

Sermon – *D'Var Torah on Naso (Revised)*
June 2, 2017

Lift Up Your Head and Be Counted among the Angels

Shabbat Shalom.

It's the season of Shavuot, so let's study Torah together. Shavuot began the evening of May 31, and ends at sundown tonight. A clever You-tube clip describes Shavuot as the most important Jewish holiday that Jews know nothing about. It began as a harvest festival of the first fruits. You can pick one of our carrots outside. It also celebrates the Israelites receiving the 10 Commandments at Mt. Sinai from God. God's word is given to us. It is accessible. There it is behind me. It's only ours if we engage in its study. So, around the world, Jews do two things on Shavuot, study Torah all-night long, and eat desserts, especially ones made from dairy products. We're not going to pull an all-nighter, but I do want us to engage for

about 14 minutes in the study of our Torah portion for this week. Ok?

The passages from our Hebrew Bible for this Shabbat teach us about Angels and Counting.

Do you believe in angels?

Our Bible is filled with stories of angels. This week's *Haftarah* portion from the book of Judges (13:8-19) tells a dramatic short story about an angel who visited upon a nameless woman.

In the story, a nameless angel appears and gives a prophecy and advice to a barren couple, Manoach and his wife. The angel first appears only to the woman and told her she would give birth to a son, who would save the Israelites against the Philistine enemies. Then he gave some prenatal advice to the woman: 'lay off the booze and bad food,' and then some parenting advice, 'Don't ever cut the boy's hair.'

Manoach was skeptical. 'I'll believe it when I see it,' he thought. But the woman seemed more convinced. The message came true. The woman gave birth to a son. She named him Samson, after the Hebrew word Shemesh, the celestial sun, thus recalling the celestial being who visited her. Samson grew to be a leader of Israel, a warrior and a judge.

Angels are messengers from God. The word "Angel" comes from the Greek, Angela, which means messenger. Angels still visit us in the 21st century. Often we do not know their names, or recognize them among us. One of the lessons from the story is to be open to the possibility of messengers from God. Don't be as skeptical as Manoach. Angels, as messengers of God, reveal the mysteries of life.

Now, one of the ways to engage in the study of Torah is to examine the context in which the Bible story takes place. This *Haftarah* story about Samson's birth angel is matched with a

section in the Torah called *Naso*. There are reasons why the angel story is matched with *Naso*. Some of the reasons are known, and some must be revealed through critical inquiry, like we are doing now. Let's make this inquiry together.

Naso et Rosh, begins the passage. *Naso et Rosh* is a Hebrew idiom for Taking a Census, or Counting heads. Not coincidentally, *Naso* is in the Book of Numbers!

What does it mean to Count?

You can count, 1, 2, 3 heads; 165 children enrolled in OST Sunday learning; 698 household members of Ohef Sholom Temple; \$1,472,615.02 dollars paid by OST last year.

You can also be counted upon, to be true to your word and your values. You can be present and accounted for. You can be held accountable. You can count, in the sense that your vote counts, your voice counts, and your actions count.

In the beginning of *Naso*, God has commanded the Israelites wandering in the Sinai wilderness to take a head

count of how many males from the age of 30 up to 50 are in certain Israelite clans: 2,630 Gershonites, 3,200 Meranites, and 8,580 Levites. “And each was recorded as the Eternal had commanded.” In *Naso*, the Israelite leaders are Accountants.

Why do they take a head count? [Pause for Response]

At the end of *Naso*, (Numbers 7:1-89) there is another kind of counting. The chieftains of each of the 12 tribes of Israel are brought to the holy altar to present a specified number of gifts for the dedication of the wandering community’s portable temple. Each chief brings the identical number and types of gifts. In an abundance of precision, the next twelve paragraphs of Torah recite in bookkeeping style, which chief brings how many offerings on which day.

As if this is not clear enough accounting, *Naso* ends with a paragraph on the sum total of gifts, with mathematical accuracy.

It's an obsession with counting. Why doesn't Torah just record the final tally of gifts? Why does Torah laboriously record the day-by-day, tribe-by-tribe, sheckle-by-sheckle, animal-by-animal count?

Because Counting is a blessing and *Naso* tells us how this is so.

Sandwiched between the head-count of Levites at the beginning of *Naso*, and the tribal gift-counts at the end of *Naso*, is a blessing perhaps familiar to you, called the priestly benediction. We recite it at special occasions, including B'nai mitzvah ceremonies, clergy ordinations and farewells. It is also a familiar benediction in Christian worship. One commentator calls this blessing "The oldest known text that appears both outside and inside the Bible." (Plaut, 2006)

As the blessing is written in the Book of Numbers,
(Chapter 6)

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶכָּ:

[24] “May God bless you and protect you!

יְאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּתְּנֶכָּ:

[25] “May God deal kindly and graciously with you!

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

[26] “May God bestow [divine] favor upon you and grant you
peace!

(Numbers 6:24-26)

As a young child, the rabbi’s re-enactment of this blessing at momentous ceremonies made a dramatic impression on me. There stood the rabbi upon the bema, holding his arms and hands outstretched, with his fingers in the shape of the Hebrew letter Shin, or placing his fanned fingertips lightly on the head

of the one who was to be blessed, as if some direct electric current of Goodness was being channeled from around us, through the outstretched arms and the ancient spoken Hebrew words, into the head and heart of the one to be blessed.

What was happening? Was I witnessing God flowing through a praying elder into a younger person?

I began to wonder, 'How can a human access this Godly power?' Do you have to be older? Do you have to speak Hebrew? Do you have to be ordained? DO you have to be a Levy or a Cohen?

Naso reveals an answer. *Yisah Adonai, Naso; Yisah, Naso.*
Do you hear it?

The word *Yisah* יִשָּׂה derives from the same Hebrew word as *Naso*. נָסָה

Yisah means “lift up, elevate, or pick up the burden.” The blessing more literally translates as ‘Lift up God’s face on you, and grant you peace,’ or as one translation reads, ‘May God shine his countenance upon you, and bless you with peace.’

Let’s go back to the beginning of *Naso* to understand this deeper meaning of counting.

נָשָׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן

“Take a census of the Gershonites,” reads the idiomatic translation. The literal translation of *Naso et Rosh* is ‘Lift each head of the house of Gershon.’

Counting is a Blessing. The way God takes a census in the Hebrew Bible is by elevating the heads of those who are to be counted. The way God blesses the Israelites is by lifting up God’s countenance upon them.

Counting is elevating. Counting is a declaration that each one of us counts. And each one of us is accountable. Not only

should we count our blessings, but we should also ‘bless our countings.’

A college friend once said to me many years ago, “Chris, why are you walking across campus with your head down? Lift up your face for all to see!” His name (Joe Barima) was from another world. He was a messenger from God. He blessed me.

יְשׁוּאָהּ הַהוּא פָּנָיו אֵלַי וַיִּשְׂמַח לִי שְׁלוֹמִים:

is a blessing that means God is lifting up God’s face upon your face and counting on you to do the same with others, so that you will be at peace. Some would say the blessing is also God’s way of saying, ‘Count me in too, because I, the Eternal One, am present in your community.’ It’s like the book we use by Rabbi Salkin in our B’nai mitzvah family class, *“Putting God on the Guest List.”*

One more story of angels and counting.

This Shabbat is the fifth anniversary of the merger of Temple Sinai and Ohef Sholom Temple. The unofficial merger date was June 3, 2012, a week after Shavuot.

In this season of Revelation at Mt. Sinai, let me conclude in our own *Sinai* Chapel, with a few words from the last sermon delivered at Temple Sinai in Portsmouth, May 25, 2012, by Rabbi Arthur Steinberg, of blessed memory. The words are excerpted from the June 7, 2012 edition of the Jewish News of Tidewater. They reveal the same message from God.

As the bow-tied rabbi wrote,
“How apropos it is that this Festival [of Shavuot] occurs in two days, within a week of the time Sinai gives its gift of Torah to Ohef Sholom Temple and our congregation, Sinai, where we have continued to meet with God, closes its doors.

“For some, Sinai is irrelevant; for some it is the very core of the Jewish experience...I have encouraged acceptance of that alternate understanding so that we can continue to listen for the reverberation of God’s message in our lives.

“One way to understand that message is to believe that there is goodness in this world. There is love and kindness, tenderness and caring. *These* are the awesome mysteries of life and they do exist. And if you tell me, ‘I’ll believe it when I see it,’ you’ve got it backwards. That is not the way it goes. You will see it when you believe it, when you believe it with all your heart.

“....In all these [32] years, I’ve seldom spoken about God; too presumptuous, too theological, too immodest. But let me tell you that because of you, I see God all the time. I see God everyday because of you.

“I see God in every relationship of loving and helping and giving between parents and children, between husbands and wives, between friends and partners.

“I see God in every good deed you’ve performed, in your every act of compassion, in every struggle against injustice and exploitation, in every anxious tear you shed over another’s sorrow...Every time you show care and a concern for another human being, God is there.”

~~To one of our angels, your memory is a blessing.~~

My friends, may we count on each other.

May we be counted as messengers of God.

May we lift up our own countenance.

And may we continue to encounter angels in our lives.

Amen