

Parshat Naso: Communities of God Atara Cohen

After God counts those who belong in the camp of Israel in parashat Bamidbar and the beginning of Nasso - a sign of God's love for each member of Israel, according to Rashi - we find a starkly exclusionary passage:

2 Command the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse.

3 Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.

4 The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the LORD had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did.

ב צו את בני ישראל וישלחו מן המחנה
כל צרוע וכל זב וכל טמא לנפש:
ג מזכר עד נקבה תשלחו אל מחוץ למחנה
תשלחום ולא יטמאו את מחניהם אשר אני
שכן בתוכם:
ד ויעשו כן בני ישראל וישלחו אותם
אל מחוץ למחנה כאשר דבר יהוה אל משה
כן עשו בני ישראל: (פ)

We have learned that people with impurities from irregular discharges and contact with the dead are excluded from the temple. We might be able to reconcile this because we can accept that God's most holy place must have absolute perfection. But how can we exclude someone from the camp - from the broader community, for what might be a mere accident?

We know that the Torah cares about the feelings of those excluded because of impurity from the story of *Pesach Sheini*. When impure people are excluded from the *Korban Pesach*, they are given a second chance a month later. Why are the feelings of the impure people not taken into account elsewhere?

I am not the only one who is uncomfortable with these verses. The Netziv feels this difficulty as well, notes the particular language of "Tzav," "command,"

"Command the Israelites" - because it is a difficult thing
to send out of the camp of Israel

צו את בני ישראל. משום שהוא דבר
קשה לשלח חוץ ממחנה ישראל

According to the Netziv, the language of the pasuk acknowledges that the Israelites themselves would be reluctant to exile their fellow tribe members. Therefore, there is a particularly strong word of command to push them to do so.

This sentiment of Israelite unity seems to be a good thing. Why, then, does God command this?

Ramban's commentary on these verses exacerbates this problem. He writes,

"And you shall send them from the camp:" After the Mishkan was established, [God] commanded that they send the impure people from the camp, for the camp was holy and ready to accept the *Shechina*. This is a mitzva that applies immediately and for future generations.

"וישלחו מן המחנה" אחר שהקים את
המשכן צוה בשלוח הטמאים מן המחנה
שיהיה המחנה קדוש וראוי שתשרה בו
שכינה והיא מצוה נוהגת מיד ולדורות"

Ramban extends the three specific types of impurity in the verses to all types of purity. He explains that God's presence descends on the camp like God does on the Mishkan, so that impurity cannot be tolerated. This applies to both that specific time, and to all times the camp is together. These people are forever excluded from the camp - until they become pure. So how do we account for this exclusion?

The Mei Shiloach is so uncomfortable with the idea of excluding people based on impurity that he believes that the impurity has a moral valence. He writes,

“remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse.”

A person with *tzaraat* is anger because *tzaraat* is from the sin of evil speech. A person with an emission is one with excess desire, and one who is impure from contact with the dead is depression. And therefore the person with *tzaraat* is sent from the three camps because the trait of anger does not have a place in Israel... the trait of desire has no place with scholars... as does depression...

"וישלחו מן המחנה כל צרוע וכל זב וכל טמא לנפש." צרוע הוא כעס כי צרעת הוא בעון לשון הרע (ערכין ט"ו): זב הוא בעל תאוה, וטמא לנפש הוא עצבות. ולכן הצרוע נשתלח משלש המחנות כי מדות כעס אין לו חלק בישראל, והזב משתלח רק ממחנה לוי וממחנה שכינה, היינו כי מדות התאוה לא יאות לתלמידי חכמים, וטמא לנפש זה אינו משתלח רק ממחנה שכינה, כי גם בתלמידי חכמים נמצא לפעמים מדות העצבות כמ"ש בגמ' (תענית ד'). אוריתא הוא דמרתח ליה ורותחא הוא עצבות, ורק ממחנה שכינה משתלח כי עוז וחדוה במקומו.

According to the Mei shiloach, the only the people who are excluded are those who supposedly cannot exist in community.

However, this metaphorical reading is perhaps more disturbing than the pshat. The people with tendencies of anger, desire and depression that draw them apart are the ones we should reach out to include all the more!

I prefer to stick to a plain reading of the text. Perhaps we must see the camps as an extension of the Mishkan, that everything must be prepared to a high degree of holiness and purity. This does not mean that those with impurities are necessarily not included in the community, only from the construct of “the camp.”

In fact, at a time without the temple, creating community and inclusion brings the *Shechina* to us. We learn in the Babylonian Talmud in Brachot (6a):

In explaining Abba Binyamin's statement, Ravin bar Rav Adda said that Rabbi Yitzhak said: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is located in a synagogue? As it is stated: "God stands in the congregation of God; in the midst of the judges He judges" (Psalms 82:1). The congregation of God is the place where people congregate to sing God's praises, and God is located among His congregation.

And from where is it derived that ten people who pray, the Divine Presence is with them? As it is stated: "God stands in the congregation of God," and the minimum number of people that constitute a congregation is a quorum of ten.

From where is it derived that three who sit in judgment, the Divine Presence is with them? It is derived from this same verse, as it is stated: "In the midst of the judges He judges," and the minimum number of judges that comprises a court is three.

From where is it derived that two who sit and engage in Torah study, the Divine Presence is with them? As it is stated: "Then they that feared the Lord spoke one with the other, and the Lord listened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before Him, for them that fear the Lord, and that think upon His name" (Malachi 3:16). The Divine Presence listens to any two God-fearing individuals who speak with each other.

אמר רבין בר רב אדא
א"ר יצחק מנין שהקב"ה
מצוי בבית הכנסת
שנאמר (תהלים פב, א)
"אלהים נצב בעדת אל"

ומנין לעשרה שמתפללין
ששכינה עמהם שנאמר
אלהים נצב בעדת אל

ומנין לשלשה שיושבין
בדין ששכינה עמהם
שנאמר (תהלים פב, א)
בקרב אלהים ישפוט

ומנין לשנים שיושבים
ועוסקין בתורה ששכינה
עמהם שנאמר (מלאכי ג,
טז) אז נדברו יראי ה'
איש
אל רעהו ויקשב ה' וגו'

When we build community today, through shuls, minyanim or even *chavrutot*, we bring the presence of God. The Gemara makes no mention of the type of people that comprise these communities. Rather, we must bring in those we may not think to include, and they by their inclusion can help bring the divine into our lives.



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