



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Naso

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

May 30, 2015

Naso

Face to Face



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you focus on the superficial or on the internal? On the body or the soul? How do we learn to see the inner essence of things instead of their external surface?

Moving is more painful than a sermon. Anyone who has ever moved from one place of residence to another – and that includes anyone not still living with mom – can attest that it’s preferable to get a root canal than to move.

The anxiety-ridden disorientation associated with moving is true for physical movement, but it is even more acute when it comes to spiritual movement. To move from one spiritual place to another is a thousand times more difficult than moving from one house to another, from one job to another, or from one school to another.

Moving a couch from one apartment to another – even with your couch potato husband embedded in it – is surely difficult; but moving yourself from one spiritual dimension to another is surely more difficult still.

What does the Torah teach us about transporting ourselves from one place of holiness to another? And how is that transportation – or teleportation – best achieved?

The answer lies in the difference between a frontside and a backside, and in a musical *faux pas* committed by no one less than King David himself.

How in the world could have King David forgotten a most basic verse in this week’s Parsha? The answer teaches us an unforgettable life lesson.

DIVINE MOVING COMPANY

1. Couch Potato (Joke)

Rivka gets into work late one Monday morning and goes to see her boss to apologize. "I'm sorry I'm late, but I had to move some furniture this morning before I came into work. In fact my back is killing me after my efforts."

"So why didn't you wait until your husband gets home tonight?"

"I could have," says Rivka, "but the couch is easier to move if he's not on it."

2. Move Over

Moving is more painful than a sermon. Anyone who has ever moved – and that includes anyone not still living with mom – can attest that it's preferable to get a root canal than to move.

The anxiety-ridden disorientation associated with moving is true for physical movement – the distress of feeling astray – but it is even more acute when it comes to spiritual movement. To move from one place to another spiritually is more difficult than moving from one house to another many times over.

Moving a couch from one apartment to another – even with your couch potato husband embedded in it – is surely difficult; but moving yourself from one spiritual dimension to another is surely more difficult still.

What does the Torah teach us about transporting ourselves from one place of holiness to another? And how is that transportation – or teleportation – best achieved?

3. Parshat Naso

We have just come from the festival of Shavuot when we received the Torah 3327 years ago. More specifically, we received the Ten Commandments, first orally and then engraved onto the *Luchot*, the Tablets.

How did the Tablets get from Sinai to the Promised Land?

Our Torah reading, *Parshat Naso*, tells us that specific members of the tribe of Levi, the Kehot family (children of Kehot), were entrusted to transport the Sanctuary and its vessels, including the Ark of the Covenant with the Tablets inside. They did this the entire time that the Nation of Israel wandered in the desert.

We learn about the Kehot family from a somewhat cryptic passage in our Torah portion:

But to the sons of Kehot he did not give, for incumbent upon them was the work involving the sacred, which they were to carry on their shoulders.¹

Who is *he* and what did he *not give*?

The previous verses relate that all the chieftains of the tribes brought certain offerings to Moses, such as wagons and oxen, as supplication.

God commanded Moses to distribute the offerings to the Levites, who were the transporters in the wilderness, in accordance with their work. So Moses took those wagons and oxen and distributed them to the sons of Gershon and Merari.

But to the sons of Kehot he did not give...

Why did *he not give*?

For incumbent upon them was the work involving the sacred, which they were to carry on their shoulders.

What does this mean?

¹ Numbers 7:9.

Why did Moses not gift wagons and oxen to the Kehot family? Because, the Kehotites carried the sacred objects, including the Ark of the Covenant,² and these sacred objects were required to be carried on human shoulders and not on wagons driven by beasts of burden.³

4. Rambam's Explanation

The great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides – the Rambam – articulates this law in his *Mishneh Torah*, where he provides more details:

When the Ark is transported from place to place, it should not be transported on an animal or on a wagon. Instead, it is a mitzvah for it to be carried on one's shoulders. Since David forgot and had it transported on a wagon, there was an outbreak [of Divine wrath directed] at Uzzah.⁴ Instead, it is a mitzvah to carry it on one's shoulders, as it states: *For incumbent upon them was the work involving the sacred, which they were to carry on their shoulders.*

When carrying the Ark on their shoulders, they should carry it face to face, with their backs pointed outward and their faces inward.⁵

They were not allowed to turn their back to the Ark. All other Levites transported their vestments normally, facing forward with their eyes on the road. The family of Kehot turned their backs to the road and maintained their front side facing the Ark.⁶ Thus all the bearers of the Ark were facing the Ark and each other.

² The proof-text cited by Maimonides/Rambam refers to the ark being carried by the Levites, specifically members of the Kehot family. In *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Positive #34) however, the Rambam writes that the mitzvah for all time was to have the ark carried by the priests, the Kohanim. Indeed, the narrative of the ark being carried in Joshua 3:6 and II Samuel 15:25 corroborates this position. (The Ramban explains that this does not contradict the Torah command, because the priests were also descended from the Kehot family of the tribe of Levi.) The reason the mitzvah was fulfilled by Levites who were not priests while the Jews journeyed through the desert is because there were not enough priests to carry the ark at that time.

³ *Sefer Hachinuch* #379.

⁴ II Samuel 6.

⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Klei Hamikdash* 2:12-13.

⁶ See *Bamidbar Rabbah* 5:8.

5. A Story from the Book of Samuel

Reading the Rambam's words carefully, we notice that he references an episode concerning King David: *Since David forgot and had it transported on a wagon, there was an outbreak [of Divine wrath directed] at Uzzah.*

What exactly happened with King David and Uzzah?

According to the Second Book of Samuel, after being crowned king at age thirty in the city of Hebron, David settled in Jerusalem, the City of David, where he established his throne. From there, he fielded forays against the Philistines, residents of Gaza, who were repeatedly trying to encroach on Jewish residents of a nearby valley.⁷

As he consolidated his kingdom, David decided to bring the Ark of the Covenant to the City of David:

And they set the Ark of God upon a new cart, and they carried it from the House of Avinadav that was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Avinadav, drove the new cart.⁸

Everyone accompanying the Ark was singing and dancing when, suddenly, the oxen pulling the wagon stumbled. Uzzah reached out to steady the Ark.

Uzzah died on the spot. Seeing Uzzah's death as divine retribution for touching the Ark in an unseemly way, David became afraid. Instead of bringing the Ark to the City of David, he let it stay where it was. Finally, when he saw that the Divine Presence had settled over the Ark, he felt able to complete the journey and bring it to Jerusalem.

As with many narratives in the books of the prophets, this tale begs for clarity. What is going on here? And why does the Rambam find this depressing narrative to be relevant to the mitzvah of carrying the Ark on the shoulders of Kehotites?

⁷ II Samuel 5.

⁸ Ibid 6:3.

6. The Talmud's Explanation

The Talmud explains David's folly and the reason for it:

Why was David punished? Because he called words of Torah "songs," as it is said [in the Book of Psalms]: *Your laws were to me as songs in the house of my sojournings.*⁹ The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him ... "You call it [the Torah] a song!? I will cause you to stumble in a matter that even young school children know. For it is written: *But to the sons of Kehot he did not give, for incumbent upon them was the work involving the sacred, which they were to carry on their shoulders. And you brought it on a wagon.*¹⁰

The Torah, in our portion, clearly states that the Ark must be carried on the shoulders of the Kehotites, and it may not be placed upon a wagon or pulled by an animal. Every Jew and Jewish child who has gone to synagogue on Shabbat and listened to the Torah reading, or who studied the verse in school, knows this fact.

How then is it possible for King David – the author of the Book of Psalms himself, which references the Torah on virtually every page – to forget a simple verse like this? How could King David have possibly placed the Ark on a wagon pulled by oxen, defying an explicit command in the Torah?! It seems unfathomable!

The Talmud explains:

God made King David forget a simple Torah verse (that even young school children are familiar with) as a punishment. What was the punishment for? For referring to God's laws ... as "songs."

What's wrong with referring to God's laws as songs? And why was the punishment to forget the verse from our Torah portion that documents the obligation to carry the Ark in a certain way – on bearers' shoulders all facing each other and the Ark?

For the answer, we must take a closer look at what this Ark contained – namely, the Tablets.

⁹ Psalms 119:54.

¹⁰ Sotah 35a.

7. Backless Fronts

The *Luchot*, the Tablets, were considered among the ten supernatural objects that were created on the sixth day – specifically, at twilight of the first Friday eve, right before Shabbat,¹¹ and they had no backside.¹² This was a supernatural phenomenon: whichever side you looked at, you saw the face and the letters engraved into its stone.¹³

Now, every single creation has a front and a back. It is impossible to have something with a face and no back. People have fronts and backs. Homes do too ... as do mountains, foods, animals, minerals, particles, atoms ... everything you can think of. Indeed, it's a cardinal law of physics – every form of existence must have a front and back.

Since this is true on the literal level, it is equally true on a figurative level: everything in life has more than one side to it. Specifically: a front and a back.

Now, what you see is not always what you get. What you perceive to be the front of something may actually be its back, or at least not its entire essence. To all people, situations, circumstances and realities, there is a front and a back.

When you go into a business meeting, all you're seeing is what the other people sitting around the boardroom are projecting and sharing, but you aren't privy to what's going on within.

When you go on a date, hoping to meet Mr. or Ms. Right, what you ostensibly see in another person is their outer dimensions, not all the layers and levels of their inner personality.

In other words: what we initially experience about any person or phenomenon is its outer expression, not its inner essence.

¹¹ Avot 5:6.

¹² See *Derech Mitzvotecha*, *Mitzvat Masei Ha'Aron Baketef* (40b) at length, for the following.

¹³ See *Talmud Yerushalmi*, *Shekalim* ch. 6; *Bartenura* and *Tosafot Yom Tov* to Avot 5:6.

The closer you get to someone or something the more that someone's or something's face and essence is revealed to you. But the farther away you are the more of the "back" and expression you see and the less of the face.

The same is true with Torah.

We initially relate to the outer dimensions of the Torah, not its inner core and essence.

The Torah that we study, learn and discuss on our human level – in relation to the world and how to live in it – is but the external back-end result of the original source in God's "face" (inner dimension), so to speak.

How the Torah relates to matter and the material world... what it says about foods we consume ... how it expects us to speak or pray ... is the outward expression and end result of the original "face" of the Torah, which reflects the Divine will and wisdom, as it transcends existence.

This level of "face" – the inner core of the Torah – is exemplified by the *Luchot*, the Tablets, which were engraved through and through so that they had no back – every side was a face with the commandments miraculously projected from all angles.

It is for this reason that the Ark, which contained the Tablets, had to be carried upon the shoulders of men that were facing one another, and not on a vehicle that people may turn their backs to. With regard to the Tablets, there was no such thing as back, but only the unfiltered face of Truth and Reality.

8. David's Mistake. Lamplighters (Story)

So what was David's mistake in comparing God's laws to songs?

Joy, music, instruments and song reflect divine *expression*, the Torah's effect on David, not the Torah's essence – which is the level of "divine delights," connected with the Divine Essence.

The Torah's laws are indeed like a song that touches the heart and soul of a person. But by calling these divine laws "songs," King David focused on the personal benefits of Torah – its "outer" dimension, its "back," not its "face" and essence.

For all its majesty and beauty music exists in a world of externals and backs. Music wakes up a world that may be silent and dormant. When does one rejoice and sing? When there is something so otherworldly going on that so surpasses anything we know or experience in this limited world.

Joy is Torah as it relates to the physical world. But Torah – the essence of Torah – is so much more than that. The Face of Torah is not a song or a musical experience because the Face of Torah has no back.

And thus, because David limited and defined the Face of Torah as only song, David was made to forget that very basic principle (which every child knows from the verse) – that the Ark, home to the Tablets, represents a level that is only face without a back.

9. Front and Back

Everything in life consists of a front and a back. Human beings have fronts and backs, as do buildings, mountains, trees and cars.

The front is defined by the essential entity itself; whereas the back is defined by that which is revealed and expressed to another.

The reason moving from one place to another, both physically and certainly spiritually, is so difficult and disconcerting is because we live in a world of fronts and backs.

The things we know, the things we are familiar with and close to, the people whose faces we see, comfort us and make us feel secure. When we move to a new place, at first all we see is the back and thus we are unsettled and frightened to go there. Once we get there and get accustomed to the place or situation or people, we begin to feel more at ease and more at home. We begin to see the face of the new reality.

Once we experience the inner soul of the new location we become comfortable with it.

This is true with physical moves. With regard to spiritual moves and journeys, the Torah teaches us a very powerful and humbling message:

When we move and journey through the wildernesses of our lives, we must bear on our shoulders the Ark of the Covenant containing the Tablets. What we carry in our souls is the Face of Torah, the Face of God, and we are not allowed to put it on a wagon or have it pulled by oxen – we are not allowed to turn our backs to it. We are not supposed to “defile” the inner soul and essence (the face) with the superficial externals of material existence (the back).

Why? Because within this deep level of our souls there is no back. On these Tablets engrained into the essence of every Jew – like the letters engraved through and through the tablets – the commandments are emblazoned on all sides equally, seen and perceived from all sides equally, any which way you look all you see is a face and no back.

On the level of the face there is only seamlessness. One integrated flow.

It’s interesting to note that in Hebrew the word for “face” – *panim* – also means inner or internal (*penimiyut*). Unlike the word “face” in English, which implies the outer surface of things.

How then can a Jew, who carries and transports and bears this essential Truth, ever turn his or her face to this innermost Reality?

10. Very Moving (Joke)

After Bob decided to move into a smaller house for his retirement, he invited his adult kids over to take a few pieces of furniture he wanted them to have. One item was a beautiful, but very heavy, antique dining-room set, which went to his son, Harry.

Harry's teenage son, Mike – Bob's grandson – helped wrestle the set onto his dad's pickup truck. It took the whole day, but finally the table, chairs and china cabinet were sitting in the dining room of Harry's home.

"Just think," Bob said to his grandson as he rested, "this set is 100 years old. And some day, it will belong to you."

"Oh, no!" Mike replied with a stricken look on his face. "You mean I'm going to have to move this thing AGAIN?"

11. The Front End (Conclusion)

Life is defined not by where you presently stand, but by where you are heading.

We are all moving, but for different reasons. Basically, there are two ways for us to move: 1) we can move by looking back; or 2) we can move by knowing that there is no back, but only fronts, only what's ahead, only what's facing us not what's behind us.

This is the lesson of the Ark, the Tablets, and the Jewish people. We are divine creatures precisely because we only see and desire to see the face of reality, never caring for the back.

In technology, the back end is the deeper behind the scenes – under the hood – stuff, while the front end is what the user experiences. But in the world of Truth it's the exact opposite: the back end is the world we see, the external matter; while the front end, the face, is the True Reality that is embedded, engrained and engraved within.

May we bear our Tablets proudly and may we show ourselves and the entire world the true face of existence. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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