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Kohanim Priests

A prominent member of a congregation came to his rabbi and said, "I would like to become a Kohen." The rabbi, careful to avoid offending the congregant, respectfully declined.

"Rabbi," said the man, "if you make me a Kohen, I'll contribute \$25,000 to the synagogue." Still, the Rabbi refused.

"Alright -- I'll make it \$50,000!" Uncomfortably, the rabbi still had to decline.

"Final offer: \$100,000. Take the money and make me a Kohen -- or else I'll quit the synagogue!"

Stalling for time, the rabbi asked the man why he wanted to become a Kohen. "It's simple," the man said, "my father was a Kohen, my grandfather was a Kohen ... I want to be a

Kohen, too."

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In the times of the Holy Temple, the hereditary status was something that was proudly preserved by the Kohanim, the priestly families. The Kohanim had the responsibility of conducting the service in God's temple, and acting as spiritual leaders of the people.

Since the Temple's destruction, however, the opportunities available for Kohanim to serve the nation have diminished considerably. In fact, nowadays, the only time a Kohen really fulfills this role is in performing a Pidyon HaBen, and reciting the priestly blessing, which is found in this week's Torah portion, Naso:

*"May God bless you and keep you.
May God shine his countenance
upon you and be gracious to you.
May God raise his countenance
upon you and give you peace."*

The Ohr HaChaim explains the first verse to mean that the quantity of success bestowed upon you should be so great that it needs special guarding. The second verse is a blessing that we should be very close to God, and be infused with the drive to do good. The final verse affirms the hope that all impediments we have caused in our relationship with God should be put aside, and that we should attain true peace through our wholeness with God.

Today, it has become the custom for parents to use these beautiful words to bless their children every Friday night at the Shabbat table.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the oldest archaeological discovery of a biblical verse were the words of the priestly blessing found on an amulet, dating back 2,500 years.

* * *

In practice today, this blessing is recited by the Kohanim at the daily morning service in Israel, and on holidays in the Diaspora. (Sefardi Jews say the blessing every day even in the Diaspora.)

The actual procedure of the priestly blessing, however, involves more than the simple utterance of words. Indeed, in Jewish mystical tradition, the positioning of the Kohen's hands during the blessing is as important as the words themselves. The fingers of the Kohen are actually aligned in such a way as to represent God's ineffable name. Moreover, the right hand (which represents kindness) is to be slightly elevated above the left hand (representing judgment). All this is designed to draw God's presence down upon the congregation.

The blessing's effect is not limited to the congregation, however. The priestly blessing contains sixty letters, which represents the 60 myriads (600,000 people) who stood at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. These correspond to the 600,000 prototype souls that were said to exist in creation. When the Kohanim recite the blessing -- with 60 letters -- then blessing is brought upon every Jew.



How Do We Move On In Life

On 4 March 1987, then US President Ronald Reagan addressed the American people from the Oval Office about the Iran-Contra Scandal. It involved senior government officials secretly facilitating the sale of arms to Iran, which was the subject of an arms embargo.

Taking full responsibility for his role in the affair, Reagan famously said:

"Now, what should happen when you make a mistake is this: you take your knocks, you learn your lessons, and then you move on. That's the healthiest way to deal with a problem... You know, by the time you reach my age, you've made plenty of mistakes. And if you've lived your life properly - so, you learn. You put things in perspective. You pull your energies together. You change. You go forward."

Unfortunately, this honest, unflinching admission of wrongdoing is often the exception rather than the rule. From Cambridge Analytica to the Panama Papers, Watergate and other scandals, public figures have been famously reluctant to admit the error of their ways.

And it's a practice that goes all the way back to the beginning of human history. When God confronts Adam after he has eaten from the forbidden tree, his response to avoid

accountability: "The woman whom you gave to me, she gave from the tree to me and I ate it." (Genesis 3:12). Rather than accept responsibility and acknowledge his wrongdoing, Adam's first instinct is to shift the blame.

In his commentary on this verse, the Sforno contrasts Adam's response with that of King David - who, when he was confronted by the prophet, Natan, with regards to his sin with Batsheva, immediately responds: "I have sinned to Hashem." (Samuel 2:12-13). This is how we should respond when we realise that we have done wrong.

In this week's Torah portion, *Naso*, we learn the mitzvah of confession. The verse states, simply: "If a man or a woman commits any sin... they shall confess their sin that they committed." (Numbers 5:6-7). The Rambam, in his *Laws of Repentance*, defines the process of repentance and sets out its various components: regretting the mistakes of the past, desisting from that wrongdoing in the present, and resolving not to return to this course of action in the future. But, there's a fourth element, no less crucial to the repentance process - *confession*. (Laws of Repentance, Chapter 1). Confession - in Hebrew, *viduy* - is simply a *verbal expression* to God of the errors of the past and our resolve for the future, an acknowledgement of full responsibility and accountability for our actions. And to confess requires real courage and honesty.

Why is verbal confession central to repentance? The *Sefer HaChinuch* emphasises the element of transparency - that God knows all and sees all, and that by verbalising our wrongdoing, we are acknowledging our lives are an open book before our Creator.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik has a different take. He compares confession, *viduy*, to the mitzvah of reciting the *Shema*, and of the mitzvah of prayer to God. All of these mitzvahs have a deep internal, emotional, spiritual and intellectual component, and yet all are made concrete and tangible through verbal expression which strengthen, give form and shape and make impactful the deep internal processes taking place. So to explain, the internal process of the *Shema* is to accept God as the Master of the Universe and to crown Him as king in our lives. That is a very deep internal process, which is given expression by the reciting of the words of the *Shema*. Prayer is defined by our sages as the "service of the heart" - deep feeling of emotional and spiritual connection to God - yet this hidden aspect is made concrete and tangible through verbal expression using a siddur. By vocalising the prayers, we reinforce, and give shape and form to, the deep internal processes happening beneath the surface.

In a similar way, the mitzvah of confession gives verbal expression to the deep internal psychological and emotional process of personal change and repentance. The words of the *viduy* help us articulate and concretise the deep feelings of regret for the past and resolve for the future.

Confession is also about repairing the damage our actions have caused, specifically to our relationship with God and with those we have wronged. The repentance process is about healing those rifts, and restoring our connection to the people we have hurt, and to our Creator. The Hebrew word for repentance is *teshuva*, which literally means "return". Through *teshuva*, we return to that pristine state in which there was no distance or disconnect in our

relationships.

The Rambam says when it comes to wronging other people, it is sometimes necessary to confess not only privately to God, but to make a public confession and apology to the people harmed, in order to rectify the damage. In addition to confession, we are also obliged to ask those we have wronged for forgiveness, in situations where we have caused harm to another. The Rambam further writes that the victim of our misdeed needs to act with compassion and graciously grant forgiveness, and in this way, the relationships that have been damaged by our wrongdoing can be fully restored.

When it comes to restoring our relationship with God, our confession is made before Him alone. The purpose, says the Maharal, is to help us restore our closeness to God, a natural state of being which is disturbed by our wrongdoing. Through the process of confession, we pour out our heart, and affect a deep, emotional reconciliation with our Creator.

Teshuva is an incredible God-given gift to restore that which has been broken. Our sages teach that through the simple act of taking responsibility, of doing *teshuva* - acknowledging and sincerely regretting our wrongdoings, desisting from them in the present, resolving not to repeat them, and confessing before God - we are given the opportunity to travel back in time and undo what has been done.

Through honesty, accountability and true humility we return to a point in time in which our relationships were undamaged, and we renew and reinvigorate our connection with God and with those around us. It's a second chance,

the gift of a new start, an opportunity to begin afresh so the future is not destroyed by the past - and so we can look ahead with fresh energy, new hope and optimism.



Making Sanctity Count

Written texts are generally supposed to be well structured, with a clear and logical flow of thoughts, and a distinct beginning, middle and end. Yet in *Parashat Naso*, various topics are addressed in succession, which ostensibly lack any connection to one another.

The book of Numbers begins with the Jewish people in the wilderness prior to entering the Promised Land, and describes their housing, hierarchy and censuses. It then branches out into a variety of seemingly disparate concepts: The sin of treachery against God through theft (*Num.* 5:6); the *sota* – the wife who is suspected of acting unfaithfully (5:11-31); the *nazir* (Nazarite) who, in order to sanctify himself, abstains from drinking wine, cutting his hair and coming into contact with dead bodies (6:2-21); and the priestly benedictions (6:22-27).

If this were any other literary work, we might accept at face value the fact that the sections are somewhat randomly placed. However, when it comes to Torah, there is no such thing as ‘random’.

Immediately prior to these verses, the Torah describes in detail the national census – the counting of each individual in the nation. The significance of counting is even highlighted in the title of this book, ‘Numbers’.

The Hebrew word for a number is *mispar*, and for counting is *lispor*, at the root of which are the three letters S-F-R. Not coincidentally, another Hebrew word that shares the exact same root is the verb for telling, *lesaper*. In other words, through counting something, one is telling its story and ascribing a level of significance to it, according to its own unique identity.

The census highlights the importance of paying attention to each individual in the nation. The subsequent sections relate to different aspects of the human psyche and represent three distinct levels of the relationships that those aforementioned individuals experience: The relationship between a person and God, between a person and others, and between a person and himself or herself.

The Torah describes the consequences of stealing, and the treacherous nature of this sin. God is the ultimate source of objective morality. Any act against morality represents an act against God Himself, and as such denotes a fracture in the relationship between man and his Maker.

The Torah then draws our attention to the relationship between man and his wife. Through the discussion of the *sota*, the Torah hones in on the marital relationship, which by definition is founded on trust. As the family unit forms the bedrock of society, its breakdown can have catastrophic societal consequences.

The Torah proceeds to describe the *nazir*, a lifestyle choice that represents sanctity, the opposite of what we saw with regard to the *sota*. The *nazir* chooses to enter a lifestyle of abstinence in direct response to the previously described breakdowns in society (Tractate *Sota* 2a). He overcomes his desires by abstaining from physical pleasures.

On the one hand, the *nazir* is called ‘holy to God’ (*Num.* 6:8) for removing potential stumbling blocks and elevating himself. On the other hand, his choice of personal separation from the material world comes at the expense of enjoying the God-given pleasures of life. He is therefore commanded to bring a sin offering upon completion of this period of abstinence (*Num.* 6:13-14; Tractate *Taanit* 11a, *Nedarim* 10a). While abstinence from things that are permitted is a legitimate decision, such a personal choice must be temporary, and is inherently flawed. This dialectic (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Personal Development 3:1, Laws of Naziriteship 10:14) forms the third sphere of human relationships – that of a person’s relationship with himself or herself.

The Torah goes on to describe the priestly blessings, which actually represent the common thread running through the seemingly disparate topics mentioned above. In each case, the priest – *Kohen* – plays an integral role, through ritual actions and words, in preserving sanctity and redressing the balance and harmony for the nation in the different levels of their relationships.

The sacred role of the priest reminds us that we have tools and community resources available to us, and that ultimately we are all able to control our actions, to elevate our behaviour, to

choose a lifestyle that builds rather than destroys, to sanctify our souls and to preserve our relationship with God, with our partners and with ourselves. If we are able to live in such a way, we will make our lives 'count', we will imbue them with purpose, and we will ensure that we are a worthy receptacle of the priestly blessing stated in the Torah: that Hashem should bless us, guard us, shed light upon us, be gracious to us and grant us peace.



The Spiritual Fence

In this week's portion, we learn about a person who takes a Nazirite vow, committing to abstain from wine. The Torah does not recommend this. Abstaining from any pleasure in this world is a denial of God's goodness. Nonetheless, one who makes such a vow is bound by it.

By taking such a vow, the Torah says that not only may he not drink wine, but he also may not eat grapes, raisins and even grape seeds and skins! Why?

This is not about adding unnecessary hardships. Rather, the Torah is creating a fence to protect the Nazirite from falling foul of his own vow. Wine is a strong temptation. If he is forbidden even to eat grape skins, he will never come close to drinking wine.

We learn from this the importance of making

fences to protect our spiritual well-being. The Sages have made many fences for us, but suggest that we also make our own, too.

When it comes to the material world, we are great at making fences, carefully guarding our physical possessions. To protect our money, there is no better protected building than a bank. We also make fences for things that may harm us: Bottles of poison are clearly marked, have difficult-to-open caps and are locked well away. If you've ever been to the Golan Heights, you will have seen acres of very well fenced-off minefields. We wouldn't want someone wandering in.

Unfortunately, we are not always as careful in guarding our spiritual possessions. Do we make fences to ensure that we are not slipping spiritually, never mind actually growing? Do we make fences to ensure we spend enough time with our families; to ensure we are not falling in to the trap of "living to work" as opposed to "working to live"? Do we make fences to help us live on the moral level that we would like to?

Try spending the first half hour, after you return from work, with your family. That's a good fence. If not, you will find yourself in bed wondering where the time went that you really were intending to spend. Or take half an hour a month to remember what exactly you are living for - to check that you haven't gone off track.

There are so many good fences, if only we would bother to make them.

We all have tremendous spiritual wealth that can slowly slip away if not fenced in. There are also many spiritual poisons. If we don't lock them away in well-marked bottles, we may inadvertently partake of them. Making a fence is

the best way to protect what we have. If we refrain from making them, it is at our peril.

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