

Torah Portion Preview for Naso I

Sabbath beginning May 26, 2023

Traditional diaspora Jews celebrate Pesach and Sukkot for a day more than Israel or us. To synchronize with them, we divide the longest portion (Naso, “Take a Census”) into two readings. This week’s portion calls for a census of 30-50-year-old men from Levi’s clan and assigns them duties for service and portage of the Tabernacle. Next, it addresses keeping the people pure by removing sick or dead bodies outside of the camp, requiring confessed wrongdoers to make restitution with interest, and engaging in trial-by-ordeal for wives accused of adultery.

At first, the topics of Tabernacle labor, disease, wrongdoing, and adultery seem unrelated. But they are different scales of duties—those to the whole community, nearby persons, individual relationships, and care for children. Moving the Tabernacle affected the whole community. Quarantining the sick affected close contacts. Compensating for wrongdoing repaired casual relationships. Ensuring the identity of fathers encouraged their decades-long support of children. The tasks have changed but correspond in reverse to the Reform Rabbi’s dimension of “Organize.” People join. Then, they learn the community’s concepts, processes, and behaviors. Seasoned members help the community adapt through leadership and vision. Ultimately leaders build community by drawing others into meaningful Jewish lives.