

MAY 17, 2010

## Shavuot and Parashat Naso

### Making a Name (for Shavuot)

**Sura sheva poh Ploni Almoni – “Ploni Almoni! Turn aside, sit down here.” (Ruth 4:1)**

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Following the death of Ruth’s husband Elimelech, Boaz (Elimelech’s nephew) wished to marry Ruth through the process of *yibbum*. However, he first required Elimelech’s brother to agree to refuse to marry her. When the time came to negotiate, Boaz called on Elimelech’s brother to “turn aside, and sit down here,” so that they could convene a quorum to serve as a proper court. Instead of identifying Elimelech’s brother by his true name, Boaz called him Ploni Almoni, the Hebrew equivalent of John Doe—an anonymous name. Why did Boaz use this strange name? Ibn Ezra explains that the word *ploni* comes from the word *pele*, meaning wonder. Thus, by using this name, Boaz was actually remarking on Elimelech’s brother’s choice to remain “wondrously silent” in allowing Boaz to marry Ruth. Because Elimelech’s brother failed to seize the opportunity presented to him, he is forever remembered as the anonymous man who could have made history as the great-grandfather of King David.

By failing to see the potential in marrying Ruth, Elimelech’s brother passed up the chance to have his name enshrined in history. As Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) convene indirect negotiations, PA President Mahmoud Abbas must not make this same mistake and forgo his chance to be remembered in history.

Following the conclusion of the first round of proximity talks between Israel and the PA, the State Department described the talks as “serious and wide-ranging,” the Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* reports. Though proximity talks are a welcome first step, direct, bilateral negotiations are the only proven way to reach a secure and lasting peace. Accordingly, after Special Envoy George Mitchell left the region, President Barack Obama called Abbas and urged him to “negotiate seriously and in good faith, and to move from proximity talks to direct negotiations as soon as possible.” Despite President Obama’s efforts, the PA maintains that it will not enter into direct negotiations until Israel meets the Palestinian’s preconditions. However, demands that Israel commit to withdraw to the 1949 Armistice lines or freeze all Jewish housing construction in Israel’s capital are unrealistic, harmful conditions that would prejudice the final outcome of negotiations. While Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stated that “It is impossible to make peace at a distance,” Abbas continues to look for ways to avoid direct negotiations—and the chance they represent to make an historic peace. For more on the peace process, click [here](#).

Mahmoud Abbas faces a simple choice. He can either sit down with Israel and work to reach a lasting peace agreement, or he can relegate himself to the eternal anonymity of a Ploni Almoni, making him just another Palestinian leader who failed to end the conflict. ■

### Counted and Lifted

**Naso et rosh benei Kehat... – “Take the sum of the sons of Kehoth...” (Numbers 4:22)**

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Typically, when describing the taking of a census, the Torah uses the word *pekod* (see 3:15). However, when commanding the counting of the Levite family of Gershon, the text uses the word *naso*. Why use this uncommon word? According to Yechiel Moskovitz, in his commentary to Da’at Mikra, the word *naso* carries an additional meaning that implies an elevation in stature (see Da’at Mikra on Numbers, footnote 8 on 1:2). Therefore, we

understand that Moses was not simply instructed to count the family of Gershon, but rather he “counted these [people] so that they would serve in holiness.”

The use of the word *naso* indicated that the family of Gershon received an elevated status within the nation. Perhaps this would also be an appropriate term to describe Israel’s recent ascent to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Israel was officially invited to join the OECD, the world’s premier economic forum, as its 32<sup>nd</sup> member state at a meeting in Paris on May 11. The OECD brings together advanced democracies that work to coordinate economic, social, environmental and financial policy, and Israel’s admittance to the group is an unequivocal declaration of its importance to the global economy. OECD membership will bring Israel significant economic and political benefits, including new business opportunities, increased access to international capital, a stronger credit rating, and an exclusive forum through which to forge strong relationships. Building on the Bush administration’s efforts, the Obama administration was instrumental in helping Israel gain accession to this exclusive economic body. Both administrations actively promoted Israel’s admission and successfully fought attempts to politicize and derail Israel’s membership. Congress also played an important role in pushing for Israel’s OECD accession. In 2005, the House of Representatives approved a resolution of support co-authored by Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and the late Tom Lantos (D-CA). A similar resolution authored by Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) and former Senator Norm Coleman (R-MN) was unanimously approved by the Senate in 2007.

Just as the family of Gershon received an elevated status within the nation, the acceptance of Israel to the OECD increases the status of Israel within the international community. Beyond increasing Israel’s standing, this development provides one more reason to be proud of the Jewish state. ■

## Libelous Language

### V’yishalchu min hamachaneh – “They they shall put out from the camp...” (Numbers 5:2)

According to Rashi, while some ritually impure individuals were allowed to remain in parts of the Jewish camp, those who suffered from *tza’arat* for speaking disparagingly of others were never permitted in any area of the camp. In fact, the Torah states that these people were forcibly expelled from the camp for their destructive ways: “Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper...” Through this command, the Torah highlights the destructive nature of one who defames another.

While the treatment of slanderers in the Israelite camp teaches us that defamation cannot be tolerated, unfortunately, libel remains a serious problem today—especially on some university campuses.

Recently, members of the University of California at Berkeley Student Government voted 16-4 to call on the university to divest its funds from Israel. The Student Senate voted to divest from General Electric and from United Technologies, both of which produce weapons purchased by the Israeli Defense Force. Proponents of the bill assert that Israel uses these companies’ products to commit war crimes in Gaza. Fortunately, Students’ Association President Will Smelko vetoed the bill. According to Smelko, “The bill was being used for the political delegitimizing of the state of Israel. Something told me the way they used the bill was morally wrong.” As former student-senator John Moghtader—founder and co-president of Tikvah: Students for Israel—explained, “The bill is based on falsehoods, because, if you read through the text, it talks about alleged Israeli war crimes...On a factual level, all the text in the bill doesn’t hold any water and it screams of racism. Why aren’t we talking about Iran or Darfur? Why are we focused on Israel, the one democracy in the Middle East?”

By issuing a veto of the divestment bill at the University of California at Berkeley, Student Government President Will Smelko demonstrated that the lessons of our *parashah* are not lost on us today. Now, as in the days of the Israelites, slander cannot be tolerated. ■