

Naso

What is the mechanism that defines community? That is the surprising question that Parshat Naso addresses. The question is a natural one, as well as one that needs to be asked again and again so that it may be addressed again and again. The details of the answer will certainly change with the times, but the fundamental structure to which the Torah expects any answer to conform, has not changed. It is that fundamental structure I want to explore.

It is not only a natural question in a general way, it has specific resonance for us this Shabbat. We have welcomed a new young woman into our community. What is the meaning of “community” in that sentence? We have also confirmed the place of two of our teens in the adult Jewish community. What is the meaning of the word “community” in that sentence? Not only that, but perhaps by way of providing an insight into the meaning of the word community in a way that almost mysteriously links all of those events together: the mother of one of our confirmands, Beth Oswald, was the teenage babysitter of the mother of the child who received her name this morning, Meredith Krain Schure. Coincidence? Probably, but still not without meaning.

Granted this is an exciting Parsha. It describes the laws regarding the jealous husband, laws regarding the Nazarite; it contains the priestly blessings. But in its opening segments, usually considered the more prosaic sections, the structure of community is outlined. It turns out not to be terribly mysterious. The Torah assigns tasks – *masaot*.

Let me interrupt myself here for a second. I want to point out that the Torah narrative is not inevitable. It is so familiar it seems inevitable, but if any story was

different, that different story would seem equally inevitable. The choice of presenting the tabernacle as portable – a folding Temple – flows seamlessly out of the needs of the narrative, but the narrative could just as easily have been structured to demand something other than a folding Temple. The Torah wants the tabernacle to be portable because a portable sanctuary is a pain in the neck (you’ll excuse my frankness). It is a burden. It is a burden that cannot even be managed by one person alone. If there is going to be a sanctuary at all, if there is going to be a place for God and humans to share the same space, if the sacred and the human are going to meet, it will only be because each person will recognize that the meaning of his or her humanity is precisely found in his or her recognition of an obligation to bear the burden of the other, which is ultimately the burden of the Divine, along side each other person equally so commanded.

The particulars that constitute the burden change – the obligation to carry them does not. It is the act of meeting that obligation that Parshat Naso defines as making a sacred community. The ongoing discernment of our obligations and our acting to meet them defines our sacred community today as well.

Meredith and Andrew – you have undertaken again to meet the most sacred obligation – to bear the burden of another human being. In meeting that obligation with Caroline and with Julia Rose, you are cementing your participation in this sacred community, following the role model of your parents and siblings. This is truly a blessing.

Rachel and Josh. Not every student who began Hebrew School with you is standing with you here today. The burden of belonging actively to the Jewish community proved too difficult for them. You have persevered and through that perseverance,

thrived. You have become connected and committed young people, also led along the way by your parents and extended families. This too is a blessing.

And in the presence of all of these blessings we can perhaps understand something inscribed even more deeply into the structure of our Parsha. Why do we translate the word Naso both as “count” and as “burden?” Why does the work of carrying the tabernacle require a second census? Because what else can you do with all of these blessings, but count them? Community both creates our blessings and provides us the place to appreciate them.