

Torah Drash - Parshat Naso

1. Volunteered for the Drash to mark two occasions: memory of my father/graduation of my son
2. As has been noted, this past week has been a difficult one for many of us – mourning the death of another black man killed by police, watching the militarization of our streets, and seeing the looting of certain businesses in different cities
3. I am struggling to place these events into a bigger narrative of the continued reality of racial injustice. Indeed, as part of a class I am preparing, I have read several books over the past two months dealing with voting rights in the United States. I have come to appreciate how far we have come, during our lifetimes, in redressing some of the worst elements of our history, even as we many obstacles still remain to guaranteeing the right to vote to all citizens.
4. And of course, I have had on my mind that I am doing the drash this week. How can I use the parsha to inform our current plight.
5. Growing up, Naso was known simply as the longest parsha, although why that seemed so important in the day I can no longer remember.
6. There are a few notable passages: Sotah, Nazir and Birchat Kohanim, but as I indicated my intent is to focus on the first 10 passages of chapter five. (see next page).
7. The first four of these sentences deals with the consequences of being afflicted with Tzarat or otherwise being designated as clean. The text states that such a person is sent or banished from the camp. And, the section concludes that “as the Lord spoke to Moshe, so did the people of Israel.”
8. During this pandemic, many of us have banished ourselves from the community, even as we maintain contact, through the wonders of modern technology. What strikes me both in the biblical text and in the contemporary context is the population’s seeming passive acceptance of this instruction from the experts. In the Biblical text, there is no pushing back against the order, no requests for exemptions. But the question must be asked, what should be done with those who do not accept their banishment, or introduce this week’s dilemma, do not accept that a curfew should apply to them? Is social ostracism appropriately directed against such citizens? Can the state impose criminal penalties?
9. The second six sentences of the third Aliyah deal with the question of atonement for a misdeed. The text relates that the wrongdoer must make restitution to the victim plus a fifth. If the victim is dead, then the restitution must go to a relative. If there are no relatives, then the restitution should go to the kohanim. And this restitution is in addition to the sacrificial atonement that is required.
10. Why such a heavy emphasis on amends? Does this contribute to our current conversations about racial injustice – are reparations+ the solution? is criminal accountability the solution? what is the missing X?
11. I don’t have the answers, but I like to use our texts to provoke the questions. And, now I turn to you, my dear Chevra, to share your own perspectives on either the issue of “banishment,” restitution, or other issues you feel compelled to speak about in response to the developments of this week.

1The Lord spoke to Moses saying:

אוֹיָדָבַר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

2Command the children of Israel to banish from the camp all those afflicted with tzara'ath or with a male discharge, and all those unclean through [contact with] the dead.

בְּצַו אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ מִן־הַמַּחֲנֶה כָּל־צָרוּעַ וְכָל־טָמֵא לְגַפְשׁ:

3Both male and female you shall banish; you shall send them outside the camp, and they not defile their camps, in which I dwell among them.

גַּמְזָכָר עַד־נְקֵבָה תִּשְׁלְחוּ אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה תִּשְׁלְחוּם וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ אֶת־מַחֲנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹכָם:

4The children of Israel did so: they sent them outside the camp; as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so did the children of Israel do.

דָּוַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אוֹתָם אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה כְּאֲשֶׁר דָּבַר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשׂוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

5The Lord then spoke to Moses saying:

הוֹיָדָבַר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

6Tell the children of Israel: When a man or woman commits any of the sins against man to act treacherously against God, and that person is [found] guilty,

וּדְבַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אוֹ־אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשֶׂה מִכָּל־חַטָּאת הָאֵלֶּם לְמַעַל מֵעַל בִּיהוָה וְאָשָׁמָה הִגַּפְשׁ הֵהוּא:

It is repeated here because two new matters are introduced. The first is that it is written: "they shall confess," which teaches us that he [the thief] is not required to pay a fifth and [bring] a guilt [offering] when incriminated by two witnesses, until he admits to the deed himself, and the second [matter] is that what is stolen from a proselyte must be given to the kohanim. - [Sifrei Naso 1:13]

7they shall confess the sin they committed, and make restitution for the principal amount of his guilt, add its fifth to it, and give it to the one against whom he was guilty.

זוֹהַתְּנִדּוּ אֶת־חַטָּאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִשְׁיב אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרִאשׁוֹ וְחִמִּישְׁתּוֹ יִסֹּף עָלָיו וְנָתַן לְאִשְׁרֵי אֲשֶׁם לוֹ:

8But if the man has no kinsman to whom to make restitution, the debt which is restored to the Lord, [is to be given] to the kohen. [This is] besides the atonement ram through which expiation is made for him.

וְאִם־אֵין לְאִישׁ גֹּאֵל לְהִשְׁיב הָאֲשָׁם אֵלָיו הָאֲשָׁם הַמּוֹשָׁב לִיהוָה לְכַהֵן מִלִּבְדֵי אֵיל הַכִּפּוּרִים אֲשֶׁר יִכְפֹּר־בּוֹ עָלָיו:

9Every offering of all the children of Israel's holy things which is brought to the kohen, shall be his.

טוֹכַל־תְּרוּמָה לְכָל־קֹדְשֵׁי בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרִיבוּ לַכֹּהֵן לוֹ יִהְיֶה:

10Everyone's holy things shall belong to him; whatever a man gives to the kohen shall be his.