

B”H

Parshat Naso

The Flow of Paradox

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

What’s In a Name?

The name given to this *parshah* is *Naso*. A principle of Torah study is that the word chosen as a name for a *parshah* is not only important in the first verse, but either it, or the concept it originates from resonates throughout the entire *parshah*. Indeed, we find that the word *naso* and the concepts it refers to appear a number of times in our *parshah*.

The simplest meaning of *Naso* stems from the verb meaning “to raise,” but as we shall see, throughout our *parshah* other meanings are revealed.

Naso 1: To Raise

As usual, the first appearance of the word is in the opening verses of the *parshah*. In this case,

*God spoke to Moses, saying. Raise the heads of the children of Gershon too, based on their households and families.*¹

The meaning of the word here is to raise—in order to appoint. Before appointing the Levites of Gershon to their posts in serving the Tabernacle, they first need to be raised.

Naso 2: Forgiveness

Later in *parshat Naso* we find three verses that are the gem of the Book of Numbers. These verses make up the Priestly Blessing, or as it is called in Hebrew, *Birkat Kohanim* (בִּרְכַת כֹּהֲנִים). The priests are commanded to bless the Jewish people with these particular words,

*May God bless you and protect you.
May God shine His countenance upon you and give you grace.
May God lift His countenance towards you and give you peace.*

When the priests recite the Priestly Blessing, their palms are lifted and fingers outstretched in a precise manner, towards the people they are blessing. With his heart open to God and his palms uplifted toward heaven, the priest becomes a conduit for



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Divine energy and abundance. The blessing flows from the heart of the priest to his arms, palms and fingers. For this reason, the Priestly Blessing is also called “Lifting of the Palms” (נְשִׂאת כַּפַּיִם). Here too, the word “lifting” (נָשָׂא) stems from the same root as *Naso*.

The Priestly Blessing comprises three blessings. The third, climatic blessing begins with the word “May God lift [His countenance]” (נָשָׂא), which also stems from the same root as *Naso*. The sages explain that lifting the countenance, meaning the face, represents forgiveness.² When upset at someone we cannot bring ourselves to look at them directly. When we experience forgiveness, we lift our face up and engage in direct contact with them in an attempt to clarify what motivated them to anger us in the first place. The purpose of this clarification is to find their original positive intent, thereby lifting, or elevating, even the negative actions that they subsequently did. When we forgive and lift our face to others, God in turn does the same for us.³ He lifts His face, as it were, and lifts up our transgressions, viewing them in a positive light.

Once the positive motivation in our transgressions is clarified, God forgives us and even incorporates our transgressions within Him in the sense that it becomes clear to everyone that it was indeed with God’s consent and providence that the transgression occur and that the evil come to pass. In this manner, God takes responsibility as it were for our evil.⁴ In the future, the paradox of how even the transgression (a breach of God’s revealed will) was part of His ultimate plan for the perfection of reality will become revealed. This dynamic is applicable to our own relationship with both the Almighty and others and presents the climax of the Priestly Blessing.

Naso 3: The Prince

At the end of *parshat Naso*, the Torah details the sacrifice brought by each of the princes of the twelve tribes in honor of the inauguration of the Tabernacle. The Hebrew word for “prince” (נָשִׂיף) also stems from the same root as *Naso*. Initially, the Hebrew etymology of the word prince suggests that the individual appointed to this post has been lifted or elevated (like the Gershonites) in order to assume that leadership of his tribe.

Indeed, we find a similar usage of the verb root of *Naso* in respect to the Mashiach,

Behold, my servant shall be successful, he will be exalted, and rise, and attain heights, with greatness.

Since the Mashiach will be the king of the entire Jewish people, not just a prince of a single tribe, it is clear that the word for prince in Hebrew is a synonym for king. In fact, in Hebrew there are 13 synonyms for “king.”⁵

However, the Hebrew word מֶלֶךְ implies not only elevation but also a certain sense of aloofness. The particular quality of a king that this captures is his ability to always remain detached from external appearances and remain focused on the essence. God, as king is described as “Elevated above the days of the world,”⁶ where the word “elevated” (שָׁמַיְמָה) stems from this same root. This idiom refers to God’s ability to see the final perfection of all that He created, allowing Him to always remain aloof of the shortcomings and failings of our own physical reality. In relation to the *sefirot*, this quality is best represented by the middle head of the crown, the head of nothingness,⁷ which in Chassidut is described experientially as pleasure. The true king is always able to experience pleasure⁸ even in the most dire of times, because he can see beyond the moment and connect with the eventual perfect outcome of God’s plans. This of course ties us back with the meaning of *Naso* as forgiveness, as explained regarding the Priestly Blessing.

The Tabernacle was dedicated during the first twelve days of the month of *Nisan*. On each day, one of the princes representing one of the 12 tribes of Israel brought a sacrifice to inaugurate the Tabernacle. For this reason, it is customary to read the verses describing the sacrifice brought on each day, during the first 12 days of the month of *Nisan* every year. After reading the verses, we pray that the spiritual lights of the tribe who brought their sacrifice on that day illuminate us and our descendants. In this way, the Torah affords us the opportunity to identify with each tribe and its prince. The prince of each tribe represents the essence of his tribe. Though each tribe has its own essence, it inter-cludes all the others, as the Children of Israel are all one people. By connecting ourselves with the prince of each tribe, we are uplifting that particular trait in ourselves, enabling us to better perform our mission in life—thereby expressing our own particular spark of Mashiach.

Naso 4: Paradox

The thread that ties all three meanings of *Naso* in our *parshah* is paradox. Paradox is one of the most basic concepts in human thought in general, and specifically in Judaism. A paradox lies beyond the rules of logic⁹ and thus gives us a chance to better understand the limitations of our human minds, while concurrently helping us to get something of a sense for what is beyond human. For this reason, in the Jewish philosophical tradition, God is recognized as the greatest paradox of all.¹⁰

The Hebrew idiom designating “paradox” (נְשִׂיאת הַפְּכִימִים) also stems from the same root as *Naso*. Literally, this idiom means “lifting opposites,” implying that the ability to sustain a paradox (mental or otherwise) reflects an ability to hold and simultaneously carry apparent opposites in order to unite and synthesize them.

This is the implied reason that the Hebrew word for “marriage” (נְשִׂיָאִין) stems from the same root as *Naso*. In marriage, two that are separate are joined into one. Marriage requires each partner to carry this paradox. The secret ingredient of marriage and of all the meanings of *Naso* we have seen is this ability to lift up and synthesize opposites thereby creating a holy and profound union that can reflect God, the ultimate paradox.

The Flow of Paradox Through the Parshah

Because paradox is so beyond our normal way of thinking, acquiring the ability to sustain this most important ingredient in life is profoundly difficult. Obviously, it cannot be acquired through logical inquiry. This is where *parshat Naso* comes in. The order in which the meanings of *Naso* appear in the *parshah* provides us with a practical guide for developing our ability to sustain paradox.

The first step is to be willing to be raised, or elevated like the Gershonites. In the context of our lives, this translates into awareness that God has given each of us a role to play and a purpose. Life has meaning (in the sense of purpose) and we must begin our journey with readiness to find and embrace the mission we have been given in life. The image for this step is raising our heads—raising our outlook on life.

The second step requires that like the priests, we strive to lift our hands, symbolizing our actions, so that they can act as a conduit for God’s Divine energy. This stage redefines us as a source of blessing for the world. By doing so we are able to both forgive ourselves and others, taking ultimate responsibility for our transgressions while thereby, paradoxically, transforming them too into sources of blessing (this is the highest form of *teshuvah*, returning to God).

Finally, by connecting with the inner essence of each of the Tribes of Israel, we merit manifesting our own princeliness—the messianic spark within us.

¹. Numbers 4:21-22.

². Likewise, in the Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy (Exodus 34:6-7), we find the root *naso* in conjunction with forgiveness of sin (נְשִׂיאַ עֲוֹן).

³. Normally, God forgives us once we have done *teshuvah*—once we have returned to Him by acknowledging and confessing our sins and altering our behavior accordingly. The motivation for cleaning the slate is in our hands. However, the Priestly Blessing adds another dimension in

which the impetus for *teshuvah* begins with God, who raises His face, as it were, and encourages us to engage Him in a process of *teshuvah*.

4. The best example of this principle in the Torah is found in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Once they had come to fully regret and perform *teshuvah* for the terrible act of selling Joseph into slavery, he said,

And now, do not be sullen, and it should not be terrible in your eyes that you sold me, for God has sent me here before you in order to sustain you. For there have only been two years of famine, but there are five more years without plowing and reaping. God has sent me before you to ensure that you survive in the land, and to sustain you abundantly. And now, it is not you who have sent me here, for it was God; and He made me a counsel to Pharaoh and a master over his house and a ruler of the entire land of Egypt (Genesis 45:5-8)

And later, after their father Jacob's passing, when they grew fearful that Joseph would now take his revenge, he said, even more strongly,

You thought to do me evil, but God thought it good, in order to enable me today to sustain a great nation. Now, fear not, for I will provide for you and your children; and he consoled them and spoke to their heart (Ibid. 50:20-21).

Once *teshuvah* had been done properly, it was possible, even for Joseph's brothers to see the positive impact of their actions, because as Joseph was now able to stress, it was God's plan, not theirs.

Indeed, the sages state that, "The sin of the tribes is remembered eternally for it gives eternal hope" (*Bereisheet Rabbah* 84:17).

5. Another word that has 13 synonyms is "light." The 13 synonyms for king and their correspondence to the *sefirot* is as follows,

	faith Mashiach (מָשִׁיחַ)	
	pleasure highness (גִּישָׁא)	
	will head (רֵאשׁ)	
understanding prince (נָסִיךְ)		wisdom dynast (עוֹצֵר)
	knowledge shepherd (רוֹעֵה)	
might ruler (שֹׁלֵט)		loving-kindness lord (אֲדוֹן)
	beauty majesty (אֲדוֹר)	
acknowledgment sovereign (מוֹשֵׁל)		victory ruler (רוֹדֵד)
	foundation provider (נָגִיד)	
	kingdom king (מֶלֶךְ)	

These are close translations of the Hebrew words, but as always, the English words do not perfectly capture the meaning of the Hebrew, but rather are meant to give a taste of its tone.

Note that though in the text of this article we have been using “prince” as a translation of גִּישָׁא, the synonym that corresponds to the aspect of pleasure in the crown, in context of the entire gamut of synonyms, “prince” is better suited to translate נָסִיךְ, the synonym corresponding to understanding.

For a more complete treatment of the topic of the 13 synonyms for king, see our Hebrew article “*Shemot Hamelech*” in volume 2 of *Malchut Yisra’el*.

⁶. A very literal translation of the words הַמֶּלֶךְ נִשְׂא מִימֹת עוֹלָם, found in the liturgical poem preceding the first blessing recited before the morning *Shema*.

⁷. Nothingness here implies the sense that the external is nothing.

⁸. More deeply, the king as a “prince” (גִּישָׁא) captures his image as a Torah sage who is continually teaching the people Torah. The Torah is likened to water, the source of all pleasure (*Tanya*, ch. 1). Just as physical water is the medium upon which all physical pleasure—representing momentary enjoyment—grows, so the Torah is the source of all spiritual pleasure—representing eternal, lasting gratification.

⁹. Observe that rules define boundaries. If there is an exception to a rule, it follows that the exception lies outside the boundary defined by the rule. Thus, an exception to a rule defines the boundaries of the rule from the outside, a very important addition to the rule itself, which is usually defined only from within.

¹⁰. A point disputed between *Maimonides* and the *Rashba*.