

Shabbat Shalom.

This week, we're in parsha number two of the book of Numbers. A book detailing our ancestors' wandering Bamidbar, in the wilderness. You can imagine that for as long as we read this book this year, we'll be thinking about the ways in which we, too, are BaMidbar, in a desolate wasteland of confusion and misdirection, uncertain of where we're headed. Let's face it, a book called "In the Wilderness," automatically resonates in 2025, when we consider just how much we feel like we're lost right now: sad, anxious, and desperate for a Moses to guide us toward some Promised Land. I wish that Parashat Naso gave us something pithy to hold onto. Some juicy narrative that we could really relate to, given the global thrust toward authoritarianism, the rise of antisemitism, and the trauma of the war in Gaza. Or if not that, at least something uplifting that might make us smile and give us hope. But instead, we get a census. And if that weren't tedious enough, it's the same census we were working on last week.

Parashat Naso begins *in medias res*. *Naso et rosh b'nei Gershon gam hem.*¹ Take a census of the Gershonites also, God says to Moses. As the word "gam," or "also," suggests, this Torah portion continues the story of counting the Israelites by their names and their tribes as they continue their wandering in the desert.

When last we met Moses, at the end of parashat Bamidbar, after counting the numbers of male adults fit for war, he turns to the Levites, the specific tribe of Israel tasked with spiritual service. And what follows, into this week's parsha, is a description of the different subgroups of Levites who play distinct roles in the priestly cult. Of course you know the Kohanim, the priests, those descendents of Levi through Yocheved and her son, Aaron. But how about the levitical cousins? The slightly less famous ones, deputized to be *administrators* in the ancient Temple, if not clergy outright. Well, last week's parsha ends with describing one of them. The Kohatites, descended from a different son of Levi. These Levites didn't get to perform sacrifices but instead their special role entailed carrying the holy of holies, the Ark of the Covenant.

And here, at the outset of Naso, we meet the Gershonites. A different subgroup from yet another son. The phrasing is mostly identical to the way the Torah describes the Kohatites and the Merarites, the final Levite subgroup also described in this census: *L'mishp'chotam l'veit avotam*. According to their families and their fathers houses. Each of these three Levite tribes are counted in the same way. But only the Gershonites, at the beginning of this week's parsha, are noted "gam hem," with the words meaning "and also them." If all three are described identically, but only the Gershonites get a "gam

¹ Numbers 4:22

hem,” attached to their description...what, then, might be the unique significance of the Gershonites, in contradistinction to the other two?

At this point, you could be forgiven if you stopped listening. Oh my God, the rabbi is going on again about some absolutely obscure flourish in the Torah. Who ever heard of Gershonites anyway, you might wonder. Also did he just say “In contradistinction?” Who’s he trying to impress? And besides, is this really the most action packed part of the parsha?

And the truth is...no. I’ll admit. It’s not. The rest of the parsha deals primarily with the punishment for adulterous wives. So, given the choice, I’m sticking with the Gershonites.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the great Talmud translator and rabbinic commentator who died just a few years ago, points out something important about this specific group of Levites. Unlike the Kohatites, mentioned last week, who were tasked with carrying the Ark, the most important vessel in the priestly cult. And unlike the Merarites, who are chosen in this week’s parsha to carry the boards of the mishkan, the most basic elements of the tabernacle, the Gershonites were somewhere in between. They handled the things that needed to be handled: the ropes and materials that made the mishkan function, but which were neither totally sacred nor totally mundane.

The Kohathites could say they were stewards of the most sacred aspects of the Mishkan. They were exalted, and special. The Merarites could say they made the whole thing work, assembling the scaffolding upon which everything else stood, and feel satisfied that they had made something that you could look at. But the Gershonites had less of a finished product to point to when they had completed their task. One set of their cousins built the structure, another group carried the important parts. And of course their *most* famous cousins, the kohanim, got to eat all the meat. And get close to the action. But for the Gershonites, they had to accept their role as middle managers.

Rabbi Steinsaltz explains that this role was as essential to the mishkan as every other. But being stuck in the middle must’ve felt deeply unsatisfying. “Because of this,” he writes, “the Torah emphasizes ‘Take a census of Gershon’s sons ALSO,’ because these people must be remembered, they must be uplifted and told, in essence, that the Kohatites did not take all the plum jobs.”² According to Steinsaltz, the reason this week’s parsha begins with the *Gershonites* was to remind them that they mattered. That being in the middle – however exhausting and unglorified it might be – is still an honor. And of course, in many ways, the middle is what allows the whole enterprise to function.

² “Of angels and porters,” Adin Steinsaltz

This, my friends, is a sweet reminder to any of us who likewise feel like our middling goes without notice. When we feel like just because we're not the boss, who gets all the power, nor the laborer who can touch the fruits of their labor before their eyes...that somehow *our* hard work amounts to very little. Instead, says Steinsaltz, following this parsha, it all actually matters. The middle *really* matters. Not only is the work distinct, we might say, with its own significant impact. But let's be clear: neither the top nor the bottom would be able to do their jobs without the unglamorous work of the middle.

It turns out that "being in the middle," or "being between" has a special significance in our tradition. For what it's worth, Maimonides was kind of obsessed with the state of being in "the middle." In his Mishneh Torah, he referred to middling people as "beinonim," intermediate ones. And in his understanding, most of humanity is "beinoni," which is to say neither perfectly righteous nor perfectly wicked. For this reason, he believed that every person must try always to do what's right, as if every choice we make in this life really matters, so that we can tip the scale of our lives toward morality and justice.³

Following Maimonides' lead, I think I'm also kind of obsessed with being in the middle. Even though being in the middle can feel like being torn asunder by two sides whom I love...two opposing poles that are each certain that they are right. As you can imagine, interpersonally, and even spiritually, rabbis wind up being in the middle of two sides quite frequently. It's baked into our role. But all of us as Jews, are also often in the middle: at the intersection of competing values, sometimes opposite groups of people, holding both our universal and particular responsibilities. Being caught in between is generally excruciating, but it's even harder these days, when our political and cultural zeitgeist presupposes that being in the middle is an abdication of moral responsibility.

This of course applies to both the American political landscape and to the Jewish one, where if you choose not to stick to a script, you will be excoriated by one side or the other. It applies to any of us who are trying to maintain our senses of self while being in relationship with people of dramatically different backgrounds. And, notably, it applies to all of us who are desperate to hold our deep familial commitments to care for Israel and suffering Israelis in equipoise with our human, humanitarian, and Jewish commitments to care for suffering Palestinians.

Being "between" does not necessarily mean being in the exact middle of a continuum between two opposite poles. Very frequently, being "between " means being closer to one side than the other, maybe so close to a side that it appears almost

³ MT Hilchot Teshuva 3:1

indistinguishable to an outside observer. But being between allows for the possibility of change. Just as neither a Tzaddik nor Rasha can be changed on Yom Kippur, those who are convinced that they are uniquely correct or pure in their views...cannot be moved. But typically, they can't move others, either.

By contrast, the ones in-between can do both. And in a time when we all know something's gotta give, that the world must be moved and also move forward: how can we NOT accept the mantle of remaining beinonim?⁴

I draw this connection, friends, because from our many conversations in recent weeks, I can tell that there is a creeping malaise in this community about always having to hold on to complexity, or competing values, or making space in our hearts for as many different kinds of people as possible. A sense that being in the middle has been painful, and it would be so much easier to give up, or to merely pick a side. But as I read that commentary of the Gershonites this week, I thought of us all, in need of a little koach, a little boost. To remember that though remaining in the middle can feel unsatisfying or impotent, oftentimes playing that role is not only good, but essential.

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⁴ Final section adapted from Matt Green, Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, 5784