

Naso 5782
The Space Between Far and Near
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Do you remember Grover, the Sesame Street character, teaching a lesson on the concept of near and far? Hither and yon he runs, near the camera and far from it, arriving at each spot and breathlessly calling out “near!” or “far!” He’s on my mind as I bring you some thoughts on today’s parashah.

We read three, sequential, yet starkly different examples of disruption and repair in today’s parashah—the first easily comprehensible, the second what I perceive as a draconian voodoo disaster, and the third inspiring in its attention to the liminal space between separation and reunification. I’d like to unpack these—briefly, given the hour—with a focus on how we navigate our relationships through choppy waters.

First up, we have the case of a person who wrongs another, in this example, by theft. The offending party first must take account of their guilt, and then, owning their responsibility, they are required to confess their wrong, make restitution, and add an additional 20% to the monetary value of the wrong that was done.

The second situation is the notorious *Sotah*. A man’s wife has had an affair with another man, or he suspects that she did and he is wrought up about it. She is brought to the sacred precinct, where she must undergo an ordeal orchestrated by a priest. Her head is bared, and she is forced to ingest a potion in which the name of God has been dissolved in a mixture of water and dirt. The potion yields a physical manifestation of the verdict. If she is guilty, her sexual and reproductive organs fail and she forfeits her fertility. If she is not guilty, she remains physically intact and fertile and is sent back home to her husband. Our sages are distinctly uncomfortable with this ritual.

The third case is that of a *Nazir*, or Nazirite, who takes a sacred vow not to drink alcohol or consume any grape products at all, cut their hair, or be near a corpse. Those restrictions impose a distance between the Nazir and the rest of the community. Although dwelling among them, the Nazir experiences themselves as spiritually set apart. The Torah describes the ritual of return, a ritual which includes a medley of ritual offerings that serve to induct the Nazir back into normal communal life. The ritual affirms both the Nazir’s experiences of abstinence and their return to normal life in community, closing the distance between the two within the liminal, sacred space of the altar.

Some of our sages link these three cases. They suggest that a man who is unscrupulous about what is his and what is not may also withhold the gifts they are expected to make to support the community's sacred institutions, and such a one will suffer in their marriage. A man like that will not trust his wife, perhaps because his own lack of propriety causes him to mistrust or to project his failures onto his her, or because his poor character drives her to seek solace in the arms of another.

The chain of causality then continues to the Nazir in this way: In the case where the wife has, in fact, become involved with another man, the would-be Nazir happens to observe the frivolity of the adulterous pair and worries that they—the observer—may, too, lack the proper controls to protect them from similar misadventure. The would-be Nazirite hopes that a set-apart time without alcohol and the other Nazirite restrictions will help them to develop the self discipline they lack.

My interest lies in what we can learn from these sequential cycles of rupture and repair. I want to suggest that the Torah offers a best case scenario and a worst case scenario, followed by an example of navigating between the spaces of rupture and repair.

The tort case in which damage is done, offers a model in which each party stands in its own truth but returns to relationship due to relational acts, in direct encounter. The aggressor humbles himself, owns his responsibility, and vulnerably seeks reconciliation. The aggrieved person, who most likely felt an assortment of negative feelings when the harm was done, now accepts the aggressor's words, restitution, and the additional token of contrition. I suspect that by giving an additional 20%, the aggressor takes the opportunity to make things better. The act is not merely restorative, but more importantly, it moves both parties toward relationship. That is what I'm calling the best case scenario.

In the case of the *Sotah*, an abstract resolution occurs: either the wife is guilty and Subject to stoning, or she is not guilty and will return home to her husband. But emotionally, there is no repair. The wronged husband sees justice executed, but certainly no reconciliation occurs; the relationship is over and dead.

One might argue that it's even worse If the woman is not guilty. The rabbis imagine how difficult it would have been for that woman to return home to the man who has subjected her to such a torturous ordeal. Fertile though she may be, it is hard to imagine her taking any pleasure in conceiving that man's baby. This, then, is the worst case scenario.

The third case, the Nazarite who separates themselves and then returns to normal communal life, shows us the importance of holding space between rupture and repair in order to effectuate a genuine return to relationship. Space is held between the Nazir's private experience and the communal life to which he returns fully. In that space, his sacred interaction with the Divine forges a unity of relationship that stands on its own.

I suspect that many of us struggle in the liminal space between . I know I do. I am often desperately eager to move forward and at the same time needing to be heard by the other, even when my perspective may prolong a conflict. Sometimes I need to be validated, and sometimes I need to know that my apology will be accepted and my sincerity is felt. Sometimes I am not ready to move forward. Sometimes the other side makes no sense to me, however much I might feel that I should validate it.

It is normal for thinking, feeling people to experience conflict, and it is normal for us to feel things when that happens, especially when we care about the people with whom we experience rupture. We may fear rupture, and most of us, I imagine, don't like how it feels, but seeking to avoid rupture will not keep us from it if we hope for authentic relationships.

Most of us will spend our whole lives practicing the skills of listening in order to understand, expressing feelings, finding honest and gentle words, giving and receiving restitution, and being open to those emotionally precious, over-the-top attempts to make things even better.

The really tricky part in any rupture between two people is that three struggles are happening simultaneously. Each person is struggling internally to identify and work with their own feelings and thoughts, while at the same time hoping for reconciliation with the other, who is engaged in their own, internal dual. The third struggle lies in the space between them. That is where the relational opportunity lies and it is the only space where there can be real hope of sustainable, interpersonal repair.

That space stands between how you feel when I do X and how I feel when you do Y. It is a space where each party's individual experiences are subsumed within, and do not direct, the intention of restoring the relationship. I am talking about the difference between personal experience and encounter with another. The philosopher Martin Buber writes about the difference between "experience" and encounter. "When I experience you, I am living in my own feelings—how your presence, your words and actions affect me. I am less interested in your presence than in what it triggers in me."* However, when I encounter you, I seek genuine meeting, a merging of souls. I interact with you on an essential level, your essence meeting my essence. Experience alone is

individual and not relational. Buber writes: “Those who experience do not participate in the world. For the experience is ‘in them’ and not between them and the world” (I and Thou, p. 34). Encounter, on the other hand, is dialogical, an experience of genuine openness in which what matters most is what happens between you and me.

(*Note: The quoted sentences are from Rabbi Shai Held. He also draws on Buber in interpreting our parashah, and he also uses the language of X and Y. I have learned from Rav Shai’s work, which focuses on the first case only, theft. My focus is on the liminal space of return modeled by the Nazir’s closing ritual—the space I am calling “relational.”)

In light of today’s Torah reading, I would humbly suggest that we commit to making the space for repair and remaining in that space long enough to truly encounter one another.

Back to Grover. Hither and yon he runs, near and then far, and then near again. Most of the time, though, he is neither near nor far, but somewhere in the middle. I think the same is true for us. May we strive in that space in good hope and loving intention and may our nearness kindle sparks that light the way to healing our world.

Amen.