

In Praise of the Mundane

This section of the Torah reading cycle seems to be filled with the mundane. Last week's *parsha* was replete with numbers, those which gave the Book of Numbers its name. This week's *parsha* (Naso) includes the repetition of the *korbanot hanesi-im*, the twelve identical offerings of the tribal leaders in celebration of the Tabernacle Dedication. These are great and easy for Torah readers, but also boring and mundane. Why are they here? Many answers are offered. But I want to share an original idea. Perhaps God wants us to realize that life is filled with mundane moments and repetitions. While life is punctuated with special moments, more of it is filled with ordinariness. How we live with routine can actually determine whether we have sanctity in life.

We might also note that Shavuot also usually falls around the time of these *parshiot*. Among the Shavuot offerings was one of barley, considered by Hazal to be animal feed, a very mundane food. Also, the Shavuot offerings were to be of *chametz* (see Vayikra 23:17). Here we are, just seven weeks after all that Pre-Pesach cleaning and work, and also all the ethical literature exalting *matza*, and now we have a *yomtov* that celebrates *chametz*. Perhaps we might say that Shavuot is the holiday that celebrates mundane-ness. We might say that, unlike other *yamim tovim*, Shavuot has no outstanding ritual or observance. It celebrates the Torah which gives meaning and structure to the routine, to the ordinariness of life.

I had a chance to imbibe this lesson quite deeply in the last ten days. After my trip to Portugal, I had scheduled hernia surgery. We had known it was coming for the better part of a year. In many ways, this surgery was easier for me than the hernias I had 35 years ago, since mine was done laproscopically. It was certainly interesting to have it done at the hospital at which I do some part time chaplaincy work ("Oh, Rabbi, usually we see you with your clothes on..." "Yes, you do, Dr. Velasco...") They did a terrific job, and I went home the same day. My wife took very good care of me at home.

Being at home that Shabbat, in spite of the discomfort and difficulty, turned out to be a most spiritual experience. I could not go far, so I spent my time davening, learning, and resting. I was able to say the words slowly and with kavana. Singing *zemirot* was difficult since my throat was sore due to the tube they inserted during surgery. Learning to do ordinary routine things again was very challenging. Actions that we often take for granted, like using the toilet, getting out of bed, going up and down steps, bending, and general mobility were not easy. But I was able to see the spiritual nature of these routine actions, to see them (as they should be) as gifts from Hashem. Those first *Asher Yatzar brachot* after surgery were profound experiences for me. I was very conscious of the Gemara's dictum (Nedarim 40a) that the Shekhina rests above the bed of a sick person.

I am trying now to integrate these lessons into my increasingly regular daily life as I get back to a normal routine. It is always good for the rabbi-chaplain to sometimes be on the other end of the patient-healer paradigm.

In the end, mundane-ness, ordinariness, repetition, and routine are often anything but routine. They are gifts from Hashem. May we be able to use them wisely and gratefully.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Shavuot Sameach!

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