

Dvar Torah on Naso **Ruth Hart, June 2022**

There are a great many topics in this week's parashah, which, chronologically (as they are written, not necessarily as they happened), fall into 6 categories:

1. Who does what jobs around the ohel mo'ed.
2. Exclusion of people deemed unclean for various reasons
3. The ordeal of the sotah
4. The nazir
5. Birkat haCohanim
6. More jobs around God's house, including offerings (because we all want to know exactly who donated what and how much it was worth).

If we make this summary a bit less flabby (because it is summer and our words of wisdom probably want to be beach, park or at least desert-fit), we could put 1, 5 and 6 together. This may delight Biblical critics and our very own Torah chatters or have you reaching for the smelling salts. 2 appears to belong somewhere else, perhaps Tazriya/Metzorah because of the lepers or Acharei Mot along with the warnings against various abominations which cause other kinds of itches and rashes. Then we have 3 and 4, the sotah and nazir, a kind of extreme version of impurity and purity, because why else are they together? Both of these appear to describe predicaments caused by people deciding to be holier than thou (or we or me) and taking on chumrot that nobody asked of them in the first place.

The pesukim relating to the sotah are conditional : if a man is jealous and so forth...Nobody is forcing a man to humiliate his wife in public. If this ritual is enacted, it shows that the man has a nasty mind if the accusation turns out to be false and to be a cuckold if it is true, not a good look, gentlemen, either way. The bitter water is harmless per se but the power of suggestion is not. As with the ritual shaming and death penalty for the ben sorer or morer, I don't know how often this actually took place but perhaps knowing that they were on the statute book was sufficient deterrent for accuser and accused. The reward for the virtuous wife never convinced me; why would she want to have a child with him after he behaved like that?

The nazir who withdrew from things that are normally permitted (perhaps imagining he was righting the unrighteousness described above) had to bring a sin offering and why? If you make a deal with God, it may keep you away from temptation, which is a salutary lesson to adulterers of either sex, among other human failings, but if a sin-offering is required to end the contract, the implication is that we would all be better off sticking to the laws that are actually attributed to God via Moses and which apply to everybody, rather than competing to out-machmir one another. If you really want to be modest, don't show off.

These episodes are sorter but better-known than the bulk of the text, i.e. points 1, 5 and 6, so why does the Torah spend so much time on the mechanics of who does what? As we saw when we celebrated the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, logistics are important: pageants and carnivals, like religious rituals, only work if every individual knows exactly what he or she is doing and where or when he or she is supposed to be. Birkat haCohanim, the last and best-known reminder of the entire code of rituals and conduct for priests, like the

appearance of the monarch on the balcony of Buckingham Palace, may only take a minute; like the korbanot and the Beit haMikdash, the absolute power of the monarchy no longer exists; most of us, be we religious and/or monarchists, don't want to go back, yet the symbolism, in 1 form or another, at length or in brief, in all of our liturgies, traditional or liberal, remains. With the notable exception of the Israeli Chief Rabbinate, the Cohanim have moved, like the Royal family, from absolute to constitutional. Religious leaders of all kinds, like the Queen and her heirs, have their views, known, or rumoured, about current affairs but need to remain above party politics, lest , in the attempt to stay "relevant" they make themselves objects of ridicule. The Sifrei Zota on Naso states that "whether or not the priests decide to bless them, I will bless them" which suggests that both kinds of leadership, in the absence of the kind of thunderbolt that finished off Nadav and Avihu, depend upon consent. A good spiritual leader or a good king or queen knows that God is watching their acts, even if they do not take their oaths literally, they must take them seriously.

Shabbat shalom.