

## PARASHAT HASHAVUA

### PARASHAT NASO

#### Completing the *Machane* By Rav Ezra Bick

*Parashat Naso* completes the construction of the *machane*, the encampment of the Jewish people around the *mishkan*. These two elements, the *machane Yisrael* and the *mishkan*, are interwoven, since the encampment of the Jews is by definition "around the *mishkan*," and therefore the settlement of the Levites, around the *mishkan* and on the inside of the *machane Yisrael*, is part and parcel of the construction of the *machane* as a whole. And so, after setting up the four sections of the camp and placing the Levites in the center in *parashat Bamidbar*, the Torah continues in our *parasha* to exactly count the Levites of working age (between thirty and sixty) and assign them their appointed tasks. When everyone is in his assigned place, both Israel and the tribe of Levi, the *mishkan*, in the widest sense as the inhabitation of God within the people ("*hashokhen itam, veshakhanti betokham*"), will be complete. Hence, at the end of our *parasha*, we find the dedication ceremony of the *mishkan*, introduced with the words, "And on the day that Moshe completed the erection of the *mishkan*, and he anointed it and sanctified it..." The day that the *mishkan* was complete follows the construction of the *machane*.

However, between the completion of the appointment of the Levites, and the dedication of the *mishkan* appear four halakhic sections. Today I wish to try and understand what their place is in the order of the *parasha*.

The four *parashot* are:

1. Sending out the *temei'im* from the *machane* (5,1-4)
2. *Asham meilot* (5,5-10)
3. *Sota* (5,11-31)
4. *Nazir* (6,1-21)

1. *Shiluach Teme'im*. This one is easy. Although we tend to view this *parasha* as a halakhic one, as the law of expelling *temei'im* from the sacred precincts is a permanent part of Halakha, and applies to the Temple in Jerusalem as well, in context this *parasha* is part of the narrative. Moshe has set up the *machane*, and, as a final step, is commanded to expel the *temei'im* from it. This purification of the *machane* is part of its creation, which is perfectly understandable if we remember that the *machane Yisrael* is the outer receptacle of the *mishkan*; in other words, of the Divine presence. So, this *parasha* is actually the last step in the construction of the *machane*, and is in exactly the right place.

2. *Asham meilot*. This section is both seemingly completely out of place, and also difficult to understand in its own right. *Chazal* and Rashi explain that it is referring to the *asham* sacrifice described in Vayikra 5, and is here mentioned only to introduce two new details of its law; one that the obligation to bring the *asham* is dependent on confession rather than on testimony, and secondly that if the intended recipient of the fine levied with the *asham* (the "fifth") is dead and has no heirs (in other words, he is a convert to Judaism), the money goes to the *kohanim*. Why this is the place to fill in these two gaps left over from the *parasha* in Vayikra is truly a mystery, and we shall leave this for the meanwhile.

3. *Sota* and *nazir*. The first deals with the procedure to test a married woman whose husband suspects her of infidelity, the second with the laws governing the practice of asceticism known as *nezirut*, whereby one abstains from wine, avoids contact with the *tum'a* of a corpse, and does not cut one's hair. These are very important and interesting halakhic subjects – in fact, each one merits an entire *masekhet* in the Talmud – but the connection to the narrative of the setting up of the *machane* and the *mishkan* is quite unclear.

The Sages questioned the placement of these two *parashot*, not in relation to the surrounding narrative but to each other.

Why is the *parasha* of *nazir* next to the *parasha* of *sota*? To tell you that anyone who witnesses a *sota* in her mortification should separate himself from wine, which leads to fornication. (Rashi 6,2, quoting the gemara in Sota 2)

Now, while this is itself a *drush* about the connection between sensual indulgence and sin, and is therefore not directly relevant to the *pshat*, I think it gives us a clue to understanding the connection of these *parashot* to the larger narrative theme of our *parasha*. For what the Sages are identifying here is a common theme in these two *parashot*, and that is hedonism. Indeed, neither *parasha* is about sin per se. The *parasha* of *nazir* is not telling us that it is a sin to drink wine (and of course the Torah does not in fact think so). Similarly, the *parasha* of *sota* is not about the prohibition of adultery (even though there surely is such a prohibition), but about the social ramifications of betrayal and mistrust within the family. In fact, the *sota* is not an adulteress, but only suspected of adultery, and there may not have been any sin committed, at least not in the technical sense. And so, while each of these two *parashot* is important in its own right, their placement **here** should be understood in their social context. The Torah is contrasting the setting up of the *machane*, the camp, which is not merely an arrangement of living quarters but is the expression of Jewish society, centered around the dwelling of God and at the same time supporting it, with a social phenomenon which places the pursuit of pleasure as the goal of human existence.

These *parashot*, I contend, should be understood, in context, as continuations of the expulsion of the *teme'im* from the *machane*. In that case, after setting up the physical plan of the *machane*, God instructs Moshe to establish a spiritual level for the inhabitants. *Tum'a*, ritual impurity, is contradictory to the indwelling of the spirit of God, which is the purpose of the *machane*. This opposition between *tum'a* and *shekhina*, while not self-

evident to us, is nonetheless attested to continually in *Sefer Vayikra*, which repeatedly warns against contaminating the *machane* in which God dwells. The most direct and striking example of this is in the purification ritual of Yom Kippur. Aharon the priest is instructed to "atone for the holy (place) from the defilements (*tum'ot*) of the Israelites, and from their transgressions and sins, and so also shall he do for the tent of gathering, **which dwells with them in their *tum'ot*** (*Vayikra* 16,16)." It is in fact impossible to ensure that there will be no *tum'a* in the *machane*, and the *mishkan* continues to remain and dwell in their midst – which is why an extraordinary process of purification must be performed once a year on Yom Kippur.

*Sota* and *nazir* continue this chain of thought unto the social field. The *machane* is a spiritual entity, which must remain not only pure but also focused on its purpose, which is to be the foundation for the presence of God within the Jewish people. The fabric of society is disturbed not only by ritual impurity, but by certain actions as well. The first is exemplified by *sota*, not so much because of the particular sin involved in her actions, but because of the effect her behavior has on the building block of Jewish society. Let us not forget that from the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*, the *machane* was based on the census of the Jews, individually ("count the heads of the Israelites"), to the houses of their fathers. Family structure was integral to the setting up of the *machane*. Adultery rends the fabric of Jewish society. What is more, even suspected adultery, arousing jealousy and suspicion, rends the fabric of Jewish society, and must be dealt with in order to preserve the *machane*.

*Nazir* itself is not about the *machane*. The insight of the sages quoted by Rashi is the key. The *parasha* is not about the dangers to society but the correction. It is not about *tum'a*, but about the expulsion of the *teme'im*. It is not about adultery, but about the process of examination and purification. *Nazir*, within the context of our *parasha*, is not about wine but about a method of preserving the *machane*. Under certain circumstances, abstinence and asceticism is a necessary facet of the *machane*. The reason is that hedonism, the common ground identified by the Sages as underlying the actions of the adulterous wife and the reaction of the *nazir*, is the true enemy of the integrity of the *machane*. This is not merely a pious *drush*. The *machane* exists only because it is centered on God, on the *mishkan*, and, by inference, on the service of God. There is no need to stress here that idolatry should not be found in the *machane*, even though it is obviously the most mortal enemy of the indwelling of God. The people have accepted God as their king, and therefore the construction of the *machane* does not require the uprooting of idolatry. Sin per se is not the problem here, as the people have accepted to worship God and follow His commands. Hedonism however is a human trait, which lurks in the hearts of all men. It cannot be simply expelled by fiat, by a decision and an acceptance of God's rule. Like *tum'a*, which is not a sin but arises from natural occurrences within the flow of life (and death), the pursuit of pleasure arises from within a normal society, and does not attack from outside. But the Torah apparently believes that it carries within it the seeds of the dissolution of the holy *machane* as the basis of the throne of God in the world.

And so, these two *parashot* are not about eliminating sin, or sinners, from the *machane*, in the way we were told to eliminate *teme'im*. They are about controlling hedonism, the pleasure principle, from the life of the *machane*, in one case by catching it after seeing how it already began to rend the social fabric, and, in the other case, by presenting an admittedly extreme response to protect the individual who has been exposed to its power.

This is followed by the short section of the priestly blessing (6,22-27). This too is a halakha that is in force in the future, but again, in context, it should be understood as God's response to the erection of the holy *machane*, after applying the safeguards we have delineated. "And they shall place My name on the Israelites, and I shall bless them (6,27)."

What about the section that I skipped, the *asham*? This remains a mystery, but perhaps, in light of what we have identified as the inner theme of *sota* and *nazir*, I can offer a suggestion. The person bringing the *asham* has committed the offense described in *Vayikra* 5, 20-26.

God spoke to Moshe, saying.

A soul who shall sin, and commit a trespass against God (*maala maal baShem*),  
And he denied his fellow concerning a keep (*pikadon*), or a surety, or thievery, or violence against his fellow;

Or if he found a lost object and denied it, and swore falsely concerning one of these that a man does, sinning therein;

And when he sins and is guilty, he shall return the theft which he stole, or the violence which he took, or the keep placed in his hands, or the lost object which he found;

Or all that he swore falsely about, and he shall pay it in the principle, and add a fifth to it, and give it to him to which it belong, on the day of his *asham*.

And he shall bring his *asham* to God.... (*Vayikra* 5, 20-26)

Notice that although the *parasha* describes monetary offenses between man, it is described as a *ma'al*, which I have translated as "trespass." In fact, that is the word that connects the section in our *parasha* to *Vayikra* 5, since in *Naso* the nature of the sin is not explained at all, other than to describe it as "*lim'ol ma'al baShem*". Now *me'ila* is usually used to describe a trespass against God, as one who takes something sanctified for himself (and that is the halakhic meaning of the word). Calling theft *me'ila* is unusual. Perhaps – as read in the context of our *parasha* – the Torah is reacting to social injury as an attack on the integrity of the *machane* as the basis of the Divine indwelling in Israel. It is not so much the particular sin against one's fellow that is the focus, but the effect on society as a whole, which is, once again, an attack on the *machane* as the seat of God. This interpretation is strengthened by looking at the two novel details of law added in this *parasha*. The first requires confession as the reason for the *asham*. While anyone who steals will have to compensate his victim if he is caught, the social upheaval, especially from the spiritual angle, requires that he mend his heart and attitude rather than merely his fellow's bank account. The danger to the *machane* is not the loss of money to some

individuals but the social attitude of exploitation. Secondly, if there is no victim to recompense, one must still pay – and the money goes to the priests. In other words, one pays it to society, and specifically to the guardians of the **sanctity** of society. This makes it clear that the *parasha* is not about justice, which is not the concern of *parashat Naso*, but social integrity in the context of the *machane Yisrael* and the *mishkan*.

There are three dangers described; *tum'a*, exploitation, and hedonism. The complete *machane* is one that has the mechanisms to protect itself from all three.