

ELEVATING OURSELVES THROUGH TORAH STUDY AND ETHICAL CONDUCT (BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

The holy Zohar notes that Parsha Nasso is the longest in the entire Torah, containing 176 verses, more than any other parsha. Why so lengthy? One book provides an answer: Parsha Nasso is usually read around the time of Shavuot, and especially just after it. Since we received the Torah on Shavuot, we are being told: “It’s very good that you received the Torah, but now you must study it more.”

This is similar to what happens when a person becomes a doctor. What does he do at that point? He opens up a medical practice. Similarly, a person who becomes a lawyer opens up a legal office once he receives his diploma. The same happens here: Once we have received the Torah on Shavuot, it is time for us to study it even more.

This is why Parsha Nasso is so lengthy: It teaches us that if we devote ourselves to the Torah, we must not choose the shortest path, but precisely the longest one. When we speak of a long path, it means extending the time that we study, not shortening it by constantly looking at the time and wondering when it will finally be over! We learn this from this week’s parsha, the longest in all the Torah. It is called nasso, a word that evokes hitnassut (“elevation”).

Actually, the Torah’s goal is to teach man how to elevate himself. We saw to our bitter regret how Hitler, when he planned on exterminating Jews, sent his generals a famous letter (which people have actually seen) in which he explained his reasoning: Jews are an ethical people, and if Jews have ethics, they have a different goal in the world, and therefore they present an obstacle for us, which is why we must wipe them out. Unfortunately, this is one of the reasons why Hitler did what he did, but thank G-d he did not succeed, for we have always preserved our morality. We have always been here, and we will always be here, right under Hitler’s nose.

Hence the Torah wants us to study and perform mitzvot so we can elevate ourselves. However we must keep one thing in mind: When people see a kippah-wearing Jew spitting or screaming in the street, their first reaction will be to say, “Look at that Jew!” Yet if somebody else were to do the same, suppose someone French, nobody would look at him or say anything.

When a Jew smokes on Shabbat, Hashem can forgive him. When someone eats treif food, Hashem can forgive him as well. Yet when someone profanes Hashem’s Name, by bothering his neighbors for example, there is no forgiveness, for such behavior is not ethical in any way.

This is the lesson that we learn from Parsha Nasso, which as we stated designates elevation. We must not feel superior to others or think that we are better than them, but instead we must elevate ourselves and become moral people. This means knowing how to conduct

ourselves in life, and working on ourselves in order to grow in the service of Hashem. Woe to the person who elevates himself without being filled with virtues in the service of Hashem.

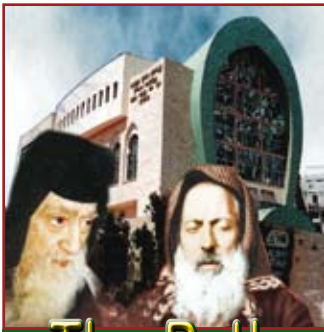
In Parsha Nasso, the Torah addresses whoever wants to elevate himself in the study of Torah, attain lofty spiritual levels, and be motivated by study. He must yearn to constantly elevate himself, for there is no limit to how far we can progress in the service of Hashem. This is why the parsha states nasso et rosh (literally, “elevate the head”) for yearning must begin with the head. This is good advice for everyone to follow, for if a person elevates himself and yearns to serve Hashem, he can reach the level of lighting the nerot, the lamps of the Sanctuary, and progress to ever-higher levels.

Reflecting on this, we realize that this is precisely man’s goal in life. This is the great difference between man and animal, for animals have no goal in life, as we very well know. No one has ever seen an animal punching a ticket at a train station or walking around with a suitcase. Even if we were to dress one up, as they do in the circus, it would still remain an animal. An animal’s entire life consists of eating and drinking, and then it dies. However man has a tremendous goal in life, and he possesses the ability to modify his nature. Unfortunately, this also means that he can become more animal-like.

Hence the Torah teaches everyone to behave as a man, as a true human being, without tending towards animalistic behavior. In other words, he must act ethically. Thus the Torah comes to help a person elevate himself. Again, this does not mean that a person should rise above others or become proud. That is completely out of the question, for the Torah is acquired only through humility (Perkei Avoth 6:6; Taanith 7a), and its sole objective is to teach man to be humble, to speak gently. This is why it helps man on both ends, training him to break away from his negative instincts, while at the same time teaching him to remain humane, moral, and humble.

Thus the Sages have said, “Who is strong? He who subdues his inclination” (Perkei Avoth 4:1). They did not say, “Who is strong? He who lifts heavy weights.” That’s not strength! True strength consists of knowing how to control one’s instincts, govern one’s anger, and conquer the negative aspects of one’s nature. It means, for example, that a wealthy person still acts with humility. It means that he will not feel superior to others, nor will he flaunt his wealth.

We learn all this from Parsha Nasso. Elevate yourself, yes, but rise above yourself, not others. Always be moral, humane, humble, and gentle with everyone, all through Torah study and ethical conduct.



The Path To Follow

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GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Calming the Speaker

When Yitzchak entered the bank, Yossef approached him and said: “Did you see what Shlomo did to me?” Obviously angry, Yossef proceeded to spew his bile. Yitzchak, who knew that Yossef possessed a good character, understood that his anger was only temporary. Yitzchak felt that if he listened to him, his anger would subside and he would return to his good-natured self. Yossef would also stop railing against Shlomo. Yitzchak might even explain to Yossef that if he were in Shlomo’s position, he may not have acted differently, for perhaps Shlomo did what he was obligated to do. Hence Yitzchak remained with Yossef and patiently listened to his enflamed remarks. Yitzchak acted properly, yet in his heart he must reject the words that he heard and not believe them.

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

For Those Who Seek Wisdom

The Gemara recounts that Rabbi Yochanan and Resh Lakish used to study together. When Resh Lakish died, Rabbi Yochanan experienced tremendous grief. The Sages tried to console him by providing him with the best study partner among them, Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat. Each time that Rabbi Yochanan pointed out something as they studied together, Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedat would say: “There is a Beraita that supports you.” Rabbi Yochanan replied, “When I stated a law, the son of Lakish used to raise 24 objections and I would give 24 answers, which consequently led to a fuller understanding of the law. Yet you say, ‘There is a Beraita that supports you.’ Don’t I know that my sayings are correct?” Rabbi Yochanan then tore his garments and wept, saying: “Where are you, O son of Lakish? Where are you, O son of Lakish?” In fact he wept until he lost his mind. The Sages then prayed for him, and he died (Bava Metzia 84a).

Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian asks, “Why did the Sages pray for him to die, instead of praying for his mental well-being?” He replies, “The Sages knew that even if their prayer was granted and his spirit revived, he would eventually find himself in the same state of mind because of his pain.” We need to examine this story carefully, for elsewhere in the Gemara it is stated that Rabbi Yochanan’s ten sons died during his lifetime (Berachot 5b). Yet not only did he accept to be consoled over their deaths, he even used his grief to console others. When his tenth son was boiled to death in a cauldron before his very eyes, he took a small bone and kept it. The idea was that if he had to console other people who were mourning the death of a loved one, he could show them the bone of his son and say, “This is the bone of my tenth son. If I could be consoled, then you can be consoled!”

Rabbi Yochanan possessed incredible strength of character, even when he was about to die. The Mishnah tells us, “Do not comfort [your fellow] while his dead lies before him” (Perkei Avoth 4:18). Yet not only did Rabbi Yochanan accept to be consoled when his own son died, he even thought about how to console others!

However all this strength did not help him, for he lacked the clarity of mind that he enjoyed when studying Torah with Resh Lakish.

We find something similar with the Rambam: “A Torah student who killed unintentionally is exiled to a city of refuge, and his teacher must go into exile with him, as it is written: ‘And he shall live.’ We give him what he needs to live by, and for those who seek wisdom, a life without Torah is considered death” (Hilchot Rotzeach 7:1).

– Imrei Yehudah

A Pearl From the Rav

In his book *Pahad David*, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita writes: “In the book *Kovetz Sichos* by Rabbi Nosson Meir Wachtfogel Zatzal, it is stated that Heaven shows every person, at least once in his lifetime, both the truth and the way to conduct himself in life. Everyone sees this at a given time, and he must cleave to it with all his might, for his success depends on it. He must often repeat it to himself in order to infuse this simple fact into his heart. In so doing, he will be able to overcome life’s obstacles and gather his strength to lead the fight against his desires.”

To this we must add that if the time to recognize the truth has already passed, yet a person failed to perceive it, he should ask Hashem to awaken in him the ability to recognize the truth once again. Hashem certainly raises the Jewish people above all others. He chose us among all the nations and gave us His Torah in order that we could reach the fiftieth gate of holiness, and at the very least He will infuse us with a desire to bring Him satisfaction.

Deeds Are Required

It is written, “A man or woman who sets himself apart by making a Nazirite vow to abstain for the sake of the L-RD” (Numbers 6:2).

Rash cites the Sages in stating, “Why is the section dealing with the Nazirite juxtaposed to the section of the adulterous woman? To tell us that whoever sees an adulteress in her disgrace should vow to abstain from wine” (see Sotah 2a).

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk asks, “Why did the Sages say that one who sees the adulterous woman in her disgrace should abstain from wine? Since he saw her in her disgrace, he will certainly abhor evil and definitely not sin. Yet why is he given additional restraints in this case?” He replies, “The roots of evil are not eradicated through intellectual reasoning, but by concrete deed. For the man who saw the adulterous woman in her disgrace, no change whatsoever took place in his soul. He simply acquired a new view on life and its circumstances, and therefore his wisdom has exceeded his deeds and he is in much greater danger than before. He must therefore abstain from wine, for in this way his deeds will exceed his wisdom.”

No Need to Overturn Worlds

It is written, “All the days of his abstinence for the sake of the L-RD, he shall not come near a dead person” (Numbers 6:6).

Rabbi Shalom Levine, who was among the greatest disciples of Rabbi Shimon Shkop of Grodno, cited the words of the Baal HaTurim on this subject: “He must not come near a dead person, in order to tell you that when the Shechinah rests on him because he is a Nazir, we should not say that it is because he speaks to the dead.” In that case, we may ask what the Nazir actually did to merit it. He abstained from wine for 30 days, and he did not shave during that time, but is that enough to merit the Shechinah?

The answer is that when we do things that are not necessarily great, but they are done solely for the sake of Heaven, we will merit great things. Sometimes we have the impression that to reach lofty spiritual levels or achieve noble goals, we must “overturn worlds.” This, however, is not true. A person is judged in the details, in things that seem small. Avoiding wine for 30 days and not shaving during that time can lead to the Shechinah, but only if a person’s intentions are completely pure.

– MiShulchan Gavoha

True Blessings

It is written, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: ‘So shall you bless the Children of Israel’ ” (Numbers 6:23).

The Midrash states that the passage regarding the priestly blessing comes after that of the Nazir because whoever abstains from wine for the sake of Heaven merits all the blessings contained in the priestly blessing (Bamidbar Rabba 11:1). Since a person who is used to being well-fed is more likely, in general, to rebel on account of excess, all the blessings given in the Torah with regards to this world can only harm him. Thus as the wisest of all men said, “Riches [are] hoarded by their owner to his misfortune” (Ecclesiastes 5:12). As for a person who knows how to set limits and sanctify himself with regards to the pleasures of this world, as well as with the wealth that Hashem grants him – a person who performs good deeds and makes others benefit as a result – for him riches will obviously not be harmful. This is what the Midrash states by asserting that whoever abstains from wine for the sake of Heaven will merit the blessings mentioned in the priestly blessing. Since he has proven himself by emerging victorious from the trial of riches, these blessings will automatically be true blessings for him, meaning that they will help, not harm him.

The Allusions of the Offerings

It is written, “[Nethanel] brought his offering: One silver bowl...” (Numbers 7:19).

Rashi explains: “Silver bowl. The numerical value of [these two words] in Gematria comes to 930, corresponding to the years of Adam, the first man.”

In the passage dealing with the offering of Nethanel, Rashi found numerous allusions to Adam, to Noah and his descendants, to Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob, to Moses and Aaron, to the Kohanim, Levities and Israelites, to the Torah, Prophets and Writings, to the Ten Commandments, the 613 mitzvot, and so on.

Why did Rashi mention all these allusions (originally noted by Moses HaDarshan) with regards to the offering of Nethanel, who brought it on the second day? Why didn't Rashi mention these allusions with regards to Nachshon, who brought his offering on the first day? After all, Nachshon's offering was exactly the same as Nachshon's, and it also contained these allusions! The answer is that since the first tribal leader brought the exact same offering as the second, Rashi explained the intentions of the latter in order to tell us that he did not imitate the first. Instead, every detail pertaining to his offering carried its own particular intentions and allusions.

Although Nethanel's offering had a specific significance to it, what he brought was exactly the same as the first tribal leader. Therefore the Midrash gives a lengthy description of the reasons of each leader in particular, although their offerings were the same. This is because no two leaders had the intention of doing the exact same thing.

– Chiddushei HaRim

Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Nasso moves from the organization of the people and the Levites within the camp, which began in Parsha Bamidbar, to the position of the Sanctuary among the people. The parsha begins with the role of the Gershonites and Merarites in transporting the Sanctuary, as well as the command to number them. It continues with the rules for preserving the people's bond of purity with the Sanctuary by expelling the impure from the camp, and by making the Sanctuary the focal point of Jewish life. Thus the Sanctuary was the place where a person who sinned against his fellowman was to make restitution to the priest. It was also where man and wife presented themselves when he became jealous, and where the Nazir would come to shave his head and bring an offering at the end of his vow. Also, Hashem's blessing of Israel would emerge from the mouths of the priests who served in the Sanctuary. All the tribes participated in the inauguration of the altar and the Sanctuary by means of the offerings that were brought by the tribal leaders, one offering for each of the twelve days that followed the anointing of the altar.

ESHET HAYIL

He'll Live Even Longer

Rabbi Shalom Schwadron recounted that he was once in the home of the gaon Rabbi Isser Zalman Meltzer Zatzal, who was sitting down with several people around him. Since they had been there for a while, Rebbetzin Beila Hinda came into the room and asked them to quickly finish up, for Rabbi Isser Zalman had not yet eaten on that day.

One person got up and said to her, "Why are you driving people away? We've already seen rabbis who receive guests for longer periods of time, even without having eaten."

The Rebbetzin left and went to see Rav Schwadron, who was sitting in another room. She said to him, "He doesn't know that I'm protecting my husband like the apple of my eye. The reason is because when I was engaged to Rabbi Isser Zalman, he sent me a telegram telling me that he had contracted typhus. Since his life was in danger, he told me that it was alright if I cancelled our engagement." The Rebbetzin then explained that her family asked her what she was going to do, and she told them that she would have to think about it. She then went into her room, and about an hour later she came out and told them that she wasn't going to cancel the engagement. "Afterwards," she recounted, "I went to the Chafetz Chaim, who promised that Rabbi Isser Zalman would live longer than people in better health, and so I took it upon myself to protect him with all my strength!" – Sheal Avicha Veyagedcha

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

The Cigarette That He Didn't Smoke

It is written, "May the L-RD lift His face to you" (Numbers 6:26).

The Mishnah states, "The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the universe, it is written in Your law, 'Who does not respect persons and Who does not accept a bribe' [Deuteronomy 10:17]. Yet do You not respect the person of Israel, as it is written: 'May the L-RD lift His face to you'? He replied to them: 'Shall I not lift My face for Israel, seeing that I wrote for them in the Torah, "You shall eat and be satisfied, and you will bless the L-RD your G-d" [ibid. 8:10], and they are meticulous [in reciting a blessing] if the quantity is but an olive or an egg'" (Berachot 20b).

We need to understand why Hashem is partial towards Israel simply because they are strict when it comes to quantities of an olive or an egg. What kind of measure for measure response does this constitute? The answer is that normally, when a person receives a gift from an important figure (even an ordinary gift with no great value), he will view it with great importance because of the prestige of the giver. The Children of Israel are partial to Hashem in this regard, for although His gift is small, it is so precious in their eyes that they recite a blessing upon it, for the One Who gave it to them is important and cherished in their eyes. Therefore Hashem is partial towards them and accepts their way of serving Him, despite being imperfect. He shows them just how important they are in His eyes, and He responds to them measure for measure.

The story is told of a Jewish man, a good friend of the king, who was appointed as the minister of finance. This Jew had many enemies who hatched all kinds of plots against him, but without success. One year the king's birthday fell on Shabbat, and the man's enemies felt great joy at the possibility of bringing down this Jew. The king held a feast on his birthday and invited all the ministers, including his favorite Jewish friend, the minister of finance. In the middle of the meal, the guests asked the king, in honor of the occasion, to offer each of them a cigarette. They were actually laying a trap for the Jew by this request: If he smoked the cigarette, they could say that he was unfaithful to his religion, so how could he be faithful to the treasury? Yet if he refused to smoke it, they could say that he was being disrespectful to the king!

When the king arose and offered them all a cigarette, they each took it and began to smoke. When he reached the Jew, he took the cigarette and placed it in his pocket. Once everyone had finished smoking their cigarette, the Jew got up and said, "As for me, since the cigarette I received from the king is so precious, I am going to make a special gold box studded with precious stones and pearls. I'm going to place this cigarette in it, and in this way I'll always remember that the king offered it to me. As for my colleges, they discredited the king's honor without reason by asking him to offer them a cigarette, and then proceeding to smoke it." When the king heard this, he became angry and severely punished them. However he felt even greater admiration for his favorite minister, bestowing even more wealth upon him, measure for measure.

This is what the Talmud is telling us: The Children of Israel are strict with themselves to the degree of an olive, meaning that they even appreciate something small because Hashem is the One Who gives it to them. Therefore Hashem can be partial towards them.

– VaYomer Avraham

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

The Torah is Your Wisdom and Your Understanding

A man went on a distant journey, leaving behind a son in Eretz Israel who studied Torah. As his final day approached, the man composed a will in which he bequeathed all his possessions to his slave, except for one thing, which his son would choose for himself. When the man died, the slave took the man's will along with his entire fortune and traveled to Eretz Israel. He said to the young man, "Your father has died, and his will gives me all his possessions except for one thing, which is yours for the choosing."

What did the son do? He went to his Rav and explained the situation. The Rav said, "Your father was very intelligent and fully understood the Halachah. He thought: 'If I leave all my possessions to my slave, he'll run off and squander them. I will give them to him as a gift so he protects them, and my son will choose for himself one thing from among them all.' When you go with the slave to the Beit Din and he shows them your father's will, you should declare: 'My father stipulated that I should choose one thing for myself from among all my father's possessions, and so I choose his slave.'"

This is precisely what the son did. He therefore acquired his father's slave and everything he owned, for one who acquires a slave also acquires the slave's possessions. Thus King Solomon said: "To the man who pleases Him, He has given wisdom, knowledge, and joy" – this is the father; "but to the sinner He has given the urge to gather and amass" – this is the slave; "that he may give it over to one who is pleasing to G-d" – this is the son (Ecclesiastes 2:26). Hashem keeps the money of the wicked so the righteous can benefit from it.

– Tanhuma, Lech Lecha 8

A TRUE STORY

Eternal Possessions

It is written, "Every man's holy things shall belong to him. Whatever a man gives to the priest, it shall belong to him" (Numbers 5:10).

The king of Spain's minister of finance, Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, had enemies who denounced him to the king. They conspired against him by claiming that he had stolen funds from the royal treasury by misappropriating large amounts of money. They demanded that the king hold an inquiry, which the king was obliged to do in order to establish a detailed account of all the money in question.

When the minister of finance presented himself before the king, he claimed that his wealth amounted to a value that was, in reality, only a tenth of the actual amount. The king, knowing that this figure was much smaller than the minister's actual wealth, was furious with him and wanted to know why he was making this claim. The minister bowed and said, "Your Majesty, I have written an additional list that contains all the possessions that are at my disposal. They are not really mine, however, for Your Majesty can decide to take them from me at any time. The amount I mentioned represents what I have given to charity. That money belongs to me alone, for nobody can reclaim the merit of a good deed." The minister's words allude to the verse cited above: "Whatever a man gives to the priest" – the money or financial value that he expended on a mitzvah or for tzeddakah – "shall belong to him." It can never be taken away from him, and thieves can never steal it.

– Torat HaParasha

IN THE LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

The Angel Would Come to Him

It is written, "Manoah arose and went after his wife" (Judges 13:11).

Here our Sages have said: "Manoah was an am ha'aretz [ignoramus], since it is written: 'Manoah arose and went after his wife'" (Berachot 61a).

This statement seems odd, since Manoah had to follow his wife because she was showing him where to find the angel! The book Toldot Yaakov Yosef addresses this issue in the following way:

A Jew heard from a preacher that a man who truly has faith in Hashem is assured of being given everything he needs, meaning that he will never lack food. This Jew decided to do the same. He went to sit by the furnace and read psalms for the entire day, not paying attention to anything else. After a few days, a merchant arrived at his home and made him an interesting offer. He had a good deal of wood to sell at a low price, and he suggested that the man accompany him to his town and help him sell it. This Jew, however, didn't want to hear about it. He said to himself, "If this merchant needs me, let him come with his wood." In fact this is precisely what happened, for the merchant brought his wood to the Jew, and in one of the logs he found some gold that made him extremely wealthy.

This is what the Sages meant by saying, "Manoah was an am ha'aretz," for Manoah should have reasoned that if an angel had been sent to him, then he didn't need to go and find him. Instead the angel would come to him.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Israel of Shklov – The Author of Peat HaShulchan

The gaon Rabbi Israel Ashkenazi Zatzal was a young student of the Vilna Gaon. Born in 5539, he was known as a tremendous Torah genius from his youth, for he possessed a sharp mind and was an expert in every Torah field. For ten years he served as the Rav of Shklov, the town whose name is forever linked to his own. When his great teacher the Vilna Gaon left this world, however, Rabbi Israel moved to Eretz Israel and settled in Sefat, where he led the Ashkenaz community. He devoted himself entirely to the Jewish people in Eretz Israel, drawing up laws and ruling that children are permitted to not obey their parents when the latter refuse to let them go to Eretz Israel.

When an epidemic broke out in Sefat in 5594, Rabbi Israel worked ceaselessly to save Jewish lives in the city. He also demonstrated superhuman strength after the great earthquake that struck Sefat in 5597. He suffered greatly at the hands of those who tried to denounce him, but a man like Rabbi Israel was not about to give in. In his great love for the Holy Land, he worked ten times harder for Eretz Israel and the yishuv.

Rabbi Israel went on to write his great work Peat HaShulchan, in the introduction of which he recounts his mishaps. He also writes that he found satisfaction in his vigorous activities for the Jews of Eretz Israel and the yishuv. His other published works include Taklin Chadetin (on Yerushalmi, Shekalim) and the responsa Nachala U'Menucha. Rabbi Israel was known for his great piety, and once during a dry spell he stood like Honi Hameagel and prayed until it began to rain. On Sivan 9, 5599 Rabbi Israel Ashkenazi departed for the celestial academy, and his body was laid to rest in Tiberias. May the memory of the tzaddik be blessed.