

Dvar Torah by Rabbi Baum; June 5, 2020

Parshat Naso: Neighborhood Engagement as a Dominant Lesson in Social Distancing

Did you imagine or hope that the world would change because of the coronavirus? That racism, brutality and violence would dissipate? Did you dream that, in the face of ongoing illness, death and uncertainty, our society would become more unified and physically and emotionally prudent and balanced? Fewer simplistic and categorical accusations by mouth, pen, and keyboard?

It seems that so far lessons of the past have not been learned. We can all play a role in making some of these changes, if we look at ourselves first. In a recently published work on the Haftarat, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, z"l, explained that we should all be like the Nazir described in Parshat Naso. A Nazir takes a brief sabbatical from society in order to renew his or her sense of mission and purpose, not only to serve Hashem with newly acquired, self-centered growth and refinement, but to seek out others who are aching. The very small steps that are taking in exiting from a societal quarantine must include the lessons learned during our Nazir like experience. If they do not, we will not only have lost many lives in this pandemic, but we will have lost the opportunity to save other lives through a revised set of values and actions.

When we sit down with our families, or alone again, this Shabbat, it is worth reflecting on the message we should take from the terrible murder of George Floyd by police officers sworn to protect society but now charged with murder. We can make the wrong choice of exclusively focusing on the reckless looting by fringes at the demonstrations, on the misguided and dangerous failure of social distancing at these events, or even on the self-pious "defenders of liberty" who constantly judge others but have little self-awareness of their own treachery. That, however, would be a colossal mistake and we would miss the opportunity to emerge from this crisis with a transformed sense of purpose and mission.

During the race riots of 1966-67, Rabbi Norman Lamm, z"l, who passed away this week, justified the resentment felt against criminals who joined the protesters. However, he wrote that this resentment against the few cannot be used a "pious disguise" for "xenophobia, fear, racial antagonism, and innate bigotry." Instead, like Avraham Avinu, we must strive to put a bad conscience to use and judiciously strive for racial equality. That is the challenge for us and what should **dominate** the thoughts and discussions at our Shabbat table. We should ask how we can go beyond our previous attitudes and actions and, as stated in the Birchat Kohanim, yearn for more godliness in this world, blessing each other with wishes of peace. That should be our focus as we initiate plans for change. I studied a sermon that Rabbi Lamm delivered in May 1969, in which he lamented that, although we could send men to the moon, we were unable to function as a society on the ground. In the same week that SpaceX was launched, I could not ignore this story. When men landed on the moon for the first time in human history, a journalist asked Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman, z"l, rosh yeshivah of Ponevitch, "What is the attitude of Judaism toward this unprecedented event? Should this change the text of Kiddush Levana? We have always said: 'Just as I dance toward you but cannot touch you....' Here we say that we cannot touch it, and yet now we are stepping on its soil!" Rabbi Kahaneman, whose family and world had been so brutally destroyed in the Holocaust replied, "When I heard about this great event, I approached the windowsill, looked at the people in the street coming and going, and I said to myself, 'You wretched world, what a foolish world you are! We reach up and connect with the moon, but we cannot connect with our fellow man.'"

We need to look for opportunities to speak out against racial injustice and to meet our neighbors. Many years ago, as several of you reminded me this week, I was not supportive of efforts in the community to start a Jewish only basketball league for our children. My own children and many of yours benefited from the interactions that they had in the town-wide leagues, where they were able to engage beyond their "daled amot" of friends. These weekly gatherings allowed their parents to interact socially and to discuss common communal and familial concerns. This is a symbol of a larger issue in our towns. There are other opportunities for engagement, and we need to look for them. I know that some of our members took some steps this week to reach out to the broader community for discussions and fellowship. Along these lines, I encourage you to participate in the program next week that I will be hosting with a local faith leader and the Mayor of Teaneck. In standing up against racism, we must get out of our bubble and venture out beyond our shul communities to meet and interact with others. We should strive to use this Nazir-like life of isolation that has been imposed on us as an opportunity to become better and accomplish more than we ever imagined possible.