

NASO (NUMBERS 4:28-7:89)

Play It Again, Achira

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

It happens every Chanukah and it will happen again this Saturday.

"*Leining*," or Torah reading, is a very challenging endeavor that takes talent and perseverance to master. A good *Baal Kriah* --Torah Reader, makes a difficult job look easy. Typically, he has spent hundreds, if not thousands of hours over many years, reviewing the weekly Torah Portions, forcing himself to remember the correct "*Trop*," the traditional musical notes that accompany these verses, as well as mastering the correct pronunciation of the words themselves. A friend of mine who is a real pro tells me that in the early years after his Bar Mitzvah, he would spend 15 to 20 hours per week in preparation for this monumental, and somewhat thankless task.

And yet, this week, everybody's an expert. People who never approach the Torah Scroll to read from it will be pacing around the *Shul* without a *Chumash* (Bible), singing along with the Torah reader, correctly intoning each and every nuance of tune and pronunciation of the Torah text. Why, of all of the sections of the Torah, do people know this week's Portion so well?

The end of this week's reading includes the Torah Readings for each of the eight days of Chanukah, so it's a little more familiar than most. But still, why do people know it so well that they could recite it by heart?!

At 176 verses, "Naso" is the longest single portion in the Torah. However, the unusual length doesn't make it more difficult to read. In fact, it's easier because it is full of repetition. In describing the gifts that the princes of each of the twelve tribes brought to the Tabernacle for the dedication of the Altar, Chapter 7 uses words (and tunes) that are continually repeated in identical monotony:

"On Day number #____, the prince of the Tribe of_____, _____, son of _____. His offering was one silver bowl weighing 130 shekels, one silver basin weighing 70 sacred shekels, both of them filled with fine flour mixed with oil for a meal offering; one golden ladle weighing 10 shekels, filled with incense; one young bull, one ram, one yearling sheep for a burnt offering, one goat for a sin offering; and the following for a peace offering: two oxen, five rams, five male goats, and five yearling sheep. This was the offering of _____son of _____."

Twelve times the Torah mentions a prince bringing a gift. Twelve times the Torah spells out in detail exactly what he brought -- a carbon copy of yesterday's prince's gift. (On the first seven days of Chanukah, we read of the gifts that were brought on the first seven days of the dedication of the Altar in the desert. On the last day of Chanukah, we read days eight through twelve. Is it any wonder that everybody knows the reading by heart?!)

We know that the Torah doesn't waste words. Why is each prince's gift repeated word for word? Would it not have sufficed to write "*The following gifts were brought by each of the twelve princes of the tribes on subsequent days: One silver bowl weighing 130 shekels, one silver basin...*"?

There are two important lessons we can learn from the Torah's repetition of apparently redundant verses.

1) THE SINCERITY OF THE PRINCES

The Torah repeats each prince's gift in detail in order to inform us that each prince brought his gift with a new feeling of dedication and inspiration; it wasn't just an imitation of what yesterday's guy brought. While the ingredients were the same, each offering was new and different in the spirit in which it was given.

Have you ever come into *Shul* and found yourself uninspired due to the fact that today's prayers are identical to the prayers you said last time you were there? Wouldn't it be nice if traditional synagogues would allow for some personal creativity in expressing our prayers to the Almighty? Why can't we be like some other houses of worship where the prayer book is a loose-leaf notebook, allowing for inclusions and deletions?

The truth is that Torah Judaism leaves plenty of room for personal expression. While the main body of our prayers was composed by the Great Assembly over 2,000 years ago, it is fitting and proper for us to include our personal requests as well. However, truly inspired prayer comes less through new words from the mouth, and more through new feelings from the heart.

We never tire of breathing just "because we did it yesterday," nor do we decide to take a break from eating because it "no longer inspires us." Every moment of life is a gift from G-d and we need to look for the beauty and novelty in every priceless moment.

2) THE UNIQUENESS OF THE PRINCES

G-d wanted to demonstrate to the princes that each and every one of them was important. No one should assume that he or she is an unimportant blip on a screen, identical to everyone else.

It is very easy to view the rest of the world as anonymous. Did we ever stop to think, while sitting in a traffic jam on the FDR Drive, (or wherever!) that every other car out there contains a human being, someone who wants to get home just as much as we do, someone who also has to make a living and has a

family, and hates being honked at and being cut off by another car JUST AS MUCH AS WE DO?

G-d gave special notice to each and every gift giver, rather than viewing him as one of several duplicates of gift giver #1. The gift of Achira ben Eynan, prince of the Tribe of Naphtali (Day #12), was just as precious in G-d's eyes as the gift of Nachshon ben Aminadav of Judah (Day # 1).

Every other person, whether we know him or not, is special in the eyes of G-d. And so are we.

Have a great Shabbos.

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