

Naso drash 6/7/25 Rabbi Chai Levy

In our triennial reading, we read about the preparing for use of the Mishkan
12 chieftain's gifts

Each one is exactly the same, yet the Torah goes through each one
To indicate the personal experience of offering of each individual,
even if the offerings themselves are the same

These are the readings that are done during Hanukkah

Each of the first 8 inaugural offerings are read on the 8 days of Hanukkah

This parasha as a whole is kind of a mish-mash of different topics:

The Sotah (suspected adulteress),

The Nazir who doesn't cut his hair or drink wine

The priestly blessing

But the aspect I want to focus on today is

The offerings, the holy place of the mishkan, and the beauty of it all.

My first inclination this week was to

speak about the horrific attack in Boulder,

The burning of Jews walking peacefully for the hostages,

And our real concerns about violent antisemitism

And the way antisemitism is being weaponized by the current
administration.

Or the moral and humanitarian crisis taking place in Gaza;

Or how all of this has us on edge, walking this difficult tightrope -

Balancing care for Israel and the safety of our people

with opposition to this extremist government and the horrors of this war;

Balancing criticism of Israel without contributing to the efforts of those who
want to "Free Palestine" by "globalizing the intifada" as we've seen in recent
weeks. And all that is real and horrible and worth our attention

But if you're like me, you're consumed by this news all week,

and you know what? It's Shabbat, and

I think we need breaks from the news cycle

to find moments of the eternal and to remember the beauty of Torah and

to allow it to sustain us.

If you want to hear my views on these, see the letter I signed with Rabbi Amy Eilberg that was published in the J this past week, or see the letter I sent out to our community with a link to Jews for Food Aid in Gaza. Today I just want to talk about something beautiful and nourishing and let our nervous systems have a bit of Shabbat menucha. Remember what I've been saying for the past few months about holding on to beauty when there is so much ugliness and holding on to our humanity in these dehumanizing times. Or remember what R Adina Allen taught us on Shavuot about why we need creativity and art and beauty.

So, our parasha counts up all of the Levites from age 30-50 and says (Num 4:47) that they did the work of transporting the mishkan like this:
כָּל־הַבָּא לַעֲבֹד עֲבֹדַת עֲבֹדָה וְעֲבֹדַת מִשָּׁא בְּאֶהֱל מוֹעֵד:
“All those who came to work the work of the work and the work of the transporting”

Talmud in masechet Arakhin teaches that from this verse is derived the requirement that the Levites accompany the Temple offerings with song.

The Sage named **Balvatei** said that **Rabbi Yohanan said** that the requirement for the Levites to accompany the Temple offerings with song is derived **from here**: The verse states with regard to the Levites: “Everyone that entered in **to do the work of service**” (Numbers 4:47). **What is work that must** be performed in conjunction with another **service? You must say that this is song.**

בְּלוּוֹטֵי אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן, מִהָכָּא: “לַעֲבֹד עֲבֹדַת עֲבֹדָה”, אִיזְהוּ עֲבֹדָה שְׁצָרִיכָה עֲבֹדָה? הֵיאֵינוּ אוֹמְרִים: זֶה שִׁירָה.

But another sage derives the requirement that there be song during divine service from *a different* verse in our parasha: עֲבֹדַת כִּי נָתַן לָא קִהַת לֹא נָתַן כִּי עֲבֹדַת

הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲלֵיהֶם בְּכַתֵּף יִשְׂאוּ”

Num 7:9 -Kahatias

“But to the Kahati he gave no [duties to carry carts and oxen], because they carried the most sacred object: They bore them [yisa’u] upon their shoulders” (Numbers 7:9). And the rabbis understand the word yisa’u to be an expression of song, as it’s used in other places to mean: Lift up your voice, sing a melody of joy, sound the timbrel...

Either way, whatever the proof text, let's just enjoy this for a moment:
the rabbis looked into this parasha with its inaugural offerings
With the census of the Levites and their duties in the mishkan
And the descriptions of the Levite clans doing their duties in transporting the
sacred parts of the mishkan
And determined that offerings must be accompanied by music and song.
It's a beautiful image of the power and necessity of music in our reaching
out to the Divine to draw close in offering.

And this piece of the Talmud goes on to say many fascinating and beautiful
things about the music and song taking place with these offerings.

First, the rabbis in their classic talmudic style, debate about who played the
instruments and what the essence of the music was.

Who were the musicians?

Rabbi Meir's view is that they were slaves

Rabbi Hanina ben Antigonus: they were Levites.

How do they derive their different opinions?

Rabbi Meir ("they were slaves") עִיקַר שִׁירָה בִּפְהַ דְּמֵאן דְּאָמַר עֲבָדִים הָיוּ קִסְבָּר: **that the one who says they were slaves holds that the essence (ikar) of song in the Temple service is singing with the mouth, and the instrumental music was performed merely to sweeten the sound of the singing.** Since the instrumental music is mere accompaniment, it could be performed by slaves.

And the one who says that the musicians were Levites holds that the ikar/ essence of song in the Temple service is the music played with instruments. Therefore, the musicians had to be Levites, who were tasked with the song that was part of the Temple service.

וְמֵאן דְּאָמַר לְוִיִּם הָיוּ קִסְבָּר: עִיקַר שִׁירָה בְּכֵלִי

What is the essence of Shira/song/ of music?

Is it the singing that comes out of the mouth or is it the instruments?

Do the musicians accompanying the offerings need to be Levites?

Or do the Levites need to be the singers and anyone, even slaves,

Can accompany the singing by playing the musical instruments?

It sounds like an argument I had once with my bandmates! j/k. Either way, the rabbis require that music be an indispensable part of making an offering.

The rabbis also discuss what kinds of instruments were used, such as: the reed flute that had a sweet sound that existed from the time of Moshe. But then the king commanded that they use a gold plated flute, but it didn't sound as pleasant and sweet, so they removed the gold.

But the instrument they discuss that I really want to tell you about is something called the *magreifah*.

I never heard about this instrument before until this week when I came across it in our study of the Piaseznicer rebbe this week in my hasidut class, a teaching not from this parasha but from a teaching from January of 1942, which led me to this page of Talmud to see the original source, and low and behold,

That same page of Talmud coincidentally mentioned our very parasha as the source of song in the Temple. [no coincidences. I love when that happens]

So, why does Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, the rebbe of the Warsaw ghetto teach about the *magreifa*, an instrument used to make music in the temple - in 1942 in the Warsaw ghetto?

Because he is trying to find meaning and dignity and beauty in a horrific time. He is looking to Torah to try to transform suffering into Divine service. He explains that the *magreifah*, which in modern Hebrew means "rake," had two functions in the ancient Temple, and this is based on Rashi's comments on our page of Talmud here in Arachin.

The *magreifah* was a cubit wide and tall, was hollow, with a handle. It had 10 holes, each of which produced 100 tones, so that the instrument made 1000 tones and could be heard all the way to Jericho.

Rashi comments that this *magreifah* was the same tool that was used to *gorfin*, to sweep or shovel the ashes from the altar of sacrifice.

And the Piaseznicer takes this notion - that the shovel that sweeps away the ashes becomes a musical instrument -

And uses it to teach about the transformation of suffering.

That the ashes of loss, death and destruction can be swept up and transmuted into the longing and beauty and prayerful yearning of music, like that which was played in the Beit HaMikdash on this fantastical magreifah.

So, I leave us with this stunning teaching of the Piasetzner
And the image of the magreifah -
The tool that shovels the ashes from the altar
Becomes a thousand-toned instrument whose sound is heard for miles.
In a time of so much suffering and loss and destruction in *our* time,
The Piasetzner offers a prayer for us and our world:
May the suffering of this time be transformed like music in the Beit HaMikdash, and
May our Divine service like the work of the Levites described in our parasha,
Be filled with song and music, as the rabbis envisioned it.