

Sermon: Parshat Naso
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Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

Salt and pepper. Gin and tonic. Spaghetti and meatballs. Peanut butter and jelly. These are things that should always come together. We have come to expect that one is always accompanied by the other because each one enhances the other. If one is missing, the other somehow is diminished. I admit that these are mundane and rather inconsequential examples, but there are certain things in life that are meaningfully and inextricably linked one to the other. To disentangle them would be undermine them, or to so weaken and degrade them that their essence would be lost. Parshat Naso offers us with an example of this by bringing us back to the ancient sacrificial services of the Tabernacle and the Temple, services which were interdependent and therefore essential to each other.

The *parsha* begins with an accounting of the Levitical families. In its conclusion to this census, the Torah indicates that there were 8,580 Levite men between the ages of 30 and 50, and it says that all of these men “were subject to duties of service,” or in Hebrew, לַעֲבֹד עֲבֹדָת לַעֲבֹדָה.¹ These three Hebrew words (one a verb and two comprise a compound noun), לַעֲבֹד עֲבֹדָת עֲבֹדָה, all use the same trilateral root, meaning that they are all related. This is all a technical way of saying that there is no reasonable translation of this phrase into English. Our *humash* uses the NJPS translation “were subject to duties of service.” Robert Alter translates as “all who came to do the work.” And Everett Fox offers a literal translation, “everyone who entered to serve the serving-tasks of the service-of-packing.” At least his translation employs

¹ Numbers 4:47.

similar verbiage to parallel the similarity in the Hebrew words themselves. An even more literal translation might be “to engage in the service of the service.” But that is still unintelligible!

Whenever the Torah presents us with some sort of riddle, such as this phrase, the rabbis of our tradition saw such a verse as ripe for interpretation. In an attempt to solve the riddle, Rashi, citing a Talmudic passage,² teaches that this verse is a reference to the songs and musical accompaniment provided by the Levites, which were an essential component of the sacrificial worship in the ancient Temple. The service of singing was essential to the service of sacrifice. The Temple service was not a silent service; the Levites were charged with the responsibility of singing and playing instruments while the Kohanim offered up the sacrifices in the Temple’s inner precincts. There were two services taking place simultaneously, one of sacrifice and one of song, and one cannot be disentangled from the other. A different Talmudic passage makes the point even clearer, “Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: Priests, Levites, and musical instruments are indispensable for the offering,” בְּהַנִּים וְלוֹיִם וְכָלֵי נְשִׁיר מְעַבְּרִין אֶת הַקֹּרְבָּן.³

In *halakhah*, Jewish law, there is a principle that components of certain *mitzvot* are indispensable and inextricable. For example, if someone wore a *tallit*, but that *tallit* was missing the *tzitzit*, the ritual fringes, on even one of the four corners, then the mitzvah has not been fulfilled. This principle, *מעבבים זה את זה*, “one invalidates the other,” is applied to certain rituals in Jewish life that are multidimensional. When applied to a particular ritual or *mitzvah*, we are able to discern that certain aspects of a mitzvah are indispensable and inextricable. If the *tallit*

² Talmud Bavli Arachin 11a.

³ Talmud Bavli Ta’anit 27a.

is missing fringes, then it really is not a *tallit* at all because the fringes are the essence of the *tallit*, just as singing was part of the essence of sacrificial worship in the Temple.

There are, on the other hand, some *mitzvot* that are not interdependent. For example, if one could only don the *tefillin shel rosh*, the *tefillin* which goes on your head, but could not wear the *tefillin shel yad*, the one which wraps around the arm, then one is considered to have fulfilled part of the *mitzvah*. For some *mitzvot*, you can earn “partial credit,” whereas for others, it’s all or nothing. In the case of those that are all or nothing, we learn from them that some things cannot be disentangled one from the other; we learn that some aspects are essential characteristics of the larger system of which they are a part.

For me, Zionism is an essential component of Judaism. Over the course of history, Zionism has taken many forms, and it continues to do so even today. Since the destruction of the ancient Temples and the subsequent exile of our people, there has been a religious version of Zionism that seeks a restoration of worship and a return of our people to the Land of Israel. As Jews we pray daily for the ingathering of our exiled people, וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע בְּנִפּוֹת הָאָרֶץ, וְתוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמְמִיחַת לְאַרְצֵנוּ, *gather us in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land*. The late 19th century saw the rise of political Zionism, a movement for the Jewish people to have their own state like other nations of the world, and the 20th century saw the fulfillment of that movement with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. For this, I am grateful. As Jews we are students of history who learn about the past and know what it means to be a people dispossessed of their land, exiled to the four corners of the earth, and subject to the whim and will of those who can easily turn from ally to enemy.

Tziyonut, Zionism, the aspiration to live as a free people safely in our ancestral homeland, and the fulfillment of that aspiration, are critical components of Judaism today as they have been for millennia. Not everyone will agree with me, and I am okay with that, but I believe that Judaism and Zionism in its various forms, are inextricably linked and cannot (and should not) be disentangled one from the other. Just as I will never apologize to anyone for being a proud Jew, so too I will never apologize to anyone for being a proud Zionist. For me, Zionism is an essential component of my Judaism. And that is why I have stood with Israel both in times of celebration and in times of distress. These past few weeks have not been easy for our brothers and sisters in Israel, and, in other ways, they have not been easy for us. The mainstream media paints an incomplete, inaccurate, and in some instances, entirely false narrative of two sides to the recent conflict, each one wishing to live peaceably side by side with the other. That, of course, is a lie. And that lie has been perpetuated not only by the media, but sadly by some within the Jewish community itself.

Last week, a diverse group of rabbinical and cantorial students from various denominations shared an open letter about the conflict in Israel. In this open letter, they mention that “buildings are smoldering in Gaza,” and they talk about “the day-to-day indignity that the Israeli military and police forces enact on Palestinians.”⁴ But, as pointed out quite eloquently by Rabbi Bradley Artson, dean of the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, their open letter “was shockingly silent about the suffering of the Israelis and the relentless terror they face daily. The letter speaks poignantly of the large toll on Palestinian

⁴ <https://forward.com/scribe/469583/gates-of-tears-rabbinical-and-cantorial-students-stand-for-solidarity-with/>.

lives and property, but says nothing about the toll...on Israelis.”⁵ Their open letter does not once mention Hamas. Their open letter does not once mention the significant historical fact that time and again, Palestinian leader have rejected Israel’s proposals to live in a state of their own, side by side with the Jewish State of Israel. The open letter of this group of rabbinical and cantorial students is arrogant, embarrassing, and shameful. As Jews, and particularly as rabbis called to lead our people and teach the tenets of our faith, we must cherish and nurture the Jewish value of *Ahavat Yisrael*, sincere love for Jews around the world, especially in Israel.

Let the record show that I do support the right of the Palestinians to live in a state of their own alongside a Jewish State of Israel. But that version of a Palestinian state is not what Hamas has in mind, and it was Hamas, *not* the Palestinian people as a whole, who incited and perpetrated the violence in Israel these past two weeks. This is not a reason to abandon the peace process, but it is a reminder to those who criticized the actions of Israel this past week that this was not a conflict between parties with reconcilable goals. Israel and Hamas will never find a middle ground because the latter is dedicated to the destruction of the former.

I stand with Israel today, just as I did yesterday, and just as I will tomorrow. Of course, there are internal matters of the State with which I take issue, and I have and will continue to voice my concerns when such matters arise, but when rockets indiscriminately rain down from an internationally recognized terrorist regime upon Israeli civilians, then I set those other matters aside for the moment to stand with my brothers and sisters in Israel, supporting their right and their obligation to protect themselves as they live in our ancestral homeland. My Judaism teaches me to do this. My Judaism teaches me to love my fellow Jews, to advocate for

⁵ <https://forward.com/scribe/469900/my-rabbinical-students-letter-shows-imbalance-and-a-lack-of-empathyfor/>.

the right for our people to live freely in our homeland, to cherish all human lives, and to seek justice and peace throughout the world. These things are inextricably linked to what it means to be a Jew; one is in service of the other. To be a Jew is to be a Zionist. One cannot be disentangled from the other, and I will always seek to fulfill these sacred obligations together.

Am Yisrael Chai. Shabbat shalom.