



Out of the Camp

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Parashat Naso 5784

Parashat Naso is thematically structured in the form of two “exterior” chapters and two “interior” chapters. A careful study of this design can provide insight into the larger significance of “מחנה ישראל - the Camp of Israel.”

The outer chapters of the *parashah* continue in the detail-heavy style that characterizes much of the beginning section of the Book of Numbers: a collection of the statistics and regulations that made up the functioning of the camp as they journeyed through the desert. The Mishnah (Yoma 3:1) describes it well referring to this fourth book of the Torah as, *Homesha ha-Pekudim*, which means something like, “The Book¹ of Accounting.” First we read through a census, tribe by tribe; then comes a mapping of the physical layout of the camp, again by tribe; and then we read of the appointment of the tribe of Levi, who will be in charge of the *mishkan* (tabernacle) at the center of the camp, and then the names of various Levitical families appointed with particular duties. All that information takes up four full chapters, all of Parashat Bemidbar and continuing into the first chapter of Parashat Naso (Numbers 4). Then,

¹ Literally, “The Fifth.” See my essay on Parashat Bemidbar 5784, “Naked as the Desert,” note 1, available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/naked-desert>.



the last chapter of Parashat Naso (chapter 7) picks right back up where chapter 4 left off²—more camp details, this time with a list of the inaugural offerings of each tribe.³

Sandwiched between all of this is a break of two chapters (Numbers 5-6) that consist not of counting, but of cases. The Torah pauses the torrent of details to give us four legal cases in a row, delivered in quick succession, all notably accentuated with the headline phrase that often introduces a new law, “וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר” - And the Eternal spoke to Moshe and said...”

The first case recalls some of the purity categories we learned in Leviticus:

במדבר ה:ב-ד

צו את בני ישראל וישלחו מן המחנה כל צרוע וכל זב וכל טמא לנפש. מזכר עד נקבה תשלחו אל מחוץ למחנה תשלוחם ולא יטמאו את מחניהם אשר אני שכן בתוכם. ויעשו כן בני ישראל וישלחו אותם אל מחוץ למחנה.

Numbers 5:2-4

Command the children of Israel to **send out** of the **camp** anyone who is afflicted with *tzara'at*, anyone who has had a *zav* discharge, and anyone who has become impure through contact with the dead. **Send out** male and female alike from the **camp**, you shall **send them out** so they do not impurify their **camps** where I dwell amongst them. And the Children of Israel did so, and **sent them outside of the camp**.

² In fact, to signal the connection between them, chapter 4 ends with *pekudim* language: “על פי ה' פקדו אותם ביד” and then chapter 7 begins by describing: “העמדים” על הפקדים.”

³ Each one listed separately, even though they are all the same.



We already learned (in Leviticus 13:46) that the *tzaru'a* (one afflicted with *tzara'at*) is sent outside the camp;⁴ now the Torah includes the *zav* (someone who experienced an abnormal genital discharge) and the *tum'at met* (someone who came into contact with a corpse) in that rule as well. But aside from the legal particulars, the language of the law contains two “מילים” - *millim manhot*—literally, “lead-words,” from the term, *Leitwort*, coined by Martin Buber: the verb “לשלוח - send out” and the noun “מחנה - camp,” are each repeated four times in just these three verses. This repetition serves not only to highlight the ruling in this case, but also to set an overarching theme for all the cases that will follow. Here amidst the buzz of the camp’s formation, we are suddenly being asked to consider those who are “outside the camp,” set apart from the community.

The next case speaks to a different kind of apartness, not of physical separation from the camp, but the spiritual estrangement caused by sin:

במדבר ה:ז

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ אִוְּ אִשָּׁה כִּי יַעֲשׂוּ מְכַל חֲטָאתָם הָאֵדָם לְמַעַל מַעַל בִּהּ וְאִשְׁמָה הִנָּפֶשׁ הֵהוּא.
וְהִתְוֹדוּ אֶת־חֲטָאתָם אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ וְהָשִׁיב אֶת־אֲשָׁמוֹ בְּרֹאשׁוֹ וְחִמִּישְׁתּוֹ יֹסֵף עָלָיו וְנָתַן לְאִשֶּׁר אָשָׁם לוֹ.

Numbers 5:6-7

Speak to the children of Israel: any man or woman who commits **any sin against another person, and thus betrays faith with the Eternal**, that soul will be guilty. They shall confess the sins they have done and make restitution for the principle, and then add a fifth on top, and give it to the one who was wronged.

Again, we know some of this general information from the book of Leviticus (chapter 5), where we read that someone who touches sacred property, steals from another person, or

⁴ On the meaning of this exile and its end, see my essay on Parashat Metzora 5784, “Like a Leper Messiah,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/leper-messiah>.



takes a false oath is considered “נפש כי תמעל מעל” - a soul that breaks faith” (Leviticus 5:15), and must atone through restitution and the penalty of an extra fifth. What is new here is the requirement to make confession. But what is this law doing here altogether?

Following on the heels of the last case, we are primed to identify some parallels between the impure and the sinner. Both have been alienated from the community—one physically and one socially. Both are offered a procedure for remedying their state of alienation and reentering the community. And both combine a social distancing with a distancing from God; the impure can neither approach the *mikdash* (sanctuary) nor even enter the camp that surrounds it, and the sinner—even if their sin has been against another person—is considered to have “broken faith with the Eternal.”

The next case invites us to continue drawing thematic connections by employing exactly the same phrasing to describe a different kind of “breaking of faith”:

במדבר ה:יב

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי תִשָּׁטֵה אִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּמְעַל בּוֹ מַעַל.

Numbers 5:12

Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: Any man whose wife goes astray and **breaks faith with him.**

This is the case of the *sotah*, the woman accused by her husband of infidelity. Echoing the two cases above, her alleged crime is described in both the language of impurity (נטמאה) and sin (עון). She is brought before the priest—that is, into the center of the camp, where the *mikdash* is—and forced to drink a ritual mixture of bitter waters that will either attack her body or exonerate her.



Whatever the outcome, the carrying out of the *sotah* ritual always reflects a tragic family situation. For either a woman has in fact betrayed her husband or a man has gone so insane with jealousy that he does not trust his innocent wife. This is indeed also a case of “מעילה - broken faith,” and a broken relationship—but this time it is two people who have become estranged from one another. The repetition of the language from the case just above suggests that, once again, the rupture of human relationships parallels a rupture in the relationship with God.

The last of the four cases embedded in the middle of Parashat Naso appears initially to be distinct from the others. It does not deal with someone who is struggling through a crisis—like disease, guilt, or family conflict—and thereby alienated from God. The case of the *nazir*, on the contrary, describes someone who is seeking to establish a more intense relationship with God:

במדבר ו:ב

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֹא לְנָדָר נָדָר נָזִיר לְהַזִּיר לָהּ.

Numbers 6:2

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: A man or a woman who decides to take a **nazarite vow**, and to **separate themselves for the Eternal**.

The nazirite vow consists of three restrictions. The *nazir*, during the period of the vow, abstains from wine or any other grape product, refrains from hair-cutting,⁵ and avoids any contact with the dead—even their own relatives.⁶ All of this is done with the intention of becoming completely dedicated to God: “קדש הוא לה.” One separates from the attachments

⁵ Note that the description of his unkempt hair, “פרע שער ראשו,” parallels the description of the *sotah*’s exposed hair during the ritual, “ופרע את ראש האשה.”

⁶ This last rule is even stricter than for a *kohen*, who may have contact with the dead if it is a close relative.



of the world—pleasurable intoxicants, personal grooming, even familial obligations—in order to attach oneself to God.⁷

Indeed, “separation” is the underlying meaning of the word-root, נ.ז.ר., as Rashi explains:

רש"י במדבר ו:ב

אין נזירה בכל מקום אלא פרישה, אף כאן שפרש מן היין.

Rashi on Numbers 6:2

Nezirah always indicates some form of separation. So, too, here he is separating from wine.

Many centuries later, writing in Germany in the 1800s, R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch agrees with Rashi’s understanding of the word, but expands his description of the “separation” to consider the fuller consequences of the nazirite vow:

The basic meaning of *nezer* is quite definitely: to keep aloof, to keep separate... so here *nezer* designates a regime of living and striving that raises the person who vows of his own free will to undertake it, out of and about the midst of people amongst whom he lives and sets him the task to be completely “holy to God,” to belong with the whole of his being and will exclusively to his God. He wishes to draw a circle round about himself in which only God is to be present.⁸

⁷ This is presumably a pious and noble cause. Yet the nazirite vow has been regarded with some suspicion in Jewish tradition. R. Elazar ha-Kappar bar R. (shorthand for “bar R. Elazar ha-Kappar”), in the Talmud (Ta’anit 11a), pointing out that the nazirite vow is concluded with a sin offering, suggested that the *nazir* is atoning for a sin against the self (וְכִפָּר עָלָיו מֵאֲשֶׁר חָטָא עַל הַנֶּפֶשׁ), by actively causing oneself pain through some form self-denial (הַמַּצְעָר עֲצָמוֹ מִכָּל דָּבָר וּדְבָר).

⁸ Translation: Isaac Levy.



The *nazir* is separating from the community in order to become closer to God. He is not physically sent out of the camp by others, but his own extreme practices isolate him from those around him, even as he remains in their midst. In that sense, the case of the *nazir* is a kind of inversion of the first case we looked at.⁹ And if the recurring words in that first case were: “לשלוח מן המחנה” - sent out of the camp,” the lead word-root here, “נזר - separation,” appears in this last case a staggering 24 times (in just 21 verses). We therefore begin and end these cases with the theme of social isolation.

With that framing in mind, let’s review the four scenarios, and note how they all play with the same variables:

1. The טמא (*tamei*) is someone suffering a type of personal affliction that not only renders them ritually contaminated, but forces them to physically leave the camp, becoming isolated from the community until they are purified by the priest, a representative of God, and readmitted to the camp.
2. The חוטא (*hotei*) has caused harm to others in the community and then sworn falsely about it in God’s name. They have damaged their social relationships and their relationship with God in tandem. They must make restitution to the people they have harmed in order to reestablish not only their place in society, but also their relationship with God.
3. The סוטה (*sotah*) deals with a private relationship that has become so toxic, it has burst out into the public square and can only find resolution through a ritual process mediated by a priest, meant to detect impurity and sin.

⁹ Note that the *nazir* must specifically avoid contact with the dead (על נפש מת לא יבא), one of the forms of impurity named in the first case (וכל טמא לנפש).



4. The נזיר (*nazir*) has chosen to withdraw from the community in order to become completely devoted to God. By abstaining from wine and contact with the dead, the *nazir* avoids both celebratory gatherings and communal mourning. A wild and unkempt mane of hair makes the *nazir* appear increasingly deviant from social norms. The nazirite vow thus ensures that the *nazir* becomes estranged from society even while living among people. Reintegration can only begin once the *nazir* ends the term of the vow by bringing a sin offering.

All of these cases deal with social pariahs, people who have become isolated from the larger community. They are inserted here, just after the description of the camp and just before the camp is inaugurated with offerings. Together, they serve as a kind of warning, before the operation of the camp begins, of the kinds of circumstances that can endanger someone's place in the camp. Each of these cases, therefore, also provides some mechanism for ending the state of social isolation, and bringing the castout back into the life of the camp.

These cases also suggest in various ways that damage to one's social relationships can undermine one's relationship with God. Even the *nazir*, who may gain some spiritual benefit from his social alienation, is presumed to be in this state only temporarily, and encouraged by the ritual itself to eventually reintegrate into the community.

For the design of the camp itself is meant to facilitate a collective spiritual experience. The twelve tribes of Israel were all arranged around the *mikdash* in the center, above which God's presence would appear—like a replication of the revelation at Sinai.¹⁰ In order to have that experience one needs not just a *mikdash*, but a *maḥaneh*, a camp of people all unified by a shared mission. While the Torah recognizes that in the complicated circumstances of human life, many people will inevitably fall outside (or choose to be outside) of the social order,

¹⁰ See Ramban's Introduction to Sefer Bemidbar.



nevertheless its ideal vision is to bring them back into the communal life and communal worship of *Mahaneh Yisrael*.

The two “exterior” chapters of Parashat Naso, then, made up of all the details of camp operations, mirror the structure of the camp itself by surrounding the characters from the four cases of its two “interior” chapters. These outsiders are thus symbolically brought back inside of the camp through the structure of the *parashah* itself.

At a time when much of the Jewish communal conversation centers around who is “in” or “out” of the “camp” of legitimacy, we would do well to remember that, from the very start of our life as a people, the Torah has encouraged us to seek to bring those who have been cast out of the camp back inside. We have always been made up of different tribes, different families, and different life experiences. Every person stands under their own unique flag (אִישׁ עַל דָּגְלוֹ, Numbers 2:2). Yet when we learned to camp together around Mount Sinai, the Mekhilta (BaHodesh 1) says, we became כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד, like one person, with one heart. May we learn to come together again as the Camp of Israel, and to tune in to the steady beat of our people’s collective heart.

