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Parshat Naso: On Human Initiative Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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The Torah, up until this point, frowns upon rabble rousers, or anyone who does not follow the letter of the law. Taking human initiative, and performing an action outside of the proscribed Torah law, has not fared well.

The classic example of taking creative license is the story of Nadav and Aviyhu. Nadav and Aviyu were killed, struck down by God in the *kodesh kodoshim* (holy of holies) for offering their own personal gift, one that was not commanded by God. (Vaykikra 10)

So, when the *n'si'ay yisrael* (tribal leaders) brought unexpected offerings in this week's parsha, Moshe's hesitancy is warranted. The Torah describes the offerings of the tribal leaders, using almost the exact same phraseology that is used in the Nadav and Aviyu story:

The princes, the heads of their fathers' houses brought offerings... And they brought their offering before the LORD, six covered wagons, and twelve oxen: a wagon for every two of the princes, and for each one an ox; and they presented them before the tabernacle. (Bamidbar 7:2-3)

ב וַיִּקְרִיבוּ נְשִׂאֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, רֹאשֵׁי בֵּית
אֲבֹתָם: ... ג וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶת-קָרְבָּנָם לִפְנֵי
יְהוָה, שֵׁשׁ-עֲגָלֹת צָב וּשְׁנַיִם עֶשֶׂר
בָּקָר--עֲגָלָה עַל-שְׁנַיִם הַנְּשִׂאִים, וְשׁוֹר
לְאֶחָד; וַיִּקְרִיבוּ אוֹתָם, לִפְנֵי הַמִּשְׁכָּן.

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The Ramban explains that the wagons were not intended to be part of the korbanot. The words of the pasuk, "and they brought their offering" refer to the wagons, that were brought "of their own accord." (Ramban 7:3). Moshe, quite understandably, was unsure whether to accept the gift. And so, God had to instruct Moshe to accept them: "Take it from them, that they may perform the service of the tent of meeting." (7:5)

A beautiful Midrash from Shir Ha-shirim describes the scene. The 12 *nissiyim* are walking towards the Mishkan with their wagons and oxen. Moshe is unsure what to do, so the midrash explain that God says: "Go out and say to them words of praise and comfort. Rabbi Hoshaya said: 'The Holy One, blessed be He, said – I consider it as though I had to bear the [weight of the] world, and now you have brought Me [wagons].'" (Shir Ha-shirim Rabba [Vilna], parasha 6).

The burden, the responsibility of creation, of holding up the weight of every human, the midrash suggests, was almost too much for God to bare. But when the *nissiyim*, upon their own initiative

offer the wagons, it becomes a symbol that we too will take initiative and share, with God, the responsibility of enhancing, shaping and creating in our world.

The Midrash continues: At that moment Moshe was fearful. He said to himself: Perhaps the spirit of divine inspiration has left me and settled upon the princes, or perhaps some prophet has arisen and taught this law.

According to Chazal, the gift of the princes presented a theological difficulty for Moshe. Thus far, all of the laws and commandments had been given by God. The giving of the wagons, which the princes brought in order for the *Mishkan* to be carried on them, creates a new situation: the princes were trying to create a new halakha that has no source in God's command. Moshe did not know what to do. His immediate visceral reaction was fear. Skepticism. A sense of loss, a feeling that he is no longer necessary or needed by God.

God reassured Moshe, explaining that people can take a little creative license, take their own initiative, and offer something extra, even if God did not explicitly make the demand. This, perhaps God is telling Moshe, is the what will be necessary as we move towards *eretz canaan* (the land of Canaan). There, we must seek freedom to express ourselves a little differently, a little creatively. This is a new reality that Moshe has to learn and in fact becomes a major theme throughout the book of Bamidbar.

The message of these narratives is that God's word is never complete. God's Torah is endless and infinite, and must be renewed. However, there is a process through which change must come about as it is possible, as was the case for Nadav and Aviyu, for human initiative to go awry. Yet, the fundamental idea of "Take it from them; the matter has come from them" still stands. Allow space, God tells Moshe, for the *nissiyim* to chart their own course.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.