



D'var Torah Parshat Naso — June 16, 2024¹

By Sue Fendrick

The word *naso* that gives its name to this week's parasha has a huge range of meanings, including: lift, carry, forgive, bear, take, and endure. It has so many meanings that I think of it as somewhat similar to what is called in American Sign Language a classifier sign--a handshape that does not indicate a particular semantic unit that is the equivalent of a word in spoken languages, but rather represents a group of nouns or other referents; for example, this is the sign for "vehicle" [show handshape]. We might imagine that *la-sait*, the very irregular infinitive, stands for a whole class of verbs that involve something going up or going on.

In any case, it's an unusual choice here, where it means to count. Biblical Hebrew has a lot of words for count, including *limnot*, as in *limnot yameinu* in Psalms, count our days; *lispor*, as in *sefirat ha-omer*; and *lifkod*, which is used over and over in last week's parasha right before it shifts temporarily to the term *naso*.

Towards the end of Parshat Bamidbar, God tells Moshe to count the Levites--well, the males between the ages of 30 and 50--specifically by clan, and begins (so typically for the Torah) with those descended from the *second*-born of Levi's children, b'nei K'hat, the children of K'hat. This is presumably because Moshe and Aaron are from this clan, as many commentators note². When the Torah turns to b'nei Gershon, in the opening verses of Parshat Naso, the same language is used again.

So why *is* "naso" used in verse 4:2: *Naso et rosh b'nei kehat mitoch b'nei levi l'mishp'chotam l'veit avotam*. The Or haChaim, a prominent 18th-century Moroccan commentator, makes the connection to parshat Ki Tissa—Tissa, from the same root as Naso—*ki tissa et rosh b'nei yisrael*, mirroring the language here of "naso et rosh b'nei K'hat" or "b'nei gershon"—count them by head. There, in Parshat Ki Tissa, the Or haChaim says, b'nei Yisrael is being *elevated* above their sin of the golden calf by giving the half-shekel as part of the census, a kind of compensation for their sin. Here, too, as the specific responsibilities of the groups of Leviim are being described, they are being elevated relative to their previous, more generic levitical status. And in the case of b'nei K'hat, they are being elevated relative to other Leviim and specifically relative to b'nei Gershon, who as the elder should have gone first.

But Rashi points out an interpretation for the use of the verb *naso* from within the context of this passage itself: Moshe is being told to count those who are fit for "avodat masa", the work of carrying—again, from the same root. B'nei K'hat are charged with carrying the ark, the table, the menorah, the altar, the parochet, and various sacred vessels. As Rashi sees it, it's a special word here used to count those who can carry, so the word for "count" that connotes carrying is used. He quotes Pirkei Avot: *ben shloshim la-koach*—30 is the age of strength, so 30-year-olds are all set for the work of carrying³. (I'll politely refrain from pointing out that he says one's strength gradually diminishes after the age of 50.) As Parshat Naso begins, b'nei Gershon are also given carrying jobs: they carry the priests' clothing, the tent itself, its covering, the screen and hangings: all the *fabric* components of the mishkan.

The Torah's language switches back to the more familiar "tifkod" when delineating the posts, sockets, and pegs that the clan of Merari, Levi's third and last son, should carry. Various commentators deal with this seemingly arbitrary change—hey, b'nei Merari are *also* carrying things, even if they're not very glamorous—by pointing out that, as the last clan

¹ This version is very slightly edited from the version of the text from which I delivered the drash orally, which lined up with the written version about 99% ☺.

² According to I Chronicles 6:2-3. Interestingly, Miriam is the only daughter listed in this passage, which delineates many lineages, otherwise all listing only sons.

³ Paul Bleicher noted to me afterwards that while 20-year-olds might be similarly or especially strong, 30-year-olds would have not only the physical strength but the emotional maturity for this important task.

mentioned, there is no longer a reason to describe them with the language of elevation, even if they will also literally be doing heavy lifting. All Levites are equal, but some, it seems, are more equal than others.

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points specifically to the language of “*naso et rosh b’nei kehat, naso et rosh b’nei gershon*”, noting that here, the Torah describes taking a census as literally “lifting people’s heads.” He continues: “Never let people feel merely a number. Make those you meet feel important, especially the people whom others tend to take for granted...Make eye contact. Smile. Let them know *you* do not take them for granted... They matter as individuals.” He assigns the same meaning to the long account later in our parsha of the offering of the head of each of the 12 tribes—the *nasi*, again from the same root as *naso*; as he sees it, this is not a boring litany but a way of indicating that each individual’s act was important on its own terms, and that people deserve and need recognition, and when they don’t get it, the results can be painful and destructive.

Even the inclusion later in our parsha of the laws of the Nazir, along with the infamous case of the sotah or the suspected adulteress, which seem like out-of-place interpolations, fit in with Sacks’ understanding of the parasha as a whole. As he explains, the laws of the nazir demonstrate the importance of reducing tensions between those *with* special recognition and those without. He sees the institution of *nazirut* as a way to open up the realm of special sanctity to non-Kohanim, even though it is temporary and not identical to the roles and restrictions of the priesthood. His focus here is not so much on recognizing each person and their role, but on limiting the kinds of resentment that can take place “when people find themselves excluded...from certain forms of status within the community”.

And in explaining the inclusion of the Sotah ritual, Rabbi Sacks further broadens his understanding of the parsha’s message to the ways that the needs of peace more generally demand from us a focus on reducing conflict wherever possible. He notes the rabbinic interpretation that God’s willingness to have the Divine name obliterated--it is written on a scroll and dissolved in the bitter waters of the Sotah ritual--is an indication of God’s valuing the opportunity to make peace between spouses, by clearing a woman of suspicion and resolving her husband’s jealousy. (I’ll note here that even the confusing coda to the troubling Sotah passage, with its murky and diversely-interpreted statement that “the man shall be clear from sin and the woman shall bear her sin”, uses—you guessed it—the same root as “*naso*”, in saying cryptically and generally that the woman will bear her sin, *tissa et avonah*.)

Finally, a couple of words, literally, about *birkat kohanim*, which comes towards the end of our parsha, with yet another appearance of our now-favorite verb. First, it is hard to know exactly what the difference is between God *shining* the divine face towards us--*ya’er Adonai panav*—and *lifting* the divine face towards us—*yisa Adonai panav*. Second, it is odd that while this is supposed to be a blessing for the Israelite nation, it is phrased in the singular you, *elecha*, as if this is a blessing for each of us individually. I’ll say that in my own experience, the two contexts in which we most routinely use *birkat kohanim* do feel very personal to me. When I’m under my tallit, my face turned away, listening to the words of the kohanim and bat kohanim, it is as if they addressed to me, individually. It is a private moment. And of course, when I bless my children on Friday night, the blessing feels very personal and individual. *Yisa*, lifting, is of course from the same root with which our parsha, and this drash, began—*Naso*.

Yisa, lifting, and *elecha*, to you, singular. Focusing on these words, we might understand the added meaning in the third line of *birkat kohanim* this way, a blessing for you today, with which I’ll end: May the lifting of God’s face towards you support *you*, as you bear your burdens and in all that you are especially called upon to carry—and as you navigate the path on which you uniquely find yourself, *v’yasem l’cha shalom*, may God grant you peace. *Shabbat shalom*.