

Sermon | Parshat Nasso
June 11, 2022 | י"ב סיון תשפ"ב
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

I am always stressed out about giving gifts...just ask Rebecca. I think that I might suffer from decision paralysis. There are too many options, and they are all so different. What is the right amount to spend for this particular occasion? How do you discreetly hide the gift before it is given? What is the best message to write on the card? Really, giving gifts is always a stressful situation for me. Unless, of course, the tough decisions have already been made! Just about half of Parshat Nasso is about giving gifts. The leaders of the various tribes come forward, one on each day, to deliver their gifts to Moses for the maintenance of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. The gifts were transferred to the Levites, who were responsible for their appropriate use. Each tribal leader brings the exact same assortment of gifts: one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels and one silver basin of 70 shekels by the sanctuary weight, both filled with choice flour with oil mixed in, for a meal offering; one gold ladle of 10 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 he-goats, and five yearling lambs.¹ (You heard that repeatedly this morning, so why not one more time?)

This is the sort of gift-giving that would make my life far less stressful. There is clearly a certain expectation, or at least an agreement reached by the tribal leaders as a collective, that they would all bring these same gifts. Giving the same thing does not minimize the meaning of

¹ Numbers 7:13-17.

the gift or contribution being made. On the contrary, it acknowledges the importance of each individual tribe and demonstrates their collective efforts to work together in this sacred project.

These are not the only gifts given in the parsha, however. In the chapter which precedes this long list of gifts, God bestows a blessing upon the Israelites via the *kohanim*, the priests who function in the Tabernacle. This, too, is a gift. It is not a tangible gift, like silver basins and oxen, but it is a gift of words and a gift of blessing. God instructs Moses to tell Aaron that he and his progeny are to bless the Israelites with these words which we all know well: “May God bless you and protect you! May God deal kindly and graciously with you! May God bestow favor upon you and grant you peace!”² God’s blessing is a gift to the Israelites.

But Parshat Nasso is not describing some sort of holiday party where friends exchange cards and gifts. Situated between God’s bestowal of the Priestly Blessing and the tribal leaders delivery of their gifts is a small detail that changes the way in which we understand what appears to be an exchange of gifts: וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם כָּלֹת מִנְשֶׁה לְהַקִּים אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן, “On the day that Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle, he anointed and consecrated it and all its furnishings, as well as the altar and its utensils. When he had anointed and consecrated them, the chieftains of Israel, the heads of ancestral houses, namely, the chieftains of the tribes, those who were in charge of enrollment, drew near.”³ They drew near after the completion of the Tabernacle to bring gifts that would support its function. Those gifts were their acknowledgement that the work had been completed and now they would support this communal initiative to bring God’s Divine Presence into their midst. But they only do this *after* the project is complete. God, on the

² Numbers 6:24-26.

³ Numbers 7:1-2.

other hand, bestows the gift of the Priestly Blessing even *before* the work is done. God's gift is not conditional. God's gift is not simply returning a favor. God's gift is given with an entirely different sort of motivation than the gifts of the leaders. There is a *midrash* that makes this importance distinction:

Rabbi Abahu said, "This attribute of the Holy Blessed One is not like that of a king of flesh and blood. When a king of flesh and blood enters a province, he only provides for the needs of the people *after* they praise him and honor him. But the Holy Blessed One is not like this. Even *before* Israel completed the Tabernacle, the Holy Blessed One gave them the blessings.⁴

God does not wait for us to construct the Tabernacle and welcome God into our midst. God does not expect that we will always be the ones to take the first step. It is a particularly human attribute to wait for praise and honor before bestowing it upon another. And it is a particularly God-like attribute to see the good in others before they demonstrate it themselves. As Jews, we take seriously the idea that we can learn from God's ways and walk in them ourselves, aspiring to cultivate within ourselves that which we see within God.

I am suggesting that we denigrate or minimize the gifts of the tribal leaders. But it is important to note the contrast between how God's gift of blessing was given to the nation, and how the tribal leaders gave their gifts to the Mishkan. God does not expect anything in return, but has faith and trust in us that we will take note and respond. God is motivated by a certain divine benevolence and grace, a sense of hopefulness for the future, and faith in us that the work ahead will eventually get done. Parshat Nasso invites us to learn from God's example. God

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma, Nasso 17.

trusts the Israelites even though we so often fail to even trust ourselves. God is kind and gives the Israelites the benefit of the doubt, which we often fail to give to others and ourselves. God takes the first step, and hopes that we will follow along.

You might know the story about Nahshon ben Aminadav, the leader of the tribe of Judah. There is a story told in the Talmud that each of the tribes stood on the shore of the Red Sea after the exodus from Egypt and none of them wished to be the first to enter its waters. Each one looked at the other, defiant that they would not be the first to dip their toes into the sea. That is, until the leader of the tribe of Judah, Nahshon ben Aminadav, stepped forward and jumped into the water.⁵ Here, Nahshon took the first step, and hoped that others would follow along. And if you followed the Torah reading carefully, then you might know that the first tribal leader to bring their gifts after the completion of the Tabernacle was none other than Nahshon! Throughout his life, he demonstrated this sense of faith, trust, and enthusiasm to take the first step, and hope that others might follow.

When we look around at the world, it is easy to despair. We have unresolved issues here at home, there is a war raging in Ukraine, not to mention the myriad of other challenges that we face as a nation and a planet. Seeing all of this, it is easy to shut down and turn away from it all. What can we do? What can I do? But the Torah speaks to us and reminds us this week that we need not wait for someone else to take the first step to do good. Before the Israelites complete their sacred task of constructing the Tabernacle, God is already taking the first step to bestow upon them blessings of safety and security, compassion and grace, wholeness and peace. It may be that the tribal leaders eventually stepped forward to offer their own gifts, but

⁵ Bavli Sotah 37a.

they did so only after their expectations were met and their hopes were fulfilled. Their gifts were gifts of celebration and recognition. But God's gifts were given with grace and with hope for a future not yet realized. It is in that way that we, too, should aspire to live in the world. We cannot despair that the world is not yet perfect. On the contrary, it is our job to work towards making it that way, to realize a vision for the future that makes God's blessing a reality of us all, to take the first step towards creating a world of safety and security, compassion and grace, wholeness and peace. Shabbat shalom.