

Jerome Mandel

BJC: 2 June 2023

14 June 2024

Dvar Torah: Nasso

Numbers 4:21-7:89

It is an honor for me to be the warm-up act for Marilyn Laken's major entertainment event this evening introducing us to her new book, *I've Never Been Old Before*. Not only have I recently discovered that I am old, but I have no idea how I got here, nor what to do now that I am here. I look forward to Marilyn's talk.

The parasha for this week, Numbers 4:21-7:89, contains three disparate matters. I'll mention two and discuss the third which I take to be the most relevant.

The final chapter, seven, is the one single instance in the entire Bible of extensive verbatim repetition without the slightest variation. It is an epic inventory of offerings brought by each of the twelve tribes to the Temple. What is interesting, if not surprising, is that the offerings of each tribe are identical. This is meant to show that the twelve tribes are all exactly equal. Of course, they were not all exactly equal. The tribes on the plains were mostly farmers. The tribes in the mountains were mostly shepherds. Some included villages, cities, shrines. Some were on a trade route. Other, pagan tribes, people, religions surrounded and influenced them in what scholars call their 'god-congested area.' And so on. The priestly writers of the text, however, were avoiding political controversy and maintaining a myth of tribal equality that did not in fact exist. In this case, peace among the tribes was more important than truth.

Forty-five years ago, a friend of mine at National University in Singapore applied to the government for a grant to study which of the three ethnic components of the state—people from the Malay Peninsula, from India, and from China—learned English, the lingua franca of Singapore, best. The government was eager to fund that research, but only so long as it showed that speakers of

Malay, Tamil, and Mandarin mastered English with equal facility regardless of education, age, or wealth. I think we should all find comfort in knowing that some Biblical paradigms continue to appear in modern societies and in this case, I think, for the same reason.

Chapter six discusses the rules governing the nazirite oath. What, you cry, is the nazirite oath? A nazirite oath is a bargain with God. A man or woman swears an oath to God that if God does something, the petitioner will do something. For example, a college student might cry 'O God, if you give me a good grade on this exam, I'll never drink beer on Wednesdays again.' The most famous nazirite was Samson, whose oath to God for success in battle was perpetual, that is, not limited to a specific event or duration. In order to validate a nazirite oath, the petitioner must avoid all beer, wine, and vinegar, avoid contact with corpses, and not cut his or her hair. Unfortunately, Samson was also a drunk who slaughtered many Philistines. When Delilah cut his hair, Samson was toast.

Another Biblical example is the judge, Jephthah, who vowed that if God helped him defeat the Ammonites, on his return he would sacrifice, as a burnt offering to YHWH, the first living thing that came out of his house (Judges 11). Perhaps he was expecting to be welcomed by a servant, but alas! it was his darling daughter. Boy, was he unhappy. But in order to fulfill his vow to God, whom he believed helped him destroy the Ammonites, he sacrificed her, unless he didn't. The Biblical text is not clear on this and feminist scholars have recently argued that she escapes execution.

The Bible regularly condemns the practice of child sacrifice, associated with the worship of the pagan god Moloch and present among various different people in Canaan. If Jephthah's daughter *is* burned, this would be one of the few acts of child sacrifice occurring among the Hebrews in the Bible. The story of Abraham and Isaac is another example. But we must remember, the story of Jephthah's daughter is a myth, a story, a folktale defining the nazirite oath and celebrating obedience to God. It never really happened.

By far the most important portion of this parasha deals with a married woman whose jealous husband suspects her of adultery. He brings her with an offering to the priest at the Temple in Jerusalem, or to a local synagogue or shrine. The priest mixes the ashes of the offering with dirt from the floor and dissolves it with water in a goblet. Now remember: the streets then were muddy, rarely paved; donkeys and camels and horses and other cattle were not yet potty-trained. So the dirt from the floor of the shrine was not particularly what we would call hygienic. The event is referred to as 'the ordeal of bitter water' for obvious reasons.

The priest has her drink the potion, declaring that if she is guilty the waters will make her "thigh to sag" and "her belly swell." It is unclear whether the result of this ordeal becomes known immediately or several months later. Strangely, there is no statement that a guilty wife is executed, which is the penalty elsewhere for adultery (Lev 20:10), only that she will become a "curse among her people" and "bear her guilt," a penalty that need not mean death. What is clear is that this ordeal is a rare example of magic in the Hebrew Bible, which is elsewhere routinely condemned.

Now, you might think, as I originally thought, that the point of this ordeal is to determine the woman's guilt because that could lead either to her death or divorce. But the most recent scholarship on this parasha points out that the wife's ordeal of bitter water is not designed to convict her of adultery but rather to ameliorate the husband's jealousy and insulate *him* from the sin of sleeping with a defiled woman. To put it differently, this is more about the husband than it is about the wife.

So, a man suspects his wife has committed adultery. Nonetheless, he still wishes, for any number of reasons, to remain married to her. If so, he faces the problem that he might be married to an adulteress who is sexually forbidden to him because adultery in the Torah is viewed as a religious sin, a sin against God rather than a sin against the husband (see Gen 39:9). 0

The guilt determined by this 'ordeal of bitter water' is not her guilt of adultery *per se*, but the potential defilement she would create for her jealous husband should he act as her sexual partner. The ritual is designed to protect *him* from the guilt of sleeping with a defiled woman who has sinned against God by breaking her oath of marriage. By passing the test of bitter water, she is the instrument that frees him from guilt. So as I said, this is really more about him than it is about her. Here we see the advantage of being male and the one to make the rules and write the book.

I have argued in the past that the great sin of all Middle-Eastern and Western religions and almost all the other religions of the world has been the systematic and systemic suppression of women. The parasha for this week is yet another example of that fundamental and systemic suppression. *We* have been fortunate to live during the second wave of feminism that began to change the world. Other scholars and I date that beginning from the employment of women during the Second World War, the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, and the resistance to the Viet Nam war in the mid-1960s. All the boys and girls went out to demonstrate strenuously, loudly, passionately, and sometimes dangerously against the war. They all came back in the evening, all equally tired and exhausted. The boys sat around and drank beer, waiting for the women to make dinner. And the women, who had been out all day every bit as long as the boys, said 'WHAT!' The National Organization for Women formed in 1966. That reignited the women's movement we continue to benefit from today. Ironically and I hope not prophetically, an article in the Washington Post reported that the Supreme Court and 41 states have reignited the war against women in the United States by limiting their ability to control their own bodies.