

Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch

Naso 20 “Service of Service”

Good Shabbos, Shabbat Shalom. This Shavuot was definitely a unique experience, for many reasons. One difference was that traditionally, tikkun leil Shavuot means cheesecake and caffeine, but this year, I didn't consume either of them. Initially, I wasn't even sure if I'd manage to stay up the whole night, although I did. When you begin to feel drowsy at our traditional all-night learning, you have classes and camaraderie to keep you going. But when you're reading for that long by yourself, it can seem endless, and you just feel like nodding off.

But that feeling of tedium during Shavuot is actually a fitting segue to this week's parsha, which concludes with seemingly endless repetition. The parsha describes the sacrifices brought for the dedication of the Mishkan beginning on Rosh Chodesh Nisan. Although each tribe gave an identical daily sacrifice over the first 12 days of that month, the Torah reiterates the details, with the same wording, for each and every tribe. So understandably, some commentators ask, why does the Torah repeat this unnecessary information 12 times, instead of describing it once, and then stating that each tribe brought the same sacrifice?

The Bnai Yissoschar and other commentaries explain that although the physical nature of the sacrifices was identical, each tribe acted with its own unique intentions, and therefore it was crucial to acknowledge the details of each tribe's service. Because intention, not mindless action, is what truly matters.

This insight brings to mind what we've explained about the nature of teshuva during the High Holidays: teshuva essentially teaches that in life, **who you are** is more important than what you **do**. Your behavior may appear similar to the actions of countless other people. But your essence, your internal character and personality, is unique to you.

We've explained that in the book of Bamidbar, each successive parsha demonstrates more profoundly how individuality is balanced with membership in a cohesive nation, and how those two aspects of our identity need not be in conflict. Through these repetitive verses about the sacrifices of the various tribes, our parsha teaches that we may not seem distinctive from other group members on the outside, but our individual intentions will always capture what makes us unique.

The tribe of Levi is a case in point, and the Book of Bamidbar highlights the ways in which they exemplify this theme of individuality. They did not take part in the series of sacrifices during the dedication of the Mishkan; the tribe of Levi was the only tribe left out of the 12-day ceremony. But as our Sages tell us about the beginning of next week's parsha, B'haalotecha, Aaron's sadness over that exclusion leads God to give the honor of lighting the menorah to the tribe of Levi, through the Kohanim. Perhaps this is because the candle represents the neshama of an *individual*, fittingly replacing the expression of individuality of the offerings of the tribes in our parsha.

Moreover, at the conclusion of his Laws of Shmita and Yovel/Jubille, the Rambam famously tells us that the role of the tribe of Levi is to be uniquely devoted to spiritual endeavors, and through their example, to inspire every single human being – Jew and non-Jew alike - to attain this unique status of *individual* as well.

In this week's parsha, we read that the tribe of Levi are commanded to do what is known as *avodat avoda, service of service*. What is the significance of those words? The Talmud in Mesechet Erchin 11a explains that the Leviim would enhance the Mishkan services through their musical instruments and song. As the Zohar elaborates, in an orchestra, every instrument has a vital part to play; similarly, every individual person in a group should never be overlooked.

Last week on Shavuot, we commemorated the most powerful group experience in Jewish history, when the entire Jewish people received the Torah from God at the foot of Mount Sinai. As we look back on the complex events of this past week, the message of Naso, the Parsha which usually follows Shavuot, becomes particularly salient: We must have our eyes on the group, with proper respect for society as a whole, while at the same time, preserving the dignity of every single individual human being. Shabbat shalom.