

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Naso

### What Personal Lessons Can We Glean from the Princes' Identical Gifts?

#### In a World Filled with People Does Hashem Appreciate Each of Us Individually?

I have often wondered how a mother of ten and a grandmother of more than fifty can appreciate all her children and grandchildren. How could she ever remember all their birthdays? How would she be able to show them all that each one has a special place in her heart? Some people may ask the same question of G-d. Since his world is filled with millions of people why would He care about little me? The truth is that our hearts expand with the birth of each child, and so does our capacity to love. How much more so, does Hashem care about us, being the source of love, Hashem's infinite love embraces each of us individually. He is not only aware of all our actions, but He also knows our thoughts and intentions, our hardships, and our strivings. "I, Hashem, search the heart, test the kidneys, to give every one according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (*Yirmeyahu* 17:10). Each of us is important to Hashem, no matter how many other people exist in His world. If you think G-d is a punishing judgmental G-d who is out to get you, just take a minute to focus on all the blessings in your life, and even when you look back to your past hardships you may discover, how you became a better person as the result of having gone through them. "Hashem your G-d is in your midst, a Mighty One Who will save. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will be silent in His love. He will jubilate over you with song" (*Tzefaniah* 3:17). We all need to feel important and appreciated. That's a basic human need. Sadly, in our time and age, many of us lack this basic need, and mental illness has been on the rise for a while. Generation Z born between 1997 - 2012 colloquially known as Zoomers are well acquainted with the Internet and social media from a young age. A 2022 survey of Gen Z young adults (ages 19 through 24) found that 42% are diagnosed with a mental health condition. Perhaps this is due to the lack of appreciation being reduced to a number by digital technology. Alyssa Mancao, a therapist in Los Angeles with a Gen Z client base notes that having grown up with the internet causes a lot of Gen Z to compare themselves with others. Her clients talk about comparing everything from their physical appearances to their career paths with their peers and influencers online. "There are a lot of feelings of inadequacy, and what I'm seeing is a lot of comparison," she said. *Parashat Naso* literally means lifting. Its reassuring message is that each of us has value in our own right, we are so much more than just a digit.

#### Upholding the Dignity and Value of Each Individual Person Created in the Image of G-d

In the holocaust, the Jews were reduced to a number. The prisoner numbers have become a synonym for dehumanization that struck the deportees of the concentration camp. These numbers were to serve efficient 'management' of camps, performed by the SS teams. In contrast, *Parashat Naso*, which likewise is about counting the Jewish people, demonstrates the Torah way of imbuing each person counted with dignity:

**סַפֵּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּרֹק דַּ פְּסוּקֵי בַּ נְשָׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי קֵהֶת מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי לֵוִי לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְבֵית אֲבֹתָם:**

"Make a count (נָשָׂא/*naso*) of the sons of Kehat from among the children of Levi by their families, according to their fathers' houses" (*Bamidbar* 4:2).

The word *Naso* is a verb with a range of meanings, including to lift, to carry, and to forgive. Together with the word שֹׂרֵשׁ/*rosh* - 'head' it is used to apply to counting. The Torah is not short of other verbs

meaning to count, such as *limnot*, *lispor*, *lifkod*, and *lachshov*. Why, then, did *Parashat Naso* not simply use a regular word for ‘counting’ instead of “lift the head”? The choice of “lifting the head” teaches us one of the most central beliefs of Judaism. Since we are created in the image of G-d, every one of us has infinite value. We are each unique. None of us is interchangeable with anyone else. Discovering G-d, singular and alone, our ancestors discovered the human individual, singular and alone (Inspired by Rabbi Yonathan Zacks, *Lifting Heads, Naso*, 5778).

### **Do we Need to be Better than Others to be Valued?**

*Parashat Naso* is the longest Parasha in the Torah. Chapter Seven in the Book of Bamidbar consists of 89 pesukim/verses which list the beautiful gifts brought by the princes of the twelve tribes, one tribe per day. The description of their gifts is repeated twelve times because the princes of each tribe brought exactly the same gifts to the Mishkan. The way of the Torah is to avoid writing any word needlessly. Just one extra letter may teach us many significant legal principles. Yet, regarding the offerings of the Princes, the Torah apparently, needlessly goes ahead and repeats the exact same thing again and again. Wouldn't it have been simpler to say Nachshon ben Aminadav offered such and such, and so too each of the princes of the remaining eleven tribes? In our competitive Western World, people often want to show how great they are, usually at the expense of someone else. The later princes could have added something more extraordinary to their gifts to make them stand out. That's not the Torah way. We don't lift ourselves up by stepping on others! What was a perfect gift for the first prince was just as perfect for the twelfth one. A Chassidic rabbi with many children was once asked in an interview how many children he had. He replied, “One!” Incredulous, the questioner persisted, and the rabbi clarified: “I was correct when I told you that I only have “one.” I have one Shemuel, one Leah, one Sarah....” How often do we hear of conflicts when parents, teachers, and bosses play favorites? That's not the Torah way. We don't lift up some while putting down others! (Based on By Rabbi Doniel Z. Kramer, Ph.D., *Parashat Naso: Like Gifts to the Divine, Every Human Being Has Value*).

### **Lifting Ourselves in Appreciation for Our Personal Relationship with the Divine**

Rav Shlomo Breuer explains that the Torah repeats the description of the offerings twelve times to teach us that each Prince actually brought a different offering. This is because what a person gives is not as important as how he gives it. Two people can donate \$1000 to B'erot but for one person it's a drop in his bucket whereas for another person it's a major contribution. When we look beyond the surface, we will learn to appreciate each person for her effort and intent. Hashem devoted so many repeated Torah verses to describe the same gift to show us how much he values each of them. He didn't belittle any gift with “the same old” attitude. Each gift and gift giver deserved full appreciation because each prince put his own special stamp on his gift, making it unique and personal. The repetition of identical gifts thus teaches us to appreciate the gifts we receive even if we have already gotten the same, valuing the intention even more than the actual gift. The offering of the princes was as beloved before Hashem as the song sung by the Jewish People at the Reed Sea.” The song at the sea says “This [zeh] is my G-d and I will glorify Him” (*Shemot* 15:2), and here it is written, “This [zeh] is the offering of Nachshon ben Aminadav” (*Bamidbar* 7:17). The offering of the princes was as beloved before Hashem as the two Tablets of the Covenant. Regarding the two Tablets, it is written, “From this side and from that side [m'zeh u-m'zeh] they were inscribed” (*Shemot* 32:15); (Midrash *Vayikra Rabbah* 8:3). The word זֶה/zeh - ‘this’ always refers to a personal experience. It signifies seeing something concrete enough to point at it with a finger (see Rashi

*Shemot* 12:2). At the Song of the Sea each Israelite experienced a personal relationship with Hashem expressed by “This is my [personal] G-d...” Likewise, at the giving of the Torah, each Jew felt that Hashem spoke directly to him. This too applies to the princes’ gift to the Mishkan, although identical, each tribe gave his own personal gift as an expression of his unique relationship with G-d. (Inspired by Rav Frand, *Lessons Learned from Gifts of the Nesiim*). We always read *Parashat Naso* the Shabbat following Shavuot representing the peak and the highest Jewish experience – hearing the words of the Torah given directly by Hashem. How thankful we must feel for our special relationship with Hashem. Tapping into this gratefulness helps us feel dignified and valued. It empowers us to proudly “lift up our heads” in thankfulness for our unique connection with the Divine. We can feel valued as the “chosen people” – chosen to sanctify our lives through the acceptance and observance of the Torah.

### **Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Naso – Some Tips for Lifting Ourselves Up Without Stepping on Others**

Many of us have the habit of comparing ourselves to others. This is a major source of unhappiness and low self-esteem, stemming from our society’s focus on competitiveness. Constant comparing yourself to others is unhealthy and can harm your self-esteem. Measuring yourself against others can make you over-anxious and can lead to discouragement. Learning to stop comparing yourself involves improving your self-esteem and confidence in your own unique value.

- **Develop Awareness** – We often make social comparisons without realizing we’re doing it. It’s a natural act, done without consciousness. The solution is to become conscious – and bring these thoughts to the forefront of your consciousness by being on the lookout for them. If you focus on these thoughts for a few days, it will soon be hard not to notice, and it keeps getting easier with practice.
- **Stop Yourself** – Once you realize you’re making these comparisons, give yourself a pause. Don’t criticize yourself or feel bad – acknowledge the thought, and gently change focus.
- **Don’t knock Others Down** – Sometimes we criticize others just to make ourselves look or feel better. Taking someone else down for your benefit is destructive. It forms an enemy when you could be making a friend. In the end, that hurts you as well. Instead, try to support others in their success.
- **Count Your Blessings** – Focus on what you do have, on what you are already blessed with. Think about how blessed you are to have what you have. Appreciate the people in your life who care about you, and even just being alive!
- **Strengthen Your Emunah that Hashem Truly Loves You for Being You** – Hashem created you because He needs you in His world. He created you for a purpose and has a particular job for you in His world. Although the world is filled with people, no one is exactly like you. No one has exactly your soul-print with the qualities and talents that distinguish you. You are the only one who can serve Hashem in your personal way.