



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Nasso

Sivan 5781 / May 2021

Leading By Example

By Rabbi David Mahler

Rav Shimon Schwab was the *rav* of the *Yekkishe* community in Washington Heights for the last 35 years of his life. In his work, *Me'ein Beit HaShoeva*, Rav Schwab makes an astounding point about this week's *Haftora* (Judges 13: 2-25). *Manoach's* wife is the first to be told that she will be blessed with a child. What's more, she is told that the child — *Shimshon* — will be a *nazir* and that the child, she, and her husband will all have to follow the laws of a *nazir* — no cutting hair, no contact with a corpse, and no partaking of foods that contain grapes.

After *Manoach* hears from his wife that their unborn child will be a *nazir*, he is intent on hearing the news straight from the angel's mouth. Rav Schwab wonders why he didn't believe his wife and offers a beautiful explanation: *Manoach* was concerned that he wouldn't be able to teach his son to be a *nazir* because he was not a *nazir*. *Hashem* sent an angel to allay *Manoach's* concern, מַכֵּל אֶשְׁר־אֶמְרָתִי אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה תִּשְׁמָר – if you want your son to follow these laws, you follow them too.

The lesson of these words has been discussed often and is clear: if we want to be successful in educating our children, we must lead by example.

Similarly, and even more compelling, the *Chizkuni* puts forth a beautiful idea. *Parshas Nasso* opens during a conversation about the responsibilities of different groups of *Levi'im* while *Bnei Yisrael* traveled in the desert. A few times in the Torah, *Hashem* highlights the transition of the elite class amongst *Knesset Yisrael* from the firstborn to the tribe of *Levi*: קַח

אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *Take the Levites in place of all the firstborn among the Israelite people.* (Bamidbar 3:45)

Originally, the *Bechorim* — the firstborn — were to be *Hashem's* legion of honor, the legion of the King, the upper crest — however, in the aftermath of the *Chet HaEgel*, the firstborn were replaced by the *Levi'im*.

In a sense, the original hierarchy seems more democratic; each tribe was represented by their firstborn. This approach is inclusive of all tribes and seems fair and equitable.

In the new system, with only *Levi* as the nation's elite, most of *Bnei Yisrael* had very little or no access to the *mikdash*, the *mishkan*, and *Beit HaMikdash*. They no longer had a front-row seat. The

After *Manoach* hears from his wife that their unborn child will be a *nazir*, he is intent on hearing the news straight from the angel's mouth. Rav Schwab wonders why he didn't believe his wife and offers a beautiful explanation.

firstborn retain some special elements, but they are few. Why the change? Why was it something *Hashem* felt compelled to do?

The *Chizkuni* doesn't take for granted that this switch seems to reek of elitism, and he addresses it magnificently. Imagine a scenario where a father is a *bechor* and he works in the *Beit HaMikdash* or *Mishkan*. The father is thinking about his special tasks day and night; his job thrills and consumes him. This father has knowledge and experiences that he wants to share, but now imagine that he does not have a *bechor* to share it with. He has no one to follow in his footsteps.

Now consider the opposite scenario: the son is a *bechor*, but his father is not. Who will he learn from?

His father has no choice but to outsource his *chinuch*. When fathers and sons have different roles, transmitting the *mesorah* is not as smooth; it can become fragmented or even broken.

That, says the *Chizkuni*, is precisely why *Hashem* switched the focus from *bechorim* to *Levi'im*.

Hashem changed the system and gave the special role to the *Levi'im* because it facilitates and enhances the next generation's education and ensures that the *Mesorah* will endure.

Hashem changed the systems so that parents are responsible for educating their children. A parent who is a *Kohen* educates his children to be *kohanim*, and a *Levi* educates his children to be *Levi'im*. I'm a *Yisrael*, so I educate my child to be a *Yisrael*.

Both the *Chizkuni*, writing in the 13th century, and Rav Schwab, in the previous one, are stressing the same essential idea: parents are the primary and most pivotal educators in their children's lives.

Over the past year, more than ever, our homes acted as both *shuls* and schools, in addition to homes. As we transition back to "normalcy," it is more important than ever that we give these ideas more thought, consideration, and reflection.

One more thing: We did not address the question of why *Hashem* established the original system in the first place. For this, I do not have an answer, and I would love to hear your ideas.

David Mahler, son of our gabbai and WHHS' favorite history teacher, grew up in the Young Israel of Scarsdale. He is the Judaic Studies principal at the Gindi Maimonides Academy of Los Angeles and on rabbinic staff of the Young Israel of Century City.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

Learning and Growing Together as a Community • Learning as Legacy

Go to yisny.org/academy-of-jewish-studies.html to see all issues of *The Collective Conversation*