

PARASHAH ONE HUNDRED-ONE

Numbers 4:21–5:10; 2Kings 15:1–7; 1Corinthians 12:12–18

notes by Tim Hegg

In the one year cycle of readings, this *parashah* begins a new section, *Naso*, “Lift up,” in the sense of taking a census (נָשָׂא אֶת־רִאשׁוֹת בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן, “Lift up the heads of the sons of Gershon”). It follows the census of the Kohathites, and the instructions given to Aaron and his sons for the preparation of the sacred objects the Kohathites would carry on their shoulders (4:1–20). When the question was asked of the ancient Sages why a new *parashah* was started here, in a context that seems to simply carry on with the census of Levitical families, they gave two answers. First, a new *parashah* was begun to give honor to the firstborn son of Moses—Gershon. Secondly, the new *parashah* was delineated at this point in the text in order to distinguish between those “most holy objects” (4:4) that would be carried on the shoulders of the Kohathites, and the other objects of the Mishkan that would be transported in carts. The level of holiness accorded to the “most holy objects” is emphasized by the fact that they are carried on the shoulders of the priests, while the outer altar, curtains, pillars, sockets, and coverings are loaded into ox-drawn carts (7:7). Thus, the duties of the families of Gershon and Merari were to take down the Mishkan and its court after the most sacred objects were covered and removed, and then to pack and load the Mishkan itself into carts for travel.

The conclusion of the census for numbering the Levitical families who would transport the most sacred objects and the Mishkan itself is given vv. 34–49, with a total number of men from the ages of 30 to 50 being 8,580. Obviously, not each of these were needed every time the Mishkan was moved, so we should presume that they had some kind of schedule for their work assignments. This may be what is indicated in v. 49, where each was “assigned” to his particular duties.

As we have noted before, this emphasizes that each task, regardless of what it was, had a direct bearing on the overall success of the Mishkan’s service to the nation as a whole. In similar fashion, Paul, in our Apostolic portion, reminds us that each member of the body of Messiah has an important task to perform in order for the community of believers to function as God intends.

Our *parashah* goes on to give instructions regarding the separation of those who were ceremonially unclean through צָרַיִעַ (tz’rua’), זָב (zav) or corpse defilement (טָמֵא לְנֶפֶשׁ, *tamei’ lanafesh*). Our English translation of tz’rua’ is typically “leper,” though the word has a wider connotation, describing unnatural skin eruptions. Zav (from זָוַב, *zuv*) denotes an unnatural “discharge,” but does not include the woman who has given birth, the menstruating woman, and those with a discharge that lasts seven days or more, all of which may be natural and expected, rather than exceptional. It is possible that these were quarantined within the community (cf. m.*Nid.* 7:4). Corpse defilement required removal of the unclean person to the outside of the camp until ritual purification had been performed. Thus, the impurities here listed are of a severe nature because they are contagious. The tz’rua’ may be leprosy, and was therefore treated with due caution. Zav may signal the presence of a disease such as gonorrhoea. Corpse defilement, on the other hand, was primarily a matter of ceremonial defilement (though obviously death within the camp could also be accompanied by contagious disease). Thus, though these severe levels of uncleanness may have been guarded against for health reasons, the primary reason that such persons were to be quarantined outside of the camp was to guard the purity of the place where the Mishkan would be erected, as 5:3 makes clear: “so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.” The abiding presence of the *Shekinah* required that Israel’s camp remain pure. Once again, the emphasis of the Torah is

that God desires to dwell among His people, but it is their requirement to make a place fit for His dwelling.

In 5:5–10 we are given additional insights into the matter of how a person who has sinned against his neighbor may be restored. In the initial giving of the laws relating to fraud (Lev 6:1–7 [Hebrew 5:20–26]), nothing is said about confessing one’s sin. Moreover, it is clear that the confession is made to the one who has been defrauded and not to the priest, for in the event that the one who was defrauded has died, confession and payment of restitution is made to a remaining relative. If no relative remains, then the payment of restitution (which presumably is preceded by confession of the sin) to the priest.

Here we may have further insight into the matter of “unintentional” sins as contrasted to the “sin of the high hand” (cf. Num 15:30-31). For while it is possible to defraud one’s neighbor unwittingly (which is usually how “unintentional” is understood), in general, defrauding a person is done with some level of intentionality. Thus, in Lev 6:1-7 where the laws pertaining to fraud are originally given, the text denotes one who has “deceived” (כחש) or has committed “robbery” (בגזל) or extortion (עֲשָׂק, literally “oppression”) or has sworn falsely (נִשְׁבַּע עַל-שָׁקֶר). While the Sages try to explain how each of these could occur without one’s knowledge, it seems most obvious that fraud, as prescribed in this text, is done knowingly and with clear intent to fraud. Yet, in the Leviticus passage, restitution of the original value plus one fifth, and an accompanying sacrifice, absolves the guilty party, which seems to go counter to the idea that guilt offerings were prescribed only for “unintentional sins” (cf. Lev 5:15, 18).

The addition of confession of sins in our *parashah* may help give us insight on this matter. For intentionality may better be understood as one’s attitude after the sin has been committed rather than simply one’s original motivation for sinning. In the moment of weakness, when one gives into the sinful nature and sins, the wayward motivations of the depraved nature intentionally sins. But the question is what one does after sinning. Is the heart smitten with remorse? Is there eventually a resolve to right the wrong, both before one’s neighbor as well as before God? If so, God offers a way of forgiveness and restitution. Such a change of heart is the mark of repentance, which is always accompanied by confession of the sin. On the other hand, if one sins and has no remorse, nor is there any movement toward repentance and confession, and a willingness to make restitution, then this signals a hard heart, or a defiant attitude toward God and one’s neighbor. There is no forgiveness for a defiant heart, which is the sin of the “high hand,” another way of denoting rebellion.

If we follow this line of reasoning in trying to understand the meaning of “unintentional sins,” we may conclude that an unintentional sin has less to do with the original motivation that perpetrated the sin, and more to do with one’s willingness to confess one’s sin and seek to make restitution after having committed the offence.

This may bear on a verse such as 1John 1:9—

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

The question that is rarely asked when reading this verse is: “what happens if a person refuses to confess their sin?” In other words, does the blood of Yeshua atone for sins that a person is unwilling to confess, even though that person is fully aware of his or her sins? The answer seems clear:

the mark of a person who has truly been born from above, in whom the Spirit of God dwells, is that of repentance and confession. A person who refuses to acknowledge and confess their sin, making restitution to the one who has been defrauded, is not displaying the character of someone whose sins have been forgiven.

Similarly, in Numbers 15:37–31, “sinning unintentionally” is put in contrast with the “sin of the high hand” (usually translated “defiantly”). The so-called “unintentional sin” should be understood more in the sense of “commits an error” (תִּחַטָּא בְּשִׁגְגָה) as over against sinning “defiantly” (תַּעֲשֶׂה (בְּיַד רָמָה). What marks the difference between the two is how one acts after the sin has been done. One who confesses their sin, and seeks to make restitution (as our *parashah* describes) is forgiven. The one who remains defiant in their sin, is banished—no forgiveness is offered.

This spiritual reality is demonstrated in the laws of purities noted in our *parashah*. Those with severe impurities were moved outside of the camp in which the Mishkan would reside. And our *haftarah*, which contains the notice of king Azariah of Judah contracting leprosy, teaches that even royalty were not exempt from this law. The text notes that “Adonai struck the king, so that he was a leper to the day of his death.” This comes immediately after the notice that Azariah failed to destroy the high places, and as a result, the people continued to sacrifice and burn incense there. In some measure, the spiritual welfare of the people was the charge of the king, and in leaving the high places in tact rather than destroying them as God had commanded, the king had led the people into idolatrous worship. The malady with which the king was struck banished him to the “outside of the camp” where he lived in a “separate house.” One wonders if, had he destroyed the high places, he might have been healed of his disease. The fact that he did not shows an unwillingness to confess and repent of his sin, and the text notes specifically that “he was a leper to the day of his death.”

Repentance, then, is a gift of God. It is God’s grace when our hearts are soft to His rebukes, and confession of sin results. For it is by His grace that we seek His forgiveness and receive it.