

Parashat Naso

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There are two parallel aspects of community leadership at the beginning and end of today's *Torah* Portion, and a very famous passage in between them. So far, the Priestly Blessing is the oldest piece of Biblical liturgy found by the archeologists, inscribed on a seal.

Parashat Naso begins with a specific aspect of the census that began in last week's *Parashah*, the enumeration of the Levitical families. There were three family groups of Levites, and each had a specific task involved with moving the portable Tabernacle from one oasis to the next.

Last week, *Parashat B'midbar* concluded with the instructions that the *Kohat* family was in charge of the ritual items of the Tabernacle - the Ark of the Covenant, the Menorah, the Incense Alter and the Alter of Sacrifice. The beginning of today's *Parashah* instructs that the *Gershon* family transported the fine linen curtains inside the Tabernacle, the three layers of roof fabric, the mesh walls of the Outer Courtyard, and the ropes holding it all up.

The *Merari* family transported in wagons the heavy wood and metal structural elements of the Tabernacle - the huge vertical boards of the walls, the metal sockets that supported the boards, the long bars that kept the walls together, and the tall columns that supported the mesh walls of the Outer Courtyard.

We learn from this that different groups of community leaders have various responsibilities. Sometimes these seem hereditary, and sometimes the task is apportioned according to the particular abilities of a group of leaders.

At the other end of today's *Parashat Naso*, we read of the specific gifts each tribal prince brought for the dedication of the Tabernacle. Since it seems that these gifts were identical, why is each repetitive paragraph chanted aloud? Our commentators answer that a reason for this is to highlight the fact that each leader and each tribe is both special and also equal to all the others.

So far we see that leaders have specific responsibilities involving specific tasks for the community, and that leaders also are expected to contribute resources to the well-being of the community. What about the well-known Priestly Blessing in the middle of today's *Parasha*?

We are familiar with this text: **“May God bless you and guard you;
May God shine His face upon you and be gracious to you;
May God lift His face unto you and grant you peace.”**

We say this every *Shabbat* eve upon our children, clergy conclude weddings and baby namings with this passage, and in some communities the *Kohanim* still use these words to bless their congregations on a weekly basis. Here in Saskatoon, this blessing even ends the annual Remembrance Day observance said aloud in English by one of the participating clergy.

So how does this fit in with the responsibilities of leadership that we saw in the duties of the Levitical families and in the gifts of the tribal princes? Simply in this way: it is the responsibility of community leaders to be careful of what they say and how they say it, for words have extraordinary power.

There are not many quotes in the *Torah* of anyone other than Moses speaking to the Israelites. This quote which is meant particularly for the *Kohanim* is one of the most famous pieces of Biblical text that became a liturgical text. It has such power, there is a special custom in Orthodox synagogues and in Israeli synagogues for how the *Kohanim* chant this passage.

During the repetition of the *Amidah*, the *Kohanim* and *Levi'im* go to the back of the sanctuary, the *Kohanim* remove their shoes, and the *Levi'im* pour water over the hands of the *Kohanim*. The *Kohanim* then come to the front of the sanctuary, drape their *Tallitot* over their heads and upraised hands, and they chant the blessing word-by-word responsively with the *Hazzan*. No one looks at the *Kohanim* while they are doing this, and it is all very awe-inspiring.

We can learn from today's *Torah* Portion that, setting the example for the rest of the community, leaders in particular have their specific tasks and bring their resources of energy and dedication. We also learn from today's Priestly Blessing that words can heal and words can hurt, and it is the responsibility of **all of us** to understand the power of our words and that we must use our words wisely.