

Rabbi Oren J. Hayon

Congregation Emanu El

*Shabbat Naso / 5780*

This Shabbat our reading of the Book of Numbers continues with a variation on a theme it took up last week: the census of the Israelite nation, in which Moses and Aaron, under instructions from God, meticulously catalogue the tribes of Israel, their patriarchs and chieftains. This week, immediately following that long list of people's names and numbers, the Torah presents us with a list of objects: the equipment and accessories used to erect the wilderness Tabernacle. The text lists all of the hardware used to assemble and disassemble the Tent of Meeting as the Israelites wandered in the desert, and God commands Moses about them in detail:

The planks, the bars, the posts, and the sockets of the Tabernacle...the sockets, pegs, and cords – all the furnishings and fittings: you shall list by name these objects that are assigned to be carried. (Num 4:31-32)

“You shall list by name these objects that are assigned to be carried”: the traditional understanding of this commandment is that Moses was being directed to write an inventory, a bill of goods that would be consulted and double-checked each time the Israelites set out for a new destination on their journey.

This was the conventional way this verse was read, but in the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was interpreted in a new way by the great rabbi Nachmanides, a mystic and philosopher from northeastern Spain. Nachmanides says that the traditional reading of that verse cannot be correct. Nachmanides asserts that when Moses was instructed by God to “list by name the objects that are to be carried,” he was being directed to create a list of the men's names who were assigned to carry each one: This man will carry two planks of wood, that one will carry six tent-pegs, and so on. Nachmanides teaches that the purpose of the list is not to keep track of the sacred inventory from the Tabernacle; it had a different purpose. Because much of the equipment was heavy and cumbersome, Moses wanted to make sure that each person's responsibility was written down and verified, lest one of them shirk the responsibility of carrying something heavy and opt instead to pick up a lighter burden that was easier to handle.

Every week before Shabbat, our clergy team gets together for a high-level conversation about worship services: what do we want them to feel like, what kind of mood will we try to create, what sorts of music will achieve our spiritual purposes in the right way, and so on. When I had this conversation with Cantor Simmons about tonight's service, I told her that I wanted this Friday night to feel light and joyful and easy. All of us have been through so much during so many hard days, so many encounters with pessimism, fear and hopelessness – I just wanted to connect with you and share a bit of happiness for a change. But then, in the last few days, the news continued to roll in: another black man dead, another white policeman charged, more burning buildings consumed by the flames of racism and violence. And it became clear to me that I don't feel ready to be joyful just yet after all.

We do have the choice to choose joy, every day and at all times, we have the privilege to change the channel and focus on the positive – and very often we take that choice, because it feels better that way – but that is exactly the moral infraction that Nachmanides taught with his reading of that verse from the Book of Numbers. The ancient Israelite who knew that his job was to carry the heaviest beam, but chose instead to pick up a few wooden pegs or a handful of linen cords: he picked up the lighter burden, even though he was obligated by conscience and by God not to do so, because it didn't hurt as much to carry. He didn't want to be seen as shiftless or lazy, he wasn't so brazen as to go empty-handed, he wanted a plausible excuse in case anyone looked sideways at him, so he could say "Look! I'm helping!" but he chose instead to carry the lighter load, and with that choice he forced others to carry his share.

So even though it is heavy, even though it is painful and uncomfortable, I think we need to talk about what's happening in America – we need to talk about the experience of black and brown Americans – we need to talk about what's happening tonight in Minneapolis ...and what's happened in south Georgia, and Louisville, Kentucky, and Midland, Texas, and Central Park – just in the last few days. It is uncomfortable – but we need to help carry that burden because we are Jews, we are people of conscience, and we need to help lift it up.

But it is heavy, isn't it? It is heavy, I know, for all of us white Jews who may have watched that terrible video of George Floyd gasping for breath, or Ahmaud Arbery collapsing with a bullet in his back. What is the right moral response to these deaths, what is the Jewish response, and how should we feel about the eruption of rage that follows each time this macabre cycle starts again? How should we react when we read another story about another black life imperiled or cut off prematurely, another community of color suffering from medical negligence or inadequate civil infrastructure, another piece of legislation that will disproportionately impact our black and brown neighbors? What should we think? What should we do?

I want to acknowledge that the way white Jews answer that question is unique, because (as I don't need to tell you) we are targeted by bigotry and hatred as well. A couple of days ago I heard from friends in Minneapolis who were on their way out to join the protests against racist violence, spurred by their Jewish conscience to speak up for justice, when at that very moment, they learned that swastikas and neo-Nazi slogans had been discovered painted outside their synagogue. At that moment it was made real in a pointed new way what it means to be a Jew caught in that pincer grip: obligated to speak up against racism but also painfully aware of our own vulnerability, our own position in which we are susceptible to the perverse and violent whim of bigoted trolls. But our suffering and our struggles do not excuse us from the obligation to stand with others; precisely the opposite: our history of pain and bigotry is what obligates us to fight racism, so that we can be there wholeheartedly alongside others who struggle.

So for us white Jews, for those of us caught in this uncomfortable intersection between our own suffering and that of others, what are we supposed to do? We are supposed to remember that verse from the Book of Numbers which reminds us that our job is to lift up and carry the burdens that God has assigned to us; we just have to determine which is the light burden, and which is the heavy one. What is the easy way out, the way we convince ourselves we are doing something meaningful so we can sleep peacefully at night, and which is the hard thing to do, the one we cannot evade because it is, in the end, the right thing? Because let's be honest: the decision to oppose racism is not an especially courageous or significant one. But there are ways to act upon that decision that are meaningful, substantive, and weighty; and there are ways of performing it in symbolic gestures that are light and ultimately empty.

Our obligation is not just to oppose racism theoretically, on principle; our obligation is to denounce and dismantle it. And that takes work: real work, hard work, heavy work that is painful and embarrassing and uncomfortable. It is the kind of work which demands that we start with ourselves first. I want to invite you again to join me in that necessary but uncomfortable work, to choose the way forward that is meaningful and substantive, without the need for credit or acknowledgment from people of color, without the need for affirmation or adulation for how kind and progressive we are. To admit – and I will start with myself – that I have done things I shouldn't have done, and I have failed to do things I should have. I have laughed at jokes that were aimed to hurt, I have failed to listen closely to the pain of others; I have resisted and rejected the chance to think critically about race and racism for years.

I will admit to you as your rabbi, as your neighbor, and as your partner: I am working at this a lot, and I am not good at it very often. I hate seeing and acknowledging the ways I have failed, I hate the way shame feels, I hate being embarrassed when I look back and remember the ways I acted in the past – I hate it. But I am trying patiently to keep doing the work, to take responsibility for and process my feelings, to keep listening more than I am talking.

But I am fortunate and grateful that I have many resources at my disposal, and so do all of you. We have extensive material to read and educate ourselves, we have fantastic resources from the Union for Reform Judaism, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism: policy statements, and reading lists, and discussion guides; films and short videos to watch, and action items to get involved with, and so on. And here, in our own congregational home, the reading list that we posted on the Emanu El website a year and a half ago (<https://www.emanuelhouston.org/resourcesforexploration>) is still up and available for you to explore.

Another resource for which I am grateful is our Community Organizing Core Team, an extraordinary group of volunteers who, with the leadership of Rabbi Fixler and Rabbi David Segal, have begun convening conversations and planning work on racial justice, bringing this issue to our congregation first, before we consider how to move out in the community. This is a critical step in the work for equity and justice: we must start by educating ourselves first.

I want to invite you to join me, so that together we can keep moving forward, failing until we succeed, getting it wrong again and again until we get it right, one step at a time, each day.

The Book of Numbers tells us: “You shall list by name these objects that are assigned to be carried” It reminds us that the first step in making things better is to identify the things that need to be named, to identify what must be claimed as ours, so that we can lift them up and hoist them onto our backs, as heavy and uncomfortable as they may be.

Nachmanides taught us that it’s not a sin to *want* to shirk the heavier load – it is, after all, uncomfortable – but it is a sin to *refuse* to carry it: because we are compelled to carry it in the service of the Holy.

We have our work cut out for us, and it is now time for us to sit down and do it. The events of these recent days call out to us urgently, and they remind us that it is our job as people of conscience, as Jews heir to an ethical tradition, to carry this burden – not *in spite of* the fact that it is heavy, but *because* it is heavy – and because it is ours.

*Shabbat shalom.*