

Naso

Surface Impressions, Unified Vision, and Sensitivity

In the *Torah* portion *Naso* we learn about many things which do not seem to go together. We learn, first of all, about the counting of two of the subclans of the Tribe of Levi. Then we learn about how certain people are to be kept out of the camp. Then we learn that if a person steals, he has to confess his sin. Then we learn about the wayward wife, and after that we learn about the Nazerite--and about the priestly blessing. Then we learn about the sacrifices that were offered on the first twelve days of the dedication of the Tabernacle by each of the individual princes of each of the tribes. Thee sacrifices were all identical. It is hard to understand why all these disparate elements were put together in one *Torah* portion.

Perhaps we can understand why all these disparate elements were put together if we look at the *Haphtorah*, which speaks about how an angel of G-d appeared to Samson's mother and announced his birth and told his mother that she should not drink any wine because Samson was going to be a Nazerite. Samson is a problematical character in Jewish thought because Samson could not make up his mind what he wanted to be. Samson could not make up his mind whether he was a holy man or a skirt chaser. He could not make up his mind whether he wanted to be a judge in Israel or a pursuer of Philistine women. He was a champion of Israel, yet he gave away the secret of his own strength, and when he lost his hair, he also lost his vision of himself as well as his eyesight. He had an image of himself as a holy man, and when he lost that image of himself as a holy man, he lost his vision of himself as a champion of the Jewish people.

All of us send out signals. All of us mean things which we do not explicitly say. It is incumbent upon all of us to look beneath the surface to determine what people really mean and not be content with superficial and outward appearances. Samson's strength was in his hair, but hair is a very superficial thing. People can get along without hair. Look at Yul Brynner, Kojak and others of great fame. The ancient Egyptians did not have any hair on them at all. They abhorred hair and, on state occasions, they wore wigs. We spend billions of dollars on hair, but is really is not necessary for human life or human happiness. The story of Samson tells us all that we

must be very careful how we portray ourselves, and we must be very careful to look beneath the surface of things. The surface image is not always the true image.

Each of us has a public image, a private image, a family image, a self image, a business image, etc. So do others, and it is important that we all learn how to read them correctly. The student in school, even if he studies everything the teacher asks but does not correctly determine what the teacher really wants, will fail. On the other hand, a student who may not even read a textbook but knows exactly what the teacher wants will be able to get an "A." Many times the teacher will signal his class exactly what he thinks is important and not important, what he is going to ask questions on and what he is not going to ask questions on, even though he doesn't say so explicitly. A scholar must be alert to these signals. Also, it is very important that we know when we have to agree with someone or when we can disagree with somebody. We have to know how to read each given situation. We cannot base our judgment on surface criteria. I remember I learned this very well over 45 years ago which I first started teaching Hebrew school. A mother came to me complaining bitterly about her child saying that her child was this and that. I did a foolish thing; I agreed with her. Never agree with a mother when she criticizes her child. Only she can do that. Nobody else can. It almost cost me my job.

We all know that things are not always the way they seem. Many times a person is praising you effusively because he has just stabbed you in the back, or because that is all he is prepared to give you. He is not going to give you any other help. All he is going to do is praise you. On the other hand, someone who criticizes you mercilessly may be your best friend. He may be trying to save your job by his criticism. You may feel very hurt and say what you are telling me is not in the manuals, and the boss did not say it, but this person understands what the boss really means and, unless you do what the boss wants you to do, you are going to be out of a job soon.

I am reminded of the story they tell about the boss who brought his son, who was just graduated from college, to his big manufacturing concern and told his son he was going to have to start at the bottom. He brought him over to the warehouse foreman and told him, "I want you to treat my

boy just like you treat everybody else.” The foreman asked what he meant by that. He said, “Well, you have to treat him just like anybody else who is going to be the boss in three years.” You have to know what people mean, not just what they say.

In this *Torah* portion we learn many, many things that teach us lessons that are not obvious at first glance. That is why they are in this *Torah* portion. When we learn about the counting of the Gershonites, one of the Levi subclans, we are struck immediately by the extra words, “Also they” when Moshe was told to count them. Why did the *Torah* have to say “also they?” It doesn’t use the words “also they” when the Merontes were counted. The reason for this is because the Gershonites were the firstborn, that since Gershon was the firstborn, he should have by right carried the holy objects of the Tabernacle, but that job was given instead to the Clan of Kahas. Therefore, he was miffed, and the words “also they” were meant to convince Gershon that the job he was assigned was very important also. When it came to the Merontes, the *Torah* did not mention “also they” because the Merontes did not expect, being the third son, to carry the holy objects of the Tabernacle. It teaches us that when you see that people are miffed, even though they may or may not have a valid reason for feeling miffed, you have to console them, talk to them, and explain things to them.

The same thing is true when we learn about the people who were put outside the camp. We know that one group of the people who were not allowed in the Temple court included those who touched a dead body. This does not seem to be fair. Here a person is doing a *mitzvah*, and he is excluded from the Temple. But many times we will do a *mitzvah* and figuratively be kicked out of the camp. The *Torah* is telling us that many times we may do *mitzvahs* and, instead of getting thanks, we’ll get criticized. For example, you will tell a mother that her child is not doing well in school, that the child has to take remedial reading, or that this child has an emotional problem. You know that you have to tell the parent because if you do not tell the parent, you are going to harm the child. The child needs the help. But many times you are going to be outside the camp. You are going to be insulted, criticized and even cursed sometimes. The parent may eventually take your advice, but meanwhile he or she will ostracize you. This happens many times in life. You do the right thing, but you are roundly

criticized. You are placed outside the camp. Ultimately you will get back in the camp, just like ultimately, the person who has taken care of a dead body after he has performed the necessary rituals will come back to the camp, too. But don't think that just because you do a *mitzvah* you are always going to get plaudits. Many times bricks are going to be thrown at you instead.

We also might think that requiring a person who steals and swears falsely not only to make restitution but also to confess his sin is too harsh. The *Rambam* learns from this whole concept of *Teshuva* repentance. Repentance involves confession. What this means is that we believe that a person can do *Teshuva*. When I tell a person that he is a sinner now but can confess and not be a sinner any more, that means that I believe that he does not have to be a sinner, that he can be good, that he can conquer sin. If we believe that a person could not help himself, if we had a fatalistic attitude toward sin, as some religions do, that that person is doomed and damned and there is nothing he can do about it, why should he confess his sin? We cannot change. He cannot make himself better, but by the very fact that we call him a sinner, means that we think he is a good person because he could be good. We know people fulfill our expectations of them, even in the physical realm, not only in the moral and spiritual realm. If we tell a person who has a serious illness that it is hopeless, that he is going to die soon, he probably will. In Jewish law, we are not supposed to do this because, first of all, if we tell him, then he may stop fighting and then he will die and, second of all, because how do we know that he will not be the exception to the rule and overcome the odds and still live?

At first glance when we learn in this *Torah* portion about the wayward wife and about how she has to drink the bitter waters, we might think that this is a terrible thing that she is forced to do. But the rabbis explain that the *Torah* does not allow a man if he is just jealous to demand that his wife go through this ordeal. There has to be good cause. She had to be found alone with another man. But, besides that, the whole purpose of this was to save the marriage. After all, they could always get a divorce. But apparently they did not want people to get a divorce. This ceremony was meant to remove the jealousy which was destroying this marriage so that the couple could live together again.

At first glance, also, you might think that the Nazerite, which we learn about there, is a holy man, that it is a wonderful thing to be a Nazerite, but the rabbis say "No," that it is not good to be a Nazerite. The rabbis say that the reason why a Nazerite has to bring a sin offering after his period of Nazeriteship is over is because we are not supposed to deny ourselves the beautiful pleasures of life if we have the opportunity to enjoy these pleasures. A person is only supposed to be a Nazerite if he has a problem. If he has a drinking problem, then he has to stay away from drinking. The way to cure his drinking problem was to stay away from drink altogether. But, normally, we know that more in religion is not always better. Being extra *frum* is not always better. If you go way beyond what the requirements of *halacha* are, you may end up sinning, not being more religious. I remember kids who always used to be too busy learning or davening to ever help their mother but, miraculously, when all the work was done, they had time to go out and play sports. That, of course, is using religion as a means of getting out of your obligations, of using religion for your own benefit which is a terrible sin.

We then learn about the priestly blessings. From the fact that the *Cohanim* were chosen to bless us, we might think that they are special people and have to be treated special, etc., but the blessings do not come from them; they come from G-d. The *Cohanim* have to love the people they are blessing. Just as the *Cohanim* are not perfect yet, they can still bless the people, so the *Cohanim* have to realize that, even though the people they bless are not perfect, they are still worthy of being blessed and they have to bless them with love.

Then we have the final section of the *Torah* portion which deals with the different offerings of the princes of Israel. They were all the same. We could ask, why did the *Torah* have to spend so much time telling us about these different offerings that were all the same? The truth of the matter is that, although they may all be the same, the way each of these princes got to the point whereby he was able to bring these particular gifts was unique and special. The sea looks level on the surface, but underneath there are different depths. This is similar to *Bar Mitzvahs*, weddings, graduations, etc. After conducting hundreds of weddings, I can truthfully say that, although the wedding ceremony is exactly the same and I chant the same

Brochas and read the same *ketubah*, etc., the weddings are not the same. Every one is different. Every one comes with unique circumstances. Every wedding is different although the rituals are all the same. The same thing is true of *bar mitzvahs*. Every *bar mitzvah* reads a *Haphtorah*, chants the *Mussaf*, some read the *Torah*, but in order to get each child to that point where he could do the same thing is a different experience with each individual child. The same is true for graduations, brisses, etc. They are all different. They are all unique. They are all special even though outwardly they all seem to be the same.

This *Torah* portion is teaching us, don't be fooled by outward appearances. Don't be like Samson who lost his vision when he lost his hair. Be sensitive to the fact that there is usually much more beneath the surface than meets the eye. Know how to read other people, know what they really mean. Also, send a unified message yourself. Many people are shocked at the reactions they get to some of the things they say or do. The reason is because we send out the wrong message. Don't do things that are either out of character or are inappropriate for the situation. We must have a unified vision of who we are. Otherwise, we will end up like Samson accomplishing nothing. At the same time, we also have to be sensitive to other people and to every situation and know what things really mean. Let us all hope and pray that all of us will not take things at face value but always look beneath the surface so that we will be able to read situations correctly and be able to be kind, compassionate, loving, good people so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.