

“*Naso*: Priests, Levites, sacred sanctuary objects, and the eternal light of the Menorah”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

The sidra *Naso* commences with an outline of the sacred duties that Aaron and his offspring were charged with overseeing in the newly constructed Sanctuary. It also includes the formula of the Priestly Blessing of the people which they were to confer on the nation each day within the sanctuary and, subsequently, at the Temple (Nu. 6:22-27). This is followed by the account of the dedication of the sanctuary and its ritual objects, and an enumeration of the gifts presented each succeeding day by the twelve princes of the tribes of Israel in celebration of that momentous occasion (7:1-89).

Although the sidrot of Bemidbar and *Naso* are independent, the subject they deal with, namely the specific duties of the three sons of Levi – Gershon, Kehat, and Merari – within the Sanctuary, serves as a literary bridge between the two. This may explain why the last section of the sidrah Bemidbar, describing God’s instruction to Moses: *Naso et rosh b’nei Kehat*, “Take a census of the Kehatites” (4:1), and our sidrah, *Naso et rosh b’nei Gershon* (4:22), employ the identical initial phraseology. Perhaps for stylistic reasons, relating to the tasks of the third son, Merari, it states, simply, *B’nei Merari...tifkod otam*, “As for the Merarites... you shall count them” (4:29).

Given the three sons' respective order of age, Gershon, Kehat and Merari (see Gen. 46:11), it may seem curious that the Torah describes their tasks according to the order of Kehat, Gershon, and Merari. The reason is that the Torah is guided here by the principle of attributing primacy to the component of the sanctuary with the highest degree of sanctity, namely the Ark and the sacred objects associated with it. And it was the awesome responsibility of the Kehat family to oversee their care, safety, and use.

It was awesome because the Levites were permitted neither to handle nor even to look at those objects on pain of death. For that reason, when the sanctuary was being dismantled and then reconstructed during each of the 42 stops that the Israelites made during the course of the 40 years of travel through the desert, the priests were delegated with the task of wrapping all the components and objects individually at the outset before presenting them to the care of the Kehatites (see 4:5–16) for transportation. The materials with which they covered the individual items were of different type and colour so that the contents could be determined before opening.

That danger that attended the role of the desert Levites, as custodians of the sacred vessels, is spelt out in the rather abstruse warning that follows the statement of the task of the Kehatites:

The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: “Do not let the group of the Kehatite clans be cut off from the Levites. Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred

objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each of them to his duties and to his task of transportation. But let them not come and gaze when the sanctuary is dismantled, lest they die” (4:17-20).

*

*

*

There was a special relationship between God and the tribe of Levi, grounded in the fact that the latter was the only tribe that did not worship the Golden Calf. Before this act of apostasy, the firstborn of each Israelite family had been invested with an extra measure of spiritual sensitivity and divine grace enabling him to serve as its representative at all domestic and tribal religious rituals (see Nu.3:11-13).

Following the calf worship by all the other eleven tribes, and as punishment for it, that privilege was withdrawn from their firstborn, and religious representation and leadership were transferred to the tribe of Levi through the two branches of Moses, the law-giver, judge, and national leader, and his brother, Aaron, and his male offspring, as High Priest (see Nu. 3:1-4). As Aaron had four sons - Nadav, Avihu, Eleazar, and Itamar – the fact that the older two died prematurely (see Nu. 10:1ff) meant that it was Eleazar and Itamar who stood at the right hand of their father Aaron to carry out all the requirements and rituals of the sanctuary (see 3:5-9) and to ensuring that no non-priest encroached upon them (see v.10). This status was subsequently made into an eternal hereditary privilege after Aaron’s grandson, Pinchas, displayed unique zeal for God in having assassinated one of Israel’s princes,

Zimri, who committed an outrageous public act of immorality with a heathen woman (Nu. 25:6-15).

In this context, it is significant that Moses, his Levite tribe, and Pinchas, grandson of Aaron, all earned their leadership positions as a reward for some courageous display of moral or religious zeal. Moses, for having stepped in to prevent an act of violence being perpetrated by one Hebrew against his neighbour (Ex. 2:13); his Levite tribe for having dissociated themselves from the worship of the Calf and for having exacted revenge on the perpetrators of the apostasy (32:26-28); and Pinchas for his fierce zeal (Nu. 25:11).

Some commentators include Aaron in this category, pointing out his having attempted to delay the making of the Golden Calf until Moses' return from Sinai (Ex. 32:1, 5, 23). The fact that Moses blamed his brother for the Israelites' sin (vv. 21,25) does not necessarily implicate him in it. Thus, Seforno states that the only blame attached to Aaron was his suggestion that they should wait until the following day and then observe a celebration (v.5). Seforno states: 'Granted that you may have had no choice but to make the calf, but the worst part of the sin was that they rejoiced with it, and that happened because you proclaimed a festival.'

Now, surely one would have expected that either Aaron, son of Levi, as leader of that tribe, or another tribal elder, would have been invested with the title of prince, and

installed into office and consecrated together with the princes of all the other tribes on that momentous occasion as described in today's sidra. Surprisingly, that was not the case, and, indeed, rabbinic tradition has it that Aaron was crestfallen and sank into a depression on that score. Hence the Midrash that God set about pacifying Aaron, saying, "Don't be troubled. By your life, your reward is greater than theirs, for you shall kindle and attend to the Sanctuary lights" (Mid. *Tanch.* sec.5; See *Rashi* on Nu.8:2).

One may wonder, however, how the Midrash could have realistically thought that Aaron could have been pacified by the 'reward' of such a daily chore as lighting the Menorah! How could the stature and status of princely leadership possibly compare with such a menial task?

But, to contrast the two superficially is to lose sight of the uniquely mystical significance that light possessed in Jewish thought. The very first words that God uttered when He created the world were *Yehi ohr*, "Let there be light." Mysticism viewed the problem of the creation of our physical universe by a God of pure spirituality as having been achieved by a succession of ten 'Sefirot,' emanations or extensions, from the divine source of light. Much simplified, God initiated the process by creating an *Ohr Elyon*, a primeval light source, to make tangible His essence in the physical world.

The first emanation of light from the divine source was, naturally, the most potent; the second extension from it, less translucent, and each subsequent one less and less so. The tenth emanation was so remote from the divine source, so diluted in its spiritual essence and so bordering on physicality that it could source the material world, with all the imperfections within it.

And hence the significance of the seven lights of the Menorah, corresponding to the seven days of Creation. When Aaron lit those lights each day, he was symbolically presiding over the renewal of the act of Creation. Hence the presence of this primary motif in our daily prayers: *Hamechadeish betuvo bechol yom tamid ma'asei Bereishit*, 'He renews, in His goodness, each day, the act of Creation.' Hence, also, the first blessing over the *Shema*, *Yotzeir Ha-me'orot*, the blessing of 'the Creator of the luminaries.'

The sun rises; a new light shines upon the world. A fresh start is symbolically offered to us all with the dawn of each new day. And the lights of the Menorah daily proclaimed that optimistic message and the comfort, hope, and potential for creativity that each new day brings.

The princes of the tribes were indeed invested with personal status and title; but that was superficial compared to what Aaron was presiding over – the dramatic daily re-

enactment of the act of Creation, with its inherent challenge for Israel and, through it, for all mankind.

Not surprisingly, the Menorah was regarded as the primary symbol of the Jewish people down to the present day in the State of Israel, symbolizing our nation's constant striving towards cultural enlightenment and spiritual insight. Not surprisingly, Aaron's Menorah was placed inside the Sanctuary and the Temple — “For in Thy light do we see light” — and, not surprisingly, the Roman emperor, Titus, after conquering Jerusalem and despoiling our Temple in the year 70 CE, had engraved over his triumphal arch in Rome a relief depicting the carting into exile of our Menorah, to signify that he had succeeded in extinguishing forever Israel's spiritual and intellectual light.

Needless to say we had the last laugh; for the century following Titus witnessed the creation of prestigious academies of Torah learning in Eretz Yisrael, presided over by the most illustrious sages and legal minds that ever graced any people's hall of fame, and whose incisiveness laid the groundwork for the Mishnah and the Talmud — one of the great systems of jurisprudence — and the dynamics of Jewish law.

And, two thousand years on, that light of Israel's Menorah, and that emanation of the primeval divine light, continues to illuminate the vast number of the brightest young and not-so-young minds in yeshivot and seminaries in Medinat Yisrael and the

Diaspora, generating intellectual curiosity, spirituality and informed observance, while Titus's Roman law remains relevant to the comparatively few scholars with a penchant for such arcane study.

Every morning, we give expression in our prayers to that passion we have for the light of Torah and its creative process:

אור חדש על ציון תאיר ונזכה כולנו מהרה לאורו — 'May a new light shine on Zion, and may we all be inspired by its brilliance.'

Shabbat shalom v'chag same'ach,

Rabbi Jeffrey