

## PRIDE, THE STUDY OF TORAH, AND ETHICS

*Rabbi David Pinto Chlita*

**T**he Zohar states that Parsha Nasso is the longest of the Torah, containing 176 verses, more than any other. Why is this so?

The commentators have offered an explanation: Parsha Nasso always falls around the time of Shavuot, and in general after it. We are therefore being taught that after the giving of the Torah, we should not be content with this event, but must commit ourselves to learning even more Torah.

The situation may be compared to a man who becomes a doctor. What does he do at that point? He opens a medical practice. A lawyer as well, after passing the bar, also goes into practice. The same applies to the Torah: After having received it on Shavuot, everyone is obligated to engage in studying it.

Hence this week's parsha is the longest of the Torah. It teaches us that it is not by choosing the easy path and cutting back on our learning that we actually invest ourselves in Torah. On the contrary, we must increase our learning and not constantly check the time to see that it is finally over! This is the lesson that we learn from the length of this week's parsha. Nevertheless, our Sages have declared that we must teach Torah to our students in a concise way! Actually, this does not mean reducing the amount of Torah that we learn, but to finding a simple and brief method for these teachings to be more easily absorbed.

The parsha is called Nasso, a root that designates elevation. In fact the goal of Torah is to teach man how to elevate himself. Our Sages have said, "[The Torah] makes him great and elevates him" (Pirkei Avot 6:1). Regrettably, we know that when Hitler (may his name be blotted out) decided to annihilate the Jewish people, he sent his generals a well-known letter (one seen by others) in which he explained why he sought to destroy the Jewish people. What follows is an extract from that letter:

"The Jewish people possess ethics, and if Jews have ethics, then they have a different objective in the world. Therefore they present an obstacle for us, which is why we must wipe them out." Sadly, this is one of the reasons for what Hitler did, but thank G-d he did not succeed, for ethics have always been rooted in us. We were, and we will remain, whether he wanted it or not.

That is why the Torah wants us to study it and perform mitzvot, so that we may progress and elevate ourselves. Nevertheless, there is one other point to understand in regards to ethics: When a Jew wears a kippah on his head and spits or screams in the street, people's first reaction will be: "Look at that Jew!" The same behavior by a non-Jew will not arouse such a response.

When someone smokes on Shabbat, or does not eat kosher, Hashem can forgive him. On the other hand,

if he causes a desecration of Hashem's Name, such as by bothering his neighbors, forgiveness becomes impossible because his actions are unethical. It is like when we see a youngster misbehaving in the street, and we immediately ask about his father, his teacher, where he grew up, and where he studied. The same goes for Jews: Everyone knows that we are the children of G-d, and therefore they will immediately say: "Look at how that Jew is behaving!"

This is the moral lesson that we learn from Parsha Nasso. The term Nasso designates elevation, and clearly it does not mean elevating oneself above others by claiming to be superior to them. Rather, it means elevating oneself by being an ethical person, by acting properly, and by working on oneself so as to progress in the service of G-d, as we have already said: "It makes him great and elevates him."

We may add that this is also the connection between Parshiot Nasso and Beha'alotcha. At the start of the former we read, "Raise the head of the sons of Gershon" (Bamidbar 4:22). Instead of "the head," why doesn't it say: "Raise the family of Gershon"? This is to teach us that if we want to raise the head, where the brain resides, then we must banish from the brain all tendencies for evil and all other desires that disrupt it in serving Hashem. This is how we elevate ourselves in spirituality, through ethics. Hence the verse means that if we want to raise the head, then we must garish (chase away) what are called "sons," meaning whatever is secondary and unnecessary.

Therefore if we want to dislodge the evil inclination that sits in the brain, we must elevate ourselves in the service of G-d by the study of ethics. This is the only way to fight it.

That is precisely what Parsha Beha'alotcha comes to teach us. In fact the lighting of the lamps of the Menorah alludes to the fact that "a mitzvah is a lamp and the Torah is light" (Mishlei 6:23). This parsha speaks of the lighting of the Menorah with olive oil. Now the lamp alludes to the soul, as it is written: "A man's soul is the lamp of Hashem" (ibid. 20:27). It is only by studying ethics and Torah that the body is sanctified, and that the soul becomes content with living in such a sanctified body.

There is more. In Parsha Nasso, the Torah speaks to anyone who wishes to advance in learning and wants to attain great heights, whoever thirsts after the study of Torah. For this, he must aspire to climb higher and higher, for there are no limits in elevating oneself in the service of G-d. Hence the Torah demands that we raise the head, for aspiration must start with the head. This means that if we elevate the head with lofty aspirations, we will then arrive at "lighting the lamp" and we will grow more and more.



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**Rabbi David Hanania  
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**CHEVRAT PINTO**

207 West 78th Street  
New York - NY 10024

Tel: 1 212 721 0230

[www.hevratpinto.org](http://www.hevratpinto.org)

[hevratpinto@aol.com](mailto:hevratpinto@aol.com)

Editor-in-Chief:

**Hanania Soussan**

In reflecting upon this, we realize that such an outcome is what differentiates man from animal. The latter has no goal in life, for no animal has ever been seen punching a train ticket or walking with suitcase in hand. Even if we tamed it, it would still remain an animal, since all its desires are instinctive, such as eating and drinking, until the day it dies.

However man has greater aspirations in life. He possesses the ability to improve his natural tendencies, meaning that he can also change his human nature into something savage. Hence the Torah teaches every individual to become worthy of being called a human, to be an ethical being, not to

act like a savage. As such, the Torah will come and help man to elevate himself, to lift himself very high.

A person must not forget, however, that he cannot grow proud over others, for the Torah can only be acquired by the humble (Pirkei Avot 6:6; Taanith 7a). Its main objective is to teach man to act with humility, to speak gently, to be discreet. Hence it helps him in two ways: It elevates him by breaking his negative tendencies, and it enables him to remain humane, ethical, and humble.

## Real Life Stories

### Why Weren't the Netivot HaMishpat's Supplications Answered?

It is written, "He shall cause the woman to drink the bitter waters" (Bamidbar 5:24).

The Maggid of Jerusalem, Rabbi Shalom Schwadron Zatzal, recounted the following story as he heard it from the mashgiach Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian Zatzal:

The Rav of Alisca, who was a great tzaddik, told me that in his youth, he leafed through the archives of the Lissa community, where Rabbi Yaakov (the author of Netivot HaMishpat) had served as Rav. He found a terrible incident that occurred to the daughter of the gaon, who was a widow. This happened just before the wedding of the widow's daughter, the Netivot HaMishpat's granddaughter. Both women had climbed into a carriage in order to travel to the neighboring town to buy clothes and other things for the widow's daughter, now fatherless.

The non-Jewish driver, who knew why the widow and her daughter were making this trip, immediately realized that they must be carrying a large sum of money. He therefore changed course, and instead of arriving at the neighboring town, he brought them to a suburb of Lissa. There he hastily summoned his friends, and together they robbed the widow and her daughter of all the money they were carrying.

Because these thieves feared that the two women would go to the police and accuse them of premeditated theft, they tied them up. Then they lit a stove and went to gather wood to fuel the fire, their intention being to murder the two women and burn their bodies to get rid of their remains. In this way, they thought that there wouldn't be any trace of them left, and therefore no way to bring the thieves to justice.

As they began to implement their plan, the widow and her daughter were lying on the floor, tied up and weeping over their bitter fate. Nevertheless, they were praying and hoping for deliverance, for the Sages have taught us: "Even if a sharp sword rests upon a man's neck, he should not desist from prayer" (Berachot 10a).

In the meantime, the thieves had lit the fire and were now waiting for it to burn with greater intensity. They were sitting around a table, discussing how they would divide the money, meaning who would receive little and who would receive much.

The driver vehemently argued that he should get twice as much as the others, since he had initiated the whole thing. If he had not shared his plan with them, nothing would have happened. As for

his friends, they thought that they should all share equally, and that it wasn't right for anyone to receive more than others. Dividing the spoils should be done equally among them all, no exceptions, they argued.

Time passed as they discussed things at this "high" moral level. The tone of the discussion was getting very heated, and shouting could be heard from outside the house. All of a sudden the door flung open, and standing at the threshold was a German police officer. He just "happened" to be passing by, outside of the house, when he heard people arguing and screaming. He therefore wanted to know what was going on.

The thieves remained silent. Then they got up and left without looking back, quickly fleeing from the house and leaving all the money behind on the table.

When the officer saw everyone leaving, he realized that something very serious was going on, much more than a simple argument. He entered the house and looked all around, and was shocked to see two women on the floor, tied up and weeping over their bitter fate.

The officer approached and asked what had happened. Who had tied them up, and why were they there, on the floor? Once the widow and her daughter told him everything, he took a knife and cut their cords, gave them back their money, and released them.

#### Isolated with a Man

That night, the author of Netivot HaMishpat appeared in a dream to his daughter, the widow, and said to her: "Know that when I was told about the disaster that came upon you, I ascended to a lofty place and begged for Divine mercy. However I wasn't answered. Why wasn't I answered? Because you had transgressed the prohibition against isolating yourself with a non-Jewish man when you traveled in that carriage with him!

"I then ascended to a higher level, and there I begged for mercy on my daughter and granddaughter, requesting that the merit of the Torah I taught by writing Netivot HaMishpat should work in your favor. At that point, my supplications were accepted on high, and in the end you escaped from death.

"From now on, be careful in regards to the grave prohibition against isolating yourself with a man!"

This story was told to the Lissa community by the daughter of the widow, the woman who actually experienced these events. As she dictated the story, they recorded it in the annals of the community as a perpetual reminder.

Thus ended Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian's account.

### My Name Among Them

It is written, "Moshe and Aaron and the leaders of the assembly counted the sons of the Kohathites" (Bamidbar 4:34).

Why is it that for the census of the Kohathites, it does not say "the sons of Kohath," as in the case of the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari, for the expression actually used is "the Kohathites" [haKehati]? Since their census was for the purpose of bearing the Ark, the Holy One, blessed be He, combined His Name with theirs in order to save them from being consumed. He placed a hei at the beginning of the name and a yud at the end of it, thus making Y-h, as if to say: "G-d will deliver them from death." This confirms what it says in Scripture: "To deliver their soul from death" [Tehillim 39:19]. – Bamidbar Rabba 6:8

### The Consequences of Sin

It is written, "They shall expel from the camp every leper, and everyone who has an emission" (Bamidbar 5:2).

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught: When Israel stood at mount Sinai and said, "Everything that Hashem has said, we will do and we will hear" [Shemot 24:7], there was none among them with an emission, or leprosy, lame, blind, dumb, deaf, or an imbecile. In reference to this occasion, Scripture said: "You are entirely fair, My beloved, and there is no blemish in you" [Shir HaShirim 4:7]. When they sinned, however, there passed but a few days before men with an emission and lepers were found among them. In reference to that occasion, Scripture said: "Command the Children of Israel, that they shall expel from the camp every leper, and everyone who has an emission." – Vayikra Rabba 18:4

### Personal Honor

It is written, "The kohen shall take sacred water in an earthen vessel" (Bamidbar 5:17).

Why an earthen vessel? Hashem protects the honor of the daughters of Israel, even the most impious among them. In fact if that vessel had been made of copper, or any other metal, it would have survived this incident, and the woman's shame would have endured because of it. An earthen vessel, on the other hand, would have been broken and the incident thus forgotten. – Midrash Hagadol

### A Complete Blessing

It is written, "May Hashem bless you" (Bamidbar 6:24).

Through offspring, as it is written: "Behold, for so blessed is the man who fears Hashem" (Tehillim 128:4).

Another explanation: "May Hashem bless you" – in your business. In fact we read, "You have blessed the work of his hands" (Job 1:10), meaning that whoever obtained a penny from Job was blessed.

Another explanation: May everyone be blessed by you, as it is said in regards to our father Abraham: "All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your offspring" (Bereshith 22:18). Let people say, "May the One Who blessed Abraham bless you as well." Likewise it is written, "By you shall Israel bless, saying: 'May G-d make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh'" (ibid. 48:20).

Another explanation: "May Hashem bless you" – by giving you a long life, as it is said: "Now Abraham was old, well on in years, and Hashem had blessed Abraham in everything" (Bereshith 24:1).

Another explanation: "May Hashem bless you" – by giving you students, as it is written: "If You bless me and increase my borders" (I Chronicles 4:10) – borders referring to students. – Lekach Tov

### Blessing and Protection

It is written, "May Hashem bless you" (Bamidbar 6:24).

"May Hashem bless you" – through money: That you do not live in a country where taxes are imposed per head, nor in a country where fines are imposed and you will be asked for your gold. On the contrary, "May Hashem bless you."

Another explanation: "May Hashem bless you" – through sons; "and guard you" – through daughters. In fact daughters need protection, as it is written: "Hashem is your Guardian; Hashem is your protective shade" (Tehillim 121:5). – Midrash Tanchuma

## In the Light of the Parsha

### The Study of Torah Raises the Head

Our Sages instituted the reading of Parsha Nasso for the Shabbat immediately following Shavuot. In fact on this day of the giving of the Torah, every single person learns more Torah and improves the way he fulfills mitzvot. Yet as soon as the following day, everyone returns to work and distances himself from the good intentions he had on that day. Even if we all resolve to improve our behavior and increase the time that we study Torah for the entire year, our daily concerns make us unwittingly forget these good resolutions, the result being that we fail to honor them. Sometimes we may even lose hope and say, "I can't respect all the commitments I've made!" Furthermore, our Sages instituted the reading of this parsha immediately after Shavuot, for it begins with the words nasso et rosh ("take a census"), but which literally means "raise the head." The term nasso designates elevation, as if to teach us that although we must support our family, and that keeping all the commitments we made during Shavuot appears difficult to us – even impossible – we should never get discouraged or lose hope. We must absolutely close the door to the evil inclination and prevent it from telling us: "Since you can't keep all the commitments you've made, what's the use of keeping any of them?" We must remove it from our heart and fulfill even just a few deeds, whatever we can do, at the very least.

This is what the Torah wants to teach us by nasso et rosh: Even if we do not succeed in putting into practice all the resolutions that we made, we should not be distressed; we must not let the evil inclination discourage us! On the contrary, we must elevate ourselves and act as best we can! How do we achieve this? It is by setting aside a time for learning Torah, something which will allow us to rid ourselves of that evil adviser, as our Sages have said: "I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as its antidote" (Kiddushin 30b).

Hence it is written: "Raise the head of the sons of Gershon" (Bamidbar 4:22) – do not read Gershon, but Gerushin, which means "divorce." The Torah divorces man from the evil inclination: As soon as a person studies it, the evil inclination leaves him, as our Sages have said: "Evil spirits leave anyone who is infused with Torah."

We know that every man has the duty to support his family, and that he cannot necessarily study Torah throughout the day. Let us therefore remember the story mentioned by our Sages: "Rabbi Idi, the father of Rabbi Yaakov bar Idi, used to spend three months traveling and one day at the study house [i.e., it took him three months to reach the study house]. ... Rabbi Yochanan said... 'Whoever studies Torah even one day in the year, Scripture accounts it to him as though he had studied the whole year through'" (Chagigah 5b).

Thus if a person cannot engage in the study of Torah full time, he should make an effort to study it for at least a few hours in the morning or at night. He will then be able to keep the resolutions that he made on Shavuot, and the Torah will elevate him, as we read: Nasso et rosh – the study of Torah raises the head.

Nevertheless, if a person fails to immerse himself in Torah immediately after Shavuot, and if he does not immediately respect the commitments that he made on the festival, the Torah will not last with him, even if he commits himself to learning a little later on. Since his learning will not have started just after the giving of the Torah, he will forget it! Thus our Sages explain that if we hear a Torah teaching and put it into practice, that teaching and what we learn from it will endure with us (Sifrei, Devarim 48). Nevertheless, if we forget the first teaching that we heard, we will not internalize the following ones either. In regard to this subject, Megillat Chassidim states: "If you abandon me for one day, I will abandon you for two" (Yerushalmi, Berachot 9:5).

During prayer services, our teacher the Maharil Diskin would usually pray in his own room, which adjoined the main hall where the congregation prayed, for which he served as the chazan. He trembled as he prayed with a pleasant voice, like a servant making requests before his king, like a son admitting his wrongdoings before his father.

His disciple, the gaon Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal Shapira, once carried out a mission for him. To thank and reward him, the Rav revealed the reason for his isolation during prayer services. Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal, who could be trusted, clearly kept this secret, although he told people that the Rav had revealed this secret to him, and that naturally he didn't understand why the Rav had confided in him.

One day Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal looked through the open door, and he was deeply moved by what he saw. It was at the end of Arvit on Shabbat, and he returned home shaken and overwhelmed. Before reciting Shalom Aleichem, he declared: "We are preparing to welcome the ministering angels, the angels on high. Yet I have just come from an angel who lives among us. I saw him during the blessing Magen Avot, and I noticed that as he recited the passage: Lefanav na'avod beyira vafachad ['We will serve Him with fear and awe'], his face started to burn like a torch. Indeed, the vein on his forehead swelled to the size of a finger! A shiver ran up my spine: To experience such reverence for the Creator, such a tangible fear of Heaven! I was convinced that whoever sees him at that very moment would acquire the reverential fear of Heaven and the Creator!"

Upon hearing this, his young son Ben Tzion decided to merit this gift: The fear of Hashem. From then on, each Shabbat he would stand facing the door of the Rav's room. He would gaze upon his holy face, which became fiery red when he recited in trembling: Lefanav na'avod beyira vafachad. This brief glance influenced the boy in all his ways, and throughout the week people would often hear this young boy, only five years old, murmuring with fear and trembling: Lefanav – na'avod – beyira – vafachad. The Rav's congregants were used to this ritual, and following the recitation of Vayichulu, they made way for the boy, who was pushed towards the Rav's room so he could admire the expression on his holy face. One of the congregants once questioned the boy's father, Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal, about this: "Are you not afraid that the statement in the Gemara [Chagigah 16a] will be fulfilled, namely that the sight of anyone who looks at a prince will be diminished, for the Shechinah rests on him, as it is written: 'You shall place some of your majesty upon him' [Bamidbar 27:20]?"

Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal calmly looked at him and answered in a serious tone: "It's a reasonable price to pay for acquiring the fear of Hashem!"

Thus Shabbat was different since Ben Tzion began looking at the Rav, and the weekdays were also different. The boy had elevated himself above all the youngsters his age, distinguishing himself by his pure fear of G-d and diligence in learning. When he was seven years old, his father sent him to bring Mishloach Manot to the tzaddik Rabbi Uri Borenstein, who was on his deathbed suffering from his final illness. Having barely entered the house, the tzaddik opened his eyes and asked his son, Rabbi Yeshaya (one of the Maharil's congregants): "Who is this boy? His face shines with a pure fear of Heaven!"

One day the boy was struck with pneumonia, a common and dangerous condition at the time, when antibiotics did not yet exist. The

boy was getting progressively worse, and all that people could do was hope for a miracle!

Friday night, at the very moment that the Rav would recite Magen Avot, the boy was burning with fever and overtaken by trembling, his entire body shaking. Then with chattering teeth, he cried out: Lefanav – na'avod – beyira – vafachad! A flood of sweat covered him, at which point his doctor declared with relief: "Sweating is a positive sign for the patient [Berachot 57b]. The critical phase has passed, and with G-d's help he'll recover." In fact on the following Shabbat, the boy had already returned to the Rav's synagogue and was gazing at his shining face.

Years passed, and the young Ben Tzion grew up to become one of the Maharil's most faithful disciples. On Tevet 29, 5658, the last night of his life, the Rav was lying on his bed with eyes closed, unaware that his disciples were around him. Immediately surrounding him were his most cherished disciples, Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, Rabbi Yaakov Borenstein, Rabbi Moshe Nachum Wallenstein, and Rabbi Tzvi Mikhal Shapira. Behind them were the rest of his disciples.

The room was packed, and yet absolute silence reigned inside, a holy and awe-inspiring respect. Suddenly, people felt movement within the crowd. Rabbi Ben Tzion, who was now 26 years old, was making his way through the crowd, ignoring the stunned and disapproving looks silently cast his way. He managed to weave his way to the bed of his Rav. Since the age of 21, he had been given the right to gaze upon the face of his teacher at such a time. He wanted, specifically at this moment, to exercise that right, for it may have been (better not to say – it's too terrible to contemplate) his last Shabbat.

The boy's decision seemed foolish, devoid of all logic. The venerated Rav, resembling an angel, was preparing to ascend and sing the praises of Heaven. He was unconscious and doctors had lost all hope of recovery. Rabbi Ben Tzion almost reached the bed of the Rav, but he could not displace his most important disciples, Torah giants! He therefore remained in the second row, which was more densely packed. However he got on his toes to look at the Rav's face, which was extremely pale.

Suddenly, everyone was overtaken by shivers. At the very instant that the Rav would usually recite the blessing Magen Avot, his face turned red like a torch, and the vein on his forehead swelled into prominence. Without a word, without anyone hearing the sound of his voice, the usual words Lefanav – na'avod – beyira – vafachad hovered over the room. Everyone was then seized by great trembling.

– HaSaraph MiBrisk

## Guard Your Tongue

### Excessive Praise

It is forbidden to praise someone excessively, even if not in the presence of those who dislike him. This is because it often happens that the speaker himself will end his praise by stating "except for his character fault of [such-and-such]." His listeners will then add, "Why are you praising him so much, since he has such a fault?"

– Chafetz Chaim