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# liberal judaism



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## News

### Parashat Naso 5780

## Rabbi Richard Jacobi – 27 May 2020

**BRIAN:** Look. You've got it all wrong. You don't need to follow me. You don't need to follow anybody! You've got to think for yourselves. You're all individuals!

**FOLLOWERS:** Yes, we're all individuals!

**BRIAN:** You're all different!

**FOLLOWERS:** Yes, we are all different!

**DENNIS:** I'm not.

**ARTHUR:** Shhhh.

**FOLLOWERS:** Shh. Shhhh. Shhh.

Many of you will recognise this clip from Monty Python's Life of Brian, a film banned in some places, while being adored in others.



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For those reading this who are fresh from the Liberal Judaism Biennial Online, which embraced the challenges of Covid-19 to redesign a weekend conference as an online-only experience, the relationship between being individuals and being part of a collaborative group was much discussed.

If you weren't part of that experience, much of it is available to view [here](https://www.youtube.com/user/LiberalJudaismMedia) (<https://www.youtube.com/user/LiberalJudaismMedia>).

It is said that at the point of revelation of Torah at Mount Sinai, every person who experienced it heard it in a way uniquely suited to them – their own language, their own vocabulary. Rabbinic literature also speaks of how future generations were there as well. Merle Field has movingly and poetically written about how “I’m ... always holding a baby so my hands are never free to write things down.” She heard it just like her brother, but her story is forgotten.

Dennis gets shushed in that scene; Merle Field's maternal woman disappears from the story of the Jewish people. If you aren't part of the crowd, if you are busy caring for babies or vulnerable people, if you're not tech-savvy to enjoy online services and study, if you can't afford the tech costs, then you're all too easily forgotten. And not just forgotten by history, but forgotten while still alive.

This Covid-19 pandemic is a crisis that is far from over. Like any crisis, it has brought out, in exaggerated form, the worst and the best in people. Our bad inclinations (*yetzer hara*) can and have been triggered by what's happening as much as our good inclinations (*yetzer hatov*). It is too early to tell if we (humanity at whatever level from individual to global) will let this crisis go to waste or seize the day to trigger moves towards a better world.

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It is not too early to develop our vision of what we could make of this crisis. Sonia Renee Taylor has deservedly won acclaim for her vision, which begins: "We will not go back to normal. Normal never was." I agree wholeheartedly with her that what we had normalised before this crisis was inherently unhealthy and wrong.

Shavuot has been, somewhat kabbalistically, likened to the marriage ceremony between God and the Jewish people in which the Torah is the dowry. God gives it, and we promise to cherish its good teachings. From its first letter, first word, first chapter onwards, there is so much to learn, and we can never complete the task of learning from it. So, the question is what we learn and apply, what we remember, but don't use, and what we forget. As Sonia Renee Taylor reminds us, we forgot key teachings, normalised unhealthy things for humanity and the planet, and shushed or ignored marginal voices, like Dennis.

This Shavuot, may we re-gain clarity of vision about the world and our role in it. May we rediscover things long forgotten or pragmatically overlooked in the hustle and bustle of pre-Covid twenty-first century life. As I write this, the sky is bluer outside my window, the songs of different birds accompany me uninterrupted by human creations, such as planes or traffic. Will I forget these tranquil moments? I hope not.

Why was humanity created on the sixth day, not earlier to co-create the rest with God? Primarily, I think, that we should learn about and from everything that came into being before us. We took all this for granted. Now we are presented with a cross-roads; which route, which path will we choose?

Torah always tells us to choose life and good. Parshat Naso, read in Israel and around the Progressive Jewish world this weekend, contains the Priestly blessing. This offers us the reward we receive if we make wise choices: "God will reach out to us in tenderness, and set within us tranquil peace."

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