



Notes for Parsha Naso; Numbers 4:21 – 7:89

This parsha is the second one in the text. It covers the enumeration of the Levite families and their duties as well as the laws concerning the removal of tamei – unclean persons from the Israelite camp. We also find the Ordeal for the Laws of Holiness, the Nazirite Code, the Priestly Blessing and the offerings given by the tribal chieftains.

The text opens with a description of the portage tasks of the Gershonite tribe. These tasks included carrying the cloths of the Tabernacle as well as those of the Tent of Meeting which included the dolphin skin cover for the top and the screen for the entrance. The Gershonites were also responsible for carrying the inside hangings, the gate screen and the cords, and the altar with all its accessories and equipment.

Next, we read of the tasks assigned to the Merarite tribe which included carrying the planks, bars, posts and sockets for the Tabernacle. Additionally, the Merarites were responsible for carrying the posts from all around the enclosure along with all their sockets, pegs and cords.

Whereas when we learned that the first census of the tribes covered men aged twenty and up in order to establish an army, the census of the priestly tribes covered men between the ages of thirty and fifty.

Chapter 5 opens with Laws of Holiness that appear to have little connection to each other. We read about people who have been excluded from the main camp due to being unclean, priests who receive offerings from confessed robbers and what procedure should be followed by a husband who accuses his wife of infidelity. These may be infrequent happenings, some of which are no longer applicable in our modern world, but they are occurrences in the ordinary lives of everyday people. Even though there are consequences for violating the sacredness of God's community, the pervasive lesson is that sacredness and ordinariness are never really separated from each other.

We constantly come across the word tamei – unclean in many passages of the Torah. When we think unclean we tend to think dirtiness and filth. But in the biblical world, that understanding of the word is incorrect. Tamei – unclean is best translated as ritually ordinary and without holiness, while the opposite of tahor – clean is best translated as ritually sacred. Therefore when we study how unclean persons are removed from the camp, they are not removed because they are dirty – they are removed because they have lost their status as holy and need to be ritually purified in order to return to the holy community of God's people.

5:1 instructs the Israelites to remove from the camp anyone with a skin affliction, any discharge and who has been in contact with a corpse.

5:5 instructs the people that if someone commits a wrong against anyone else and then realizes their error, they are to confess and make restitution of the principle amount plus an additional one-fifth. In there is no kin to collect the restitution, then the money goes to the priest with each priest keeping the donation given

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specifically to him. We learn from this that we must first make amends to the person we have harmed before we can go to God and ask Divine forgiveness.

5:12–31 covers the procedure that a husband should follow if he suspects his wife of infidelity. There is no corresponding procedure for a wife that suspects her husband of infidelity. This law of ordeal contains an underlying assumption that a husband can force God to make known the truth of infidelity or not by invoking the ordeal. There is no other law in the Torah that is dependent upon divine manifestation of any kind.

6:1-8 covers the Laws of the Nazirite – a man or woman who takes a vow setting him or herself apart for the Lord. A Nazirite abstains from any form of alcohol; including wine, or any form of grapes including the seeds, skin and juice. Nazirites do not cut their hair and in the case of men, do not shave their beards. A Nazirite may also not attend a dead body, even if the dead is one of his immediate family. Verses 9-21 cover the procedures taken by the Nazirite when his or her term as a Nazirite is completed. From the way the Torah is written, the text assumes that the institution of Naziriteship is already in existence as it does not describe any procedure for becoming one.

6:22-27 contains the Priestly Blessing.

6:24: The Lord bless you and keep you!

6:25: The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!

6:26: The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

The usage of this blessing has varied over time from being given to individuals to being given to the community during the Second Temple Period after the morning tamid / sacrifice. Today, some rabbis give this blessing at the end of services, while others, notably Orthodox communities, pronounce this blessing only on holy days. In the Temple, the Divine Name was used while in the synagogues the word Adonai was substituted.

Chapter 7 of this parsha details the numerous offerings brought by the chieftains of Israel when Moses finished setting up the Tabernacle as well as anointing the furnishings, the altar and all its utensils.

For twelve days the chieftains brought offerings, a different chieftain on each day. After this, the parsha ends with Moses going into the Tent of Meeting to speak with God where we told that the Voice addressed Moses from above the cover on the top of the Ark between the two cherubim.

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