BS”D

Parshas Naso 5776

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*Ritual purity is not enough to make the camp holy. Ethical and moral integrity are required.*

The Camp of B’nei Yisroel: The Hidden Agenda

The Book of Bamidbar in general, and particularly the first two parshios of Bamidbar and Naso that I’m going to discuss, are primarily narrative. The Chumash starts with the counting of B’nei Yisroel, then continues with the twelve tribes being grouped into four divisions who camped together and traveled together. The Torah goes on with the counting of the Leviim. The redemption of the firstborn and the three Levi families being assigned special tasks in carrying the Mishkan. Once the camp of B’nei Yisroel is set up, those who are ritually unfit (tamei) are told to leave the camp until they are purified. At the end of Naso, the Torah recounts the gifts of the princess and their special offerings for the dedication of the Altar (Chanukas HaMizbe’ach).

But in the middle of our parsha, the Torah presents us not with narrative but with laws.

First, the law of one who is “faithless to G-d” and steals or withholds money from his fellow. He must bring a sacrifice and repay the debt plus an additional fifth of the principle to pay the aggrieved party. If that party is deceased and has no heirs, the wrongdoer gives the payment to the Cohen.

Then the Torah briefly mentions some laws regarding the giving of the tithe of the crop (terumah0 to the Cohen.

The Torah goes on at length about the process used to determine the innocence or guilt of the suspected adulteress (Sotah).

Afterwards, the Torah tells in detail the law of the Nazir, someone who vows to abstain from wine, from coming into contact with the dead, and from cutting his hair.

Finally, the Torah tells us the text of the blessings that the Cohanim are supposed to bless the B’nei Yisroel with.

What are all of these laws doing here right in the middle of the narrative of the counting of the Jews and the establishment of the camp?

The Ramban explains that all of these laws are supplements to laws already spelled out earlier.

We were already told in the Book of Vayikra about the law of the denier of his fellow’s money. (By the way, there it spells out that he not only denied the debt, but swore falsely. In our parsha that is alluded to by the term “faithless to G0d,” i.e., he swore a false oath.)

In our parsha, we add what to do in the circumstance when the victim has no heir. This is only possible with a convert to Judaism who dies without leaving descendants. Every born Jew has heirs by definition even if it’s a distant cousin since all Jews have a familial relationship with one another in the literal sense.

Next come the laws of terumah. Terumah was mentioned just briefly in Shmos (22:25) and Vayikra (22:11) so the Torah fills in more details.

In Vayikra the laws of the meal offering (korban Mincha) are taught. Here the Torah finishes those laws with the Mincha offering of the Sotah, the accused adulteress. Similarly, the Nazir’s sacrifice is included here to finish the laws of sacrifice.

And finally, the Torah in Vayikrah (9:22) mentions Aharon blessing the people. Here the Torah concludes with the ongoing Mitzvah of the Cohanim blessing the people which is particularly significant upon the establishing of the Mishkan.

Now, while there is no doubt that Ramban’s explanation is correct, it only answers part of the question. Yes, these details had to be addressed, but why here in particular, that is, right after the setting up of the Israelite camp?

The commentaries explain about the order of these Mitzvos and their connection to one another. I will bring down some of them. Afterwards, I’ll explain the answer to my original question; why here?

Rashi explains the connection between the section of the giving of the Terumah to the Cohen and the section about the Sotah. A man who withholds gifts that are due to the Cohen will wind up having to take his wife who is suspected of immoral behavior to the Cohen.

Ibn Ezra sees the connection to the portion about the “faithless” thief. The Sotah, too, is faithless, as the Torah says, “She was faithless to him [her husband].”

The Ramban sees the connection of Sotah to the earlier section of establishing the tribal affiliations of each Jew. If there is adultery, the child born may not be of his mother’s husband; he is not of his tribe, but he is a *mamzer* (illegitimate child). Thus, the portion of Sotah which spells out how to determine if an act of adultery happened or not, is connected to the preceding sections about tribal identifications.

Rashi explains why the portion of the Nazir follows that of the Sotah. A person who witnesses the fate of the guilty adulteress may choose to become a Nazir who refrains from drinking wine. Wine, i.e., intoxication is seen as a gateway to immoral and adulterous behavior.

The Ibn Ezra says that a woman who chooses to be a Nazirah is the opposite of the Sotha; she is modest and chaste.

Here’s my suggestion as to why *all* of these laws are found here:

After the people of Israel are divided by tribe and tribal groups camped around the Sanctuary, those who are ritually unclean must temporarily leave the camp, as noted earlier.

But ritual purity is not enough to make the camp holy. Ethical and moral integrity are required.

The first law is of the person who stole and lied, betraying G-d and man. He must confess his sin and make amends to the wronged party.

But it is not enough to simply not do financial wrong. A person must give of his produce to those entitled to it by G-d’s will, i.e., the Cohanim.

Moral integrity is necessary for the camp to be holy. In the law of the Sotah, the Torah provides a means to settle an accusation of adultery. The woman (and according to the Sages, the man as well) who is accused is proven either guilty or innocent.

The Nazir is giving the option for those in the camp to choose a way of life of even more exceptional holiness than a regular Jew. In some respects, the Nazir lives up to the standards of the High Priest, the Cohen Gadol. In the writings of the Prophets, the Nezirim are compared to prophets. These are people of exemplary holiness.

When the camp is now assembled in ritual, ethical, and moral holiness, they are ready for the blessing of the Cohanim, “May G-d bless you…. and give you peace.”

G-d’s greatest blessing is peace; peace from external enemies and just as important, peace within. If we purify ourselves from wrongdoing and seek holiness in the way we live our lives, we can be assured of the concluding passage of Birkas Cohanim, “They shall place my Name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them.”