

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Naso, Numbers, Chapters 4-7

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Operation Arnon and the Altar of Jewish History

At the conclusion of a week in which we marked and marveled at the IDF operation retroactively renamed “Arnon,” let us speak again of Nahshon, and of the operation known by his name.

As we discussed in *Parashah* and Politics for *Beshalach*, the book *O Jerusalem!* describes how two British Jews, Harry Jaffe and Bronislav Bar-Shemer, oversaw an operation in which a convoy of food was shipped, prior to Passover of 1948, to the besieged Jews of Jerusalem. After two days of preparation, these men had managed to assemble around 60 trucks, not nearly enough. To get the rest, they went to busy intersections in Tel Aviv and, as the book tells us, commandeered Jewish truck drivers and their trucks, essentially drafting them into the Haganah. Then the convoy set out. The book describes the scene:

Shaking the night with the steady drone of their engines, the trucks ground slowly up the pass toward Jerusalem. Some lurched along with two or three tires flattened by sniper fire. All along the column, men shouted, “*Kadimah, Kadimah!* Forward! Forward!” . . .

In Jerusalem, the news that a convoy was coming rippled through the city. Hundreds of people ran down Jaffa Road to watch it come in: women in bathrobes, schoolchildren, religious Jews coming from morning service in the synagogues, their prayer shawls still draped over their shoulders. They hung out of windows, clambered onto rooftops and balconies, to watch in awe and gratitude. They sang and cheered and clapped as the convoy drove into sight. They were a desperate, hungry people existing that week on a ration of two ounces of margarine, a quarter of a pound of potatoes, and a quarter of a pound of dried meat. For two weeks not a single vehicle had reached the city, and now they were rumbling forward in a steady stream as far back as the eye could see—dozens of trucks bumper to bumper, crammed with supplies.

Mature men watching from the curb wept openly. Children scrambled up onto the trucks with flowers. . . . Even the sullen truck drivers [conscripted into service] were transformed. Rolling down the corridor of ecstatic human beings, they understood they had saved a city.

Above all else, one memory would remain engraved upon the minds of those Jerusalemites watching the



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convoy stream down the streets of their city that happy April morning. It was the first glimpse many of them had of the convoy—the front bumper of the blue Ford of Harry Jaffe.

On it, Jaffe had painted six words: “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem.”

It is a luminous description of Jewish love for Jerusalem; and it is an inspiring account of Jewish unity.

The entire convoy was named “Operation Nahshon” for a prince of the tribe of Judah, who figured, as we have previously discussed, in a famous midrash. Before splitting the sea—the rabbis report—with Egypt bearing down on Israel, Moses instructed the Israelites to enter the water, and every one of them looked at the other and said, “You first.” But one, Nahshon of the tribe of Judah, strode, according to the rabbis, into the sea. And only when he had waded into the waters up to his nose did the sea actually split. For him Operation Nahshon was named, an invocation of ancient courage.

The scriptural inspiration of this midrash, of this tradition, is to be found in our *parashah*. The great majority of our reading is taken up by the description of the *hanukat ha-mizbeah*, the offerings brought by the respective princes of the twelve tribes in order to inaugurate the altar of the Tabernacle. The process of inauguration took twelve days, with the prince of each tribe bringing his offering on a separate day. *Naso* is very clear about the order:

And the one who brought offerings on the first day was Nahshon, son of Aminadab, of the tribe of Judah. (Numbers 7:12)

In celebrating the Tabernacle, Nahshon brought his offering first—in Hebrew “*rishon*.” He was given this honor, we are informed by the midrash, by virtue of his being first to enter the sea: he was honored because his courage had served as an inspiration to all of Israel.

If our *parashah* celebrates Nahshon as first, it is, for the rabbis, because this one man’s small step was a great leap forward for the people of Israel. Nahshon’s bravery split the sea and, millennia later, he inspired an operation to save a sacred city. Thus even today, it is Nahshon whose name lives on in an Israeli anti-terrorism brigade whose motto, “Be first, Nahshon,” has at its heart the word “*rishon*” from our reading.

The past seven days—from last Shabbat to this one—is a week in the Jewish calendar that is not only one in which we mark Shavuot; it is also the week of Nahshon. It is striking that such a seemingly obscure character in *Tanakh* appears in three separate synagogue readings in a single week. Nahshon was listed as the leader of the tribe of Judah in last week’s *parashah*, *Bemidbar*, and he is listed first in the roster of offerings in *Naso*. And he was also mentioned this week on Shavuot, at the end of the book of Ruth. For Nahshon is the ancestor of Boaz, and therefore of David; he is patriarch of the house that Ruth built. And this is apt: for what is Ruth if not the tale of how courageous steps taken by one humble individual can lead to the very redemption of a people?

The story of the endurance of Israel is more than just that of the most famous figures in our history, more than just Abraham and Moses and King David. The story of Nahshon, and the story of Ruth, remind us that courageous steps taken by so many Jews moved Jewish history forward.



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It is with this in mind that we can better appreciate the unfolding of the biblical description of the inauguration ceremony in our *parashah*. For centuries, commentators have puzzled over the fact that the Torah uses up dozens of verses in describing the offering of each and every tribal prince, even though each offering is exactly the same. The Torah could easily have summed up the account by describing the offering on the first day of the inauguration—that of Nahshon—and then telling us that every other prince acted likewise, but it does not do so. Each prince's elaborate offering is described, every single one of them exactly like Nahshon's. The point, as many explain, is that the inauguration of the altar by the princes marked a moment of unity, of dedication, and of shared vision. Nahshon's offering came first; but every other leader followed his example.

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of the priestly blessing, with which the *kohanim*, the descendants of Aaron, invoke the Almighty as they pray for internal peace for Israel, through which Israelites learn to love one another. The inauguration at the conclusion of the *parashah*, the ritual begun by Nahshon, is thus the embodiment of unity par excellence. Of course, unity will not be the dominant theme throughout much of this biblical book. It is for precisely that reason that we remember the altar's inauguration—because, in the words of Rabbi Menachem Leibtag,

that short moment of unity can remain as inspiration for future generations, especially to their leaders, and especially at times of historic potential.

For the midrash to celebrate Nahshon as going first to inaugurate the altar is to express the fact that often individuals of courage can become sources of unexpected inspiration and unity. And it would be Nahshon's—and Ruth's—descendant David who would establish Jerusalem as a source of Jewish unity, a unity to which Harry Jaffe and a group of Tel Aviv truck drivers would testify in their own imitation of Nahshon millennia later.

We remember Operation Nahshon, and the biblical Nahshon, as we ponder this week another operation, one that freed four hostages, one that was renamed for a courageous Nahshon of our age who fell in battle: Arnon Zamora. As Dan Senor noted in his podcast, the news of the liberation of the hostages precipitated a worldwide moment of profound Jewish consciousness and cohesion, not only in the way that Jews celebrated the hostages' return to their families, but also in the way in which Jewry learned about the warrior who had fallen. In the weeks in which we celebrate Nahshon's legacy, and in which we mark how Nahshon first inaugurated the altar that embodied Israelite unity, we mourn the death, and celebrate the life, of a man who was a Nahshon in the way he courageously lived, and we mark how the altar of sacrifice that he sanctified gave the entire Jewish world a feeling of unity.

Amir Ofer, who had served in the 1976 operation to free hostages in Entebbe—an operation that had been retroactively renamed for Yoni Netanyahu—told the Jewish world about the interactions he had had with Arnon Zamora shortly after October 7. Ofer's words deserve to be quoted at length:



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My friends, today Lieutenant Colonel Arnon Zamora from the YAMAM (Israeli Police Special Unit) was killed in the rescue operation in Nuseirat. I wanted to share with you an experience I had with him. I didn't know him. I was at some show at the amphitheater in Mevaseret Zion a few years ago. There were a few thousand people there. Suddenly, a lovely guy approached me, asked if he identified me correctly, and told me that he was an officer in YAMAM and asked me to come lecture to them about Entebbe. Of course, I agreed.

On October 16, 2023, I received a call from him: "I must talk to you." It was his first leave since the war began. I said, "Whenever you say." We talked for two hours. He told me in great detail how they were caught by surprise at the Yad Mordechai junction, how three RPGs missed him by millimeters, how his intuition to stop a few kilometers before the junction and regroup saved the entire force, how they fought like lions. How they reloaded all the magazines four times on the first day and jumped from the junction to Sderot, from Sderot to Ofakim, and from Ofakim to Be'eri, and how they were at the forefront everywhere. And how his heart broke in Be'eri at the house of Pesí [Cohen, the site of a bloody shootout].

And all the time he asked, "How did you succeed and we did not?" I saw before me a man among men, a true hero and an exceptionally moral person. I told him—and I meant every word I said—that there is no comparison between the situations.

Thus did a man who had liberated hostages at Entebbe console a man who felt that he had failed to save more men, women, and children. Ofer tells us that soon after that conversation he wrote a message to Zamora, with more encouragement:

It took me a few hours to digest and process the story. You were real heroes, and you functioned exceptionally well in the most difficult conditions possible. Strategic surprise, tactical surprise, fighting in an area full of civilians, and few against many. It is impossible to produce a more difficult situation even in a simulator. You literally saved the country. You have already secured your place in heaven, and more.

Zamora, we are told, wrote back as follows:

Know that it helped me a lot to talk to you. I felt like I took rocks off my shoulders.

Ofer described a bit more of their correspondence, and then concluded:

We lost a superb fighter. Feel free to share this with anyone you know. This man deserves to be known by everyone in the country.

And so he will be, as the memory of Arnon Zamora, who in the end became the hero of an operation much like Entebbe, is added to the covenantal history of the Jewish people, serving, like the altar of the Tabernacle, as a unifying symbol for Jewish identity and memory.



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Thus the wonder of Jewish history: only Jews have a covenantal memory that stretches to the ever-present past, drawing a line from Nahshon to operation Nahshon, from an obscure individual in the Bible who is described in the midrash as taking one small step on the shores of the sea 3,000 years ago to the bright blue Ford of Harry Jaffe in 1948, entering first into the city that is the locus of Jewish hopes and dreams. And only Jews can suddenly unite across the globe inspired by the heroism and sacrifice of one man who embodied Jewish unity and sacrifice in this difficult time, placing him forever in the pantheon of Jewish heroes.

There are those that resent this unique aspect of Jewish identity and Jewish history, and will do anything to carp at it, to criticize it, to undermine it. Immediately after euphoria swept the Jewish world over the rescue of four hostages, the *New York Times* gave us a story focusing on the challenges Israel still faces, and the accompanying headline: “Israel’s Euphoria over Hostage Rescue May Be Fleeting.” To this, Richard Goldberg of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies replied:

I grew up staring at a memorial plaque for Yoni Netanyahu. There will be plaques for Arnon Zamora in synagogues around the world. There is a political campaign going on to kill any sense of joy over the hostage rescue. It will not succeed.

Indeed it will not. The Jewish people remember the Nahshons, remember those who had the courage to forge ahead, and we remember the altar of sacrifices that is the record of the deeds of Jewish heroes. On the week of Nahshon we mourn a hero who fought to free captives, and we celebrate the success of the operation named for him. We remember as well the words written to him by Amir Ofer soon after October 7, words that have such a deep resonance now:

You literally saved the country. You have already secured your place in heaven, and more.

May Amir Ofer’s words serve as a source of consolation; and may Arnon Zamora’s example serve as a beacon of inspiration for years to come.

Additional Resources

Amir Ofer Writes about Arnon Zamora, X, June 8, 2024. [Click here to read.](#)

Dan Senior and Nadav Eyal on Operation Arnon, *Call Me Back*, June 10, 2024. [Click here to listen.](#)



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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

