bring the hoped - for harmony, fulfillment, and peace to the nation.”

The first section of our Torah reading, therefore, is about peace in the community. It represents the responsibility of an entire community to have a vision that is larger than itself and to work toward that vision which will quiet strife in the community at-large.

I am privileged to serve on the Rabbinic Leadership Council of Professor Arnold Eisen, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Chancellor Eisen has just issued a booklet entitled *Conservative Judaism Today and Tomorrow*. Last week we had a telephone call of the Rabbinical Leadership Council to discuss this new work and to offer feedback to the Chancellor on the text before it gets published for the general public. The Chancellor believes that Judaism, of which Conservative Judaism is only a part, is based on covenant. As he understands it, life as a Jewish human being is given ultimate meaning. The covenant at Sinai established a people simultaneously with a relationship to the Holy One. We are more than a religion, we are also a people and the sense of community is extremely important to the Chancellor as he outlines a description of Judaism and, in particular, Conservative Judaism.

He writes, “covenant requires community: vital and caring face-to-face communities that are the building blocks of the global community, linking Jews across the generations and around the world. The task of building, maintaining and transforming local communities remains one of the greatest challenges confronting Conservative [and every other form of] Judaism today.”

He informs us that “successful Conservative institutions are true communities of mutual responsibility and shared commitment; places where people not only know your name, but need and value your gifts. Such institutions provide palpable assurance to

everyone who walks through the door that they are never alone in the world.” Based on the covenant and the concept of community synagogues, day schools, camps, Conservative institutions and organizations worldwide offer us the opportunity to “do our best to figure out how Torah should be lived and taught here and now – in ways that have never before been imagined.”

It is essential that everybody feel part of a community and the wholesomeness of that community must be one of the goals and visions of the institution or organization. The first part of our Torah portion reminds us of the importance of community and sets the stage for the concept of Shalom to flow to the home and to the individual.

The second section dealing with the suspected adulterous wife is based on the concept of Shalom Bayit. While to a large extent the Rabbis designated the whole area of husband/wife relationships under the rubric of Shalom Bayit, it is really more than that. It represents family harmony, all individuals in the family showing respect to one another.

Rabbi Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, the 13th century Spanish rabbi and author, outlined in a very interesting passage how he sees Shalom Bayit in the home on a Friday night. He states: “Close to sunset a person should set his Shabbat table, prepare the chairs and the lights and everything else including glasses and bowls. And he should be very careful to have wine for Kiddush. He should also trim his nails every Friday afternoon and sharpen his knife, as it is said, ‘and it shall be on the sixth day you shall prepare.’ This means the sharpening of his knife... for if your knife is dull and cannot cut, there is no Shalom Bayit.”

This is a remarkable passage. While I can understand the setting of the Shabbat table and the partnership that should function between husband and wife, what has the sharpening of the knife to do with anything? Why should it lead to family harmony and wholesomeness in the house?

As I understand Rabbi Jonah, he is informing us that arguments occur in the household over the most minute of details. Picture this: husband and wife and perhaps other family members are sitting around the Shabbat table and it is time to cut the challah. The knife is dull and it doesn’t cut properly. The husband blames the wife because she hasn’t prepared properly for the Shabbat experience. She blames the husband because it was his job to make sure the knife was sharpened. Before you know it, it blows up into a major fight of wills and tempers.

We all know that arguments usually start over the most innocuous of details. Sometimes when will overrides reason, one even forgets the genesis of the argument. Rabbi Jonah informs us that even the smallest matters should be taken care of so that arguments will not ensue, misunderstandings will not happen, and there can truly be Shalom Bayit in the family. In our homes nothing is more important than the wholesomeness of the house, a sense of peace and respect in our domiciles, and a proper sense of values for all.

The third aspect that is mentioned by the Ralbag is that of the self through the laws of the Nazirite. The Nazirite takes upon himself an extra degree of holiness by uttering a vow which forbids him from cutting his hair, drinking wine and coming into contact with a corpse. At the end of the experience, which must go on for at least 30 days, he brings sacrifices, including a sin offering, stressing, the Rabbis tell us, that being an ascetic is not part of our tradition. One can and, in fact, should enjoy the pleasures of life.

In his book *Lessons For Living*, Rabbi Sidney Greenberg cites a study by psychologist William Marston who asked 3,000 people this brief question: “What do you have to live for?” He found that 94% of his respondents were simply enduring the present while they waited for the future. They are waiting for: ‘something to happen – waiting for the right man or the right woman; waiting for children to grow up; waiting to pay off the mortgage; waiting for a vacation; waiting for retirement; waiting to get involved in the community; waiting to learn some new skill or hobby.’” Each day 94% of us, at least according to the study, are waiting for the next day. We don’t take advantage of today which is now at our command and before we know it, is gone.

In order to experience each day as a unique entity we need to be content in our own lot, ready to take on the challenge of that day, to make a difference in the lives of our family and our community, to appreciate the gifts that we have received and not wait for a better tomorrow, for that tomorrow may never come. A sense of wholesomeness of self comes with knowing that you have lived each day to its fullest, that you have given all that you have and that as the next day comes you are ready to meet the next challenge.

Gersonides informs us that there is an order in this Torah portion from the community to the family to the self. If we have peaceful communities then we will learn to have a peaceful family home life and if we do that then we can experience a wholesomeness of self. Rabbi Feder suggests that the opposite is true as well. We need to start with ourselves and feel that sense of personal contentment. Then we can move to the family unit and feel a sense of Shalom Bayit and, only then, can we work towards peace in the community.

This triad concludes with another triad – the priestly blessing. We are familiar with this blessing because we bless our children with it on Friday night, often a new couple under the huppah is given that blessing, and quite frequently a benediction delivered by both Jews and non-Jews includes this special prayer in which we hope that “the Lord will bless you and protect you; the Lord will deal kindly and graciously with you; the Lord will bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace.” The ultimate vision is peace. If one feels blessed by G-d then one senses the essence of peace. If one feels a recipient of G-d’s kindness and grace, then there is a measure of peace that comes along with it. The Ktav Sofer, Avraham Shmuel Binyonim Sofer, the 19th century Hungarian rabbi writes, “Peace begins in the home, then extends to the community and, finally, to all of the world.”

I don't know whether we can create peace in the world, but we should at least start with ourselves. If we can bring peace to ourselves then perhaps we can bring it to our families. If we can bring it to our families, then we can bring it to our communities, and then perhaps we can bring it to the entire world. May we start small and, hopefully, by doing so create a ripple effect which will create peace and harmony for all who inhabit the earth. May it occur speedily in our day.