



ארגון רבני צהר



הסתדרות הציונית העולמית  
המערך לשירותים רוחניים בתפוצות

BSD

## Parashat Naso

### Above and Together with the People

-Rabbi Benayahu Bronner-

We already are familiar with the kohanim (priests) from the books of Shemot and Vayikra, where they are described as the “holy vessels” charged with performing the services in the Temple and with maintaining the spiritual level of the nation. This responsibility is also alluded to in the blessing given by Moshe to the tribe of Levi: “They shall teach Your ordinances to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel; they shall place incense before You, and burnt offerings upon Your altar” (Devarim 33:10). It would appear that the first part of the blessing is directed toward the entire tribe, while the latter part of the blessing, formulated in the words “they shall place incense before You, and burnt offerings upon Your altar,” is directed only toward the kohanim. The prophet Malachi also describes the priestly duty to educate and spread the word of Torah to the rest of the people: “For a priest’s lips shall guard knowledge, and teaching should be sought from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts” (Malachi 2:7). During the Second Temple period the status of the kohanim who returned to the Land of Israel with Ezra, who himself was a kohen, became elevated, and thus, besides serving in positions of leadership they also sought to maintain the spiritual level of the people.

In our parasha, Naso, we find that as part of their educational charge the kohanim were tasked with dealing with people from the peripheries of society.

The woman suspected of committing adultery (*sotah*), of “deal[ing] treacherously with him [her husband],” is brought before the kohen in the Temple. The *sotah* is a woman who is suspected and warned by her husband not to be alone with another man, but who allegedly failed to heed the warning. She is only “alleged” to have been alone with said other man since it is unclear whether or not she actually committed an adulterous act, with the purpose of the proceeding carried out in the Temple being to clarify this point. As part of the proceeding, the kohen dishevels the woman’s hair and forces her to take an oath and drink the bitter water, water in which the kohen soaked a piece of parchment containing Hashem’s name until the Holy Name was dissolved. If the bitter water harms the woman, her guilt has been proven. If she remains unharmed, she is said to receive the blessing of future children from her husband.

The chapter of *sotah* is instructive as to the role that the kohen plays in maintaining the sanctity of the Jewish family, which is a fundamental precept of the Jewish people. The book of Bamidbar begins with a census of the Jewish people, in which the Torah refers to the people in the context of their “families according to their fathers’ houses.” One may assume that the kohanim also dealt with family related matters in contexts other than the *sotah*, including day to day issues that may have arisen on a regular basis. In this way, the kohanim promoted family values by educating people from all walks of life.



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Another social outcast, albeit from the other end of the social spectrum, is the nazirite. The nazirite is a person who accepts upon himself a prohibition against consuming wine and related products. The Torah calls the nazirite at once “holy” and “sinner.” He is considered holy because he refrains from something that is permitted to him, while he is simultaneously considered a sinner since he causes himself to suffer unnecessarily. Our Sages draw a connection between the *sotah* and the nazirite by stating that the nazirite accepts upon himself certain abstentions because he witnessed the “*sotah* committing the adulterous act.” The trauma of witnessing the *sotah*, who is representative of complete and utter permissiveness, causes the witness to react by abstaining from bodily pleasures in order to distance himself from the risk of sin. However, the Torah teaches us that extremism, even when it tilts toward holiness, is not ideal. At a certain point the nazirite is scheduled to complete his period of abstention and bring a sin offering to the Temple to atone for the fact that he caused himself to refrain from the pleasure of drinking wine. The kohen is charged with accepting the nazirite’s sacrifices, while at the same time he apparently also was to discuss with him the motivation behind his decision to become a nazirite. The Talmud relates an episode concerning Shimon the Tzaddik (Righteous), who was a kohen and was once visited by a young nazirite. In the course of their conversation, the youth told Shimon the Tzaddik that he became a nazirite because he was very good looking and he would boast of his looks and particularly of his hair. I assume that the conversation between the kohen and the nazirite focused on the proper and desirable path to holiness and the worship of Hashem, a path which follows the middle road rather than that of abstention, with the sanctity of the kohanim representing the ideal track: connecting with both the material and the spiritual. In this way, the holy person is not removed from the people, but rather assumes a position of leadership and guidance to others.

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