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**D'var Torah By:** Anne Ebersman

## Focal Point

But to the Kohathites he [Moses] did not give any [gifts]; since theirs was the service of the [most] sacred objects, their portorage was by shoulder. (Numbers 7:9)

## D'var Torah

As *Naso* opens, Moses continues the census of Levites that begins in *B'midbar*, last week's *parashah*. However, in this *parashah*, God chooses an interesting word to command the census. God tells Moses, *Naso et rosh* (Numbers 4:22), meaning literally, "Lift up the heads of." Other instances of a census recorded in the Bible use a form of the word, *pikeid*, "enroll." This usage is especially notable because we learn in *Naso* that the Levites are in fact weighed down. The Levites' job is to carry all of the appurtenances of the Tabernacle through the desert. And yet here is this word *naso*, "raise them up." They are weighed down; they are raised up. What lesson is intended by connecting these opposites?

One response relates to the current time of year-the period of the counting of the *Omer*. At Passover, we celebrate our great liberation from Pharaoh, yet according to our tradition, our freedom is not complete at that time. To be fully free we must first go through the counting of the *Omer*: We must count off fifty days before we can climb up to Mount Sinai. Only when we stand at Sinai and receive the Torah will we be fully transformed from slaves of Pharaoh into servants of God. As the Rabbis saw it, the most profound freedom is actually another, more ennobled, form of servitude-service to God. We ascend to Sinai to be raised up in servitude: we climb up to become weighed down by 613 divine commandments.

The paradoxical relationship between servitude and freedom, between being weighed down and being raised up, became real for me when I had children. There is no doubt that my children are the greatest responsibility-one might even say the greatest burden-I have taken on in my entire life. And yet, being with them gives me a profound sense that I am doing exactly what I am meant to do in life: I can best describe it as a deep feeling of freedom. (Of course, there are also times when my children sulk or behave willfully or have tantrums, and I want nothing more than to drop them with a babysitter and retrieve them at bedtime, but that is for another week and another *parashah*.) The servitude of mothering two young girls raises me up in ways I did not expect.

So it is for the Levites. They are given a special burden. They must carry the pieces of the Tabernacle through the wilderness. They are raised up for a special privilege. They are entrusted with the Israelites' most precious possessions.

At the end of *Parashat Naso*, we learn that all the tribes bring gifts for the Levites, and

Moses divides these gifts among the different clans of the Levite tribe. However there is one Levite clan, the Kohathites, which does not receive any gifts. The reason given is as follows: "But to the Kohathites he [Moses] did not give any [gifts]; since theirs was the service of the [most] sacred objects, their portage was by shoulder" (Numbers 7:9). Moses reasons that had they received gifts, they would be unable to carry them, given the nature of the service they perform:

The Kohathites do not receive gifts perhaps because they don't need them. Instead, they carry the most precious gift on their shoulders-their service to God. They are raised up above all the other Levites with this most sacred service, and they carry it with great difficulty, on their own aching backs.

Perhaps, in the end, it is the things that weigh us down that actually raise us up most profoundly. As we travel through the wilderness of our lives, God beckons us to discover our special burdens-intended for our shoulders only-which are also our most precious gifts. It is not that God seeks to burden us. God knows and waits patiently for us to learn that when we discover what is meant for our shoulders only, the act of carrying will become a way of being raised up. We may sweat as we hike along in the hot sun, but as we shield our eyes to look ahead, we are aware that we are ascending to Sinai, and at that moment the burden becomes as light and as pleasant as a kiss from a child.

### **By the Way**

- "We All Stood Together"

My brother and I were at Sinai  
He kept a journal  
Of what he saw  
Of what he heard  
Of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record  
Of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write  
I can't  
I'm always holding a baby  
One of my own  
Or one of a friend  
Always holding a baby  
So my hands are never free  
To write things down

And then  
As time passes  
The particulars  
The hard data  
The who what when where why  
Slip away from me

And all I'm left with is  
The feeling

But feelings are just sounds  
The vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard  
After all he's got a record of it  
Consonant after consonant after consonant

If we remembered it together  
We could recreate holy time  
Sparks flying

(Merle Feld, *A Spiritual Life* [New York: State University of New York Press, 2000])

- "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth." Rabbi Yochanan said: An angel carried utterances [at Mount Sinai] from before the Holy One, blessed be He, each one in turn, and brought it to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you take upon yourself this commandment? So-and-so many penalties are attached to it, so-and-so many precautionary measures are attached to it, so many precepts and so many lenient and strict applications are attached to it; such-and-such a reward is attached to it." The Israelite would answer him, "Yes." He then said, "Do you accept the divinity of the Holy One, blessed be He?" and he answered, "Yes, yes." Thereupon he kissed him on the mouth; hence it says, *Unto thee it was shown, that thou mightest know* (Deuteronomy 4:35), namely, by an [angelic] messenger.

The Rabbis, however, say: The commandment itself went in turn to each of the Israelites and said to him, "Do you undertake to keep me? So many rules are attached to me, so many penalties, so many precautionary measures, so many regulations are attached to me, so many relaxations and rigors; such-and-such a reward is attached to me." He would reply, "Yes, yes," and straightaway the commandment kissed him on the mouth... and taught him Torah. ( *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:2, 2)

## Your Guide

1. Both of these texts are about standing at Sinai and our relationships with important loved ones. In each of them, a relationship is being described as having burdens and rewards. What aspects of your life have rewards that are worth the burdens?
2. Do the most rewarding things in life carry burdens?
3. What aspects of Jewish life are both burdens and rewards?

5/29/2004

**Topics:** undefined

**Reference Materials:**

Naso, Numbers 4:21-7:89

*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, pp. 1,043-1,075; Revised Edition, pp. 921-945;

*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, pp. 815-842

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### **The Things They Carried - a d'var Torah for parashat Naso**

*This is the d'var Torah I'll offer on Shabbat morning at my shul. If you're going to be davening with us, you might want to skip this post so you can hear the d'var with fresh ears!*

May God bless you and keep you  
May God deal kindly and graciously with you  
May God bestow favor upon you, and grant you  
peace.

Those three verses from Numbers 6 are known as the "priestly blessing." Once these verses were recited by the priests. Today in some communities which preserve the distinctions between *kohanim*, *levi'im*, and *Yisrael* (priests, Levites, and everyone else), the descendants of *kohanim* recite these words at the end of the *amidah* with their hands upraised. In other communities these words are a benediction offered by the rabbi. I myself love chanting this blessing, every opportunity I get.

After this blessing, in this week's Torah portion, we read, "Thus shall they link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them." When we recite this blessing, we link God's name with our community; we create and strengthen the bonds between ourselves and the part of God's essence which is described by each of our many different names for God. "And I will bless them," Torah says -- the "I," of course, being God. When we recite these words, we are turning a cosmic spigot for divine blessing.

Immediately after this blessing, we read about how once the mishkan (the portable tabernacle; the dwelling-place for God) was built, Moshe consecrated it and its furnishings. Then the heads of the tribes brought carts and oxen as a gift to Adonai. On God's instruction, Moshe gave the carts and oxen to the Gershonites and Merarites, two groups within the broader group of Levites. The Gershonites were responsible for the curtains and hangings and ropes; the Merarites were responsible for the posts, crossbars, tent pegs and so on.

But the Kohathites -- a third group of Levites -- did not receive oxen or carts, because they carried the most sacred objects, and they carried them on their shoulders. The ark of the covenant, which our tradition says contained both the whole tablets and the shattered set; the golden menorah; the table and vessels; all of these were carried directly by the men of the tribe of Kahat.

The Sfat Emet -- Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (d. 1905) -- offers a beautiful teaching about this by way of a verse from I Samuel as interpreted by the Zohar. (Bear with me! It's worth it.)

The verse from Samuel is: "The cows went straight (וַיִּשְׁרְיָהוּ / *vayiSHARnah*) along the way." The cows in question were carrying the ark of the covenant on their backs. The Sfat Emet follows the Zohar in engaging in a bit of aural wordplay, reading *vayiSHARnah* -- "they went straight" -- as "שרו / *SHARu*," "they sang." In other words: what really happened in Samuel was that the cows sang as they went. That's the Zohar's claim: "It was the Ark on their backs that enabled them to sing."

The Sfat Emet writes:

The same is true of the Levites! It is the fact that they carry the Ark on their shoulders that gives them the power to lift their voices in song. This is true also of every person who serves God. True service fills a person with light and joy. ...True worship consists of Torah and mitzvot; these of their own accord fill a person's mouth with song and exultation.

Rabbi Art Green adds:

The religious life is not meant to be a weighty burden, but one that helps us to feel the lightness and joy of knowing God's presence. The Levite who carries the ark on his shoulders is also -- or is *therefore* -- the one who sings! What a great message, and a typically hasidic one: life in God's service is a life of happiness and fulfillment. Like those privileged cows who merited carrying the Ark of the Lord on their backs, the service of God should so fill us with joy that we cannot keep from breaking into song.

I love this reading of the task of the Kohathites. It's not that they were extra-burdened by having to carry the holy implements on their own shoulders instead of having some oxen and a wagon; rather, their service was a blessing. It was their very service which allowed them to sing. We should all be so lucky as to be able to throw our whole selves, not only mind and heart and spirit but also even our bodies, into serving our Creator.

How do these details of who carried what and how they carried them relate back to the priestly blessing with which our Torah reading today began? In the Biblical paradigm, Aaron and his sons -- the Levites -- were uniquely privileged to do the work of serving God (carrying the various components of the dwelling-place for God), and as a result of their physical service, they were given the opportunity to serve as conduits for blessing. In our paradigm, this work is open to all of us.

When we put our whole selves, in all four worlds -- body, heart, mind, and spirit -- into service of the One, that's when we can bless others. That's when we can link God's own Name with our names. That's how we open that spigot for cosmic abundance: not merely through saying the words of the priestly blessing, but through committing our whole selves to serving others, and in so doing, serving God.

Posted at 07:00 AM in [Hasidut \(http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com\)](http://velveteenrabbi.blogs.com)

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# *The Aura of Torah*

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*A Kabbalistic-Hasidic Commentary  
to the Weekly Readings*

RABBI LARRY TABICK



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pleasure from it since it comes from the Eternal, according to the analogy above.

And this is the meaning of the midrash: “How? [. . .] If the Israelites sit down with their children and their household, but do not have enough to satisfy [their hunger], yet they show Me favor and recite the blessing”—that is to say that they contemplate from whom the food has come and recite the blessing, and because of the greatness and importance of the One who gave it, they have pleasure from a small amount, and from this do they derive satisfaction and so recite the blessing. This is the meaning of the notion that they show God favor. Understand!

This is an attribute [of God] too, for the Holy One shows them favor and enjoys the insignificant service that they have performed before God, because God contemplates from whom this service comes, [appreciating] that we are [merely] human and of limited intellect, but serve God just the same. This is the explanation of “May the Eternal bestow divine favor upon you.” Understand, because it is profound.

Simchah Bunam of Pshische (1765–1827), *Kol Simchah* [The sound of joy (Jeremiah 7:33)] (Jerusalem: HaMesorah, 1986), p. 87

#### NOTES

**In the Midrash Rabbah [it says].** *Be-midbar Rabbah* 11:7.

**Recite the blessing.** I.e., the “Grace after Meals.” Deuteronomy 8:10 is the Rabbis’ prooftext for reciting “Grace after Meals.”

**We have to eat until we are satisfied [before saying the grace].** Based on the order of verbs in Deuteronomy 8:10. See the Talmud, *Berachot* 21a.

#### COMMENT

I particularly liked the dialectic aspect of this teaching and its suggestion that God and human beings are interdependent. Just as we depend upon God for the things that sustain our bodies, and our souls, so too God is dependent, as it were, on us to acknowledge God’s divinity. To do so not only connects us with the One who is greater than we, but also brings that One into human life in concrete, even intimate, ways.

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## [105] Exertion Required

*“But to the descendants of Kohath, [Moses] did not give anything, because the service of the holy belonged to them; they were to carry it on the shoulders.”*

*Numbers 7:9*

#### CONTEXT

The Tabernacle is complete, and each of the princes of the tribes brings his offering for its inauguration. The identical offerings are then distributed among two of the three Levite clans, whose task it is to transport them through the wilderness. But the clan of Kohath is not given anything, because their special task is to carry the Ark of the Covenant.

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk was famous in his own day for having very high moral and spiritual expectations of his followers.

“In the service of the holy,” you must work hard.

“They were to carry it on the shoulders”—if someone says, “I have not exerted myself, but I have found,” do not believe them.

Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859), *Sefer Amud HaEmet* [The book of the pillar of truth] (Bnei Brak, 2000), p. 76

#### NOTE

“**But I have found.**” I.e., found holiness, spirituality.

#### COMMENT

I believe that Judaism must be joyful if it is to survive in our hearts and beyond our lifetime, but that does not mean that it cannot make demands on us. A Judaism that makes no demands is just another form of entertainment, and one that may not be able to compete with the high-tech forms so readily available in the twenty-first century.

So how do we square the circle, offering joy while making demands? For me, the answer lies in a talmudic teaching based on the task given to the clan of Kohath, that of carrying the Ark of the Covenant. It must have been an arduous task indeed, walking for hundreds of miles carrying the sacred chest with its contents, the stone tablets of the Ten Command-



ments. “The ark carried those who carried it,” says the Talmud (*Sotah* 35a). If the Talmud is to be believed, the men of Kohath knew that they were engaged in singularly important work, and they were happy, fulfilled. They were so happy that the physical exertion required did not matter. They realized they were on a spiritual as well as a physical journey toward the Promised Land, and that thought filled them with joy.

People don’t mind the demands made upon them if they understand and subscribe to the goals. We need to keep the goals of Judaism in mind at all times: nothing less than the repair of our world, the repair of our souls, the sanctification of the mundane, in a word: holiness.

## *Be-ha‘alotekha*

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### [106] Keeping It Fresh

*“Aaron did so; he mounted the lamps at the front of the candelabrum, as the Eternal had commanded Moses.”*

*Numbers 8:3*

#### CONTEXT

The Tabernacle has been dedicated, and Numbers 8 opens with the command to Aaron to position the seven-branched candelabrum so that it may illuminate the sacred area.

R. Mordechai of Izbica had been a loyal student of Menachem Mendel of Kotzk until their final dramatic break.

Rashi explains: “This is to praise Aaron because he did not change [*shinnah*].”

*Shinnah* [change, repeat] means that it was not something he felt he was just repeating, like someone acting out of habit. On the contrary, he always performed the commandment as something new that a person does with joy and enthusiasm. Hence it says in the Gemara: “People should purify themselves for a festival, as it is said, ‘And their carcasses you shall not touch’ [Leviticus 11:8].” “Carcass” refers to a thing from which life has departed, and thus, if anyone performs a commandment without joy and enthusiasm, simply as “a command learned from other people by rote” [Isaiah 29:13], it is as if it had no life in it. Therefore, [it says] “for a festival.” Because God sends life to Israel, each person must receive that life with joy.

Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica (1800–54), *Mei HaShiloach* [The waters of the Siloam (Isaiah 8:6)] (Bnei Brak, 1995), v. 1, p. 147