

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Parshat Naso contains the law of the Nazirite -- the individual who undertook to observe special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink wine or other intoxicants (including anything made from grapes), not to have his hair cut, and not to defile himself by contact with the dead (Num. 6:1-21). Such a state was usually undertaken for a limited period; the standard length was thirty days. There were exceptions, most famously Samson and Samuel who, because of the miraculous nature of their birth, were consecrated before their birth as Nazirites for life. (Judges 13:1-7; I Sam. 1:11)

(The Talmud distinguishes these kinds of cases from the standard vow for a fixed period. The most famous Nazirite of modern times was Rabbi David Cohen (1887-1972), a disciple of Rav Kook and father of the Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi She'ar-Yashuv Cohen (1927-2016).)

What the Torah does not make clear, though, is firstly why a person might wish to undertake this form of abstinence, and secondly whether it considers this choice to be commendable, or merely permissible. On the one hand the Torah calls the Nazirite "holy to God" (Num. 6:8). On the other, it requires him, at the end of the period of his vow, to bring a sin offering (Num. 6:13-14).

This led to an ongoing disagreement between the Rabbis in Mishnaic, Talmudic, and medieval times. According to R. Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the Nazirite is praiseworthy. He has voluntarily undertaken a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos (2:11) said, "I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and your young men for Nazirites," suggesting that the Nazirite, like the prophet, is a person especially close to God. The reason he had to bring a sin offering was that he was now returning to ordinary life. His sin lay in ceasing to be a Nazirite.

Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. For them the sin lay in becoming a Nazirite in the first place and thereby denying himself some of the pleasures of the world God created and declared good. R. Eliezer added: "From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life." (Taanit

11a; Nedarim 10a)

Clearly the argument is not merely textual. It is substantive. It is about asceticism, the life of self-denial. Almost every religion knows the phenomenon of people who, in pursuit of spiritual purity, withdraw from the pleasures and temptations of the world. They live in caves, retreats, hermitages, monasteries. The Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls may have been such a movement.

In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted similar kinds of self-denial -- among them the Chasidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. In retrospect it is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Chasidei Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts may have been familiar with Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews towards the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were ascetic movements in the first centuries of the Common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were, in fact, dualists, holding that the true God was not the creator of the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. Therefore God -- the true God -- is not to be found in the physical world and its enjoyments but rather in disengagement from them.

The two best-known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the Nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish practices. Judaism strongly believes that God is to be found in the midst of the physical world that He created that is, in the first chapter of Genesis, seven times pronounced "good." It believes not in renouncing pleasure but in sanctifying it.

What is much more puzzling is the position of Maimonides, who holds both views, positive and negative, in the same book, his law code the Mishneh Torah. In Hilchot Deot (3:1), he adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer HaKappar: "A person may say: 'Desire, honour, and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world; therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the

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other extreme.' As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing.... This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way."

Yet in Hilchot Nezirut (10:14) he rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of R. Elazar: "Whoever vows to God [to become a Nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy.... Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet." How does any writer come to adopt contradictory positions in a single book, let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer lies in a remarkable insight of Maimonides into the nature of the moral life as understood by Judaism. What Maimonides saw is that there is not a single model of the virtuous life. He identifies two, calling them respectively the way of the saint (chassid) and the way of the sage (chacham).

The saint is a person of extremes. Maimonides defines chessed as extreme behaviour -- good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires. (Guide for the Perplexed, III:52) So, for example, "If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint [chassid]." (Hilchot Deot 1:5)

The sage is a different kind of person altogether. He or she follows the "golden mean," the "middle way," the way of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. He or she avoids miserliness in one direction, prodigality in the other, and instead chooses the middle way of generosity. The sage knows the twin dangers of too much and too little, excess and deficiency. He or she weighs the conflicting pressures and avoids the extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. What makes Maimonides so acute a thinker is that he realises that you cannot have both -- that they are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the

poor. But what about the members of the saint's own family? They may suffer because of his extreme self-denial. A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's country and its defence? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what then about the rule of law, and justice? Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. Yet you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society. They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path. I know no moral philosopher who makes this point as clearly as Maimonides -- not Plato or Aristotle, not Descartes or Kant.

It was this deep insight that led Maimonides to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the Nazirite. The Nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a chassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, and exemplary. That is why Maimonides calls him "praiseworthy" and "the equal of a prophet."

But it is not the way of the sage -- and you need sages if you seek to perfect society. The sage is not an extremist -- because he or she realises that there are other people at stake. There are the members of one's own family as well as the others within one's community. There are colleagues at work. There is a country to defend and a society to help build. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue.

There were Sages who believed that in an ideal world, tasks such as earning a living or having children could be "done by others" (see Berachot 35a for the view of R. Shimon b. Yochai; Yevamot 63b for that of Ben Azzai). These are elitist attitudes that have surfaced in Judaism from time to time but which are criticised by the Talmud.

In a strange way, saintliness is a form of self-indulgence. We are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; in society not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others.

Hence, while from a personal perspective the Nazirite is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a "sinner" who has to bring an atonement offering.

Maimonides lived the life he preached. We know from his writings that he longed for seclusion. There were years when he worked day and night to write his Commentary to the Mishnah, and later the Mishneh Torah. Yet he also recognised his responsibilities to his family and to the community. In his famous letter to his would-be translator Ibn Tibbon, he gives an account of his typical day and week -- in which he had to carry a double burden as a world-renowned physician and an internationally sought

halachist and sage. He worked to exhaustion. (See Rabbi Yitzhak Sheilat, Letters of Maimonides [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Miskal, 1987-88), 2:530-554.

Maimonides was a sage who longed to be a saint, but knew he could not be, if he was to honour his responsibilities to his people. That is a profound and moving judgement, and one that still has the power to inspire today. *Covenant and Conversation 5779 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l* © 2019 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"When a man or woman shall commit any sin that people may commit, to do a trespass against the Lord, and that person be guilty; then they shall confess their sin which they have committed..." (Numbers 5:6-7) According to Maimonides, this verse, which obligates confession, is the basic source for the commandment of repentance; repentance is incomplete without verbal confession. Writing in his Mishneh Torah (Hilkhos Teshuva 1:1) he rules that "every commandment in the Torah... if a person violates any one of them either intentionally or accidentally, his act of repentance must be accompanied with confession before God, because it's written in the Torah 'then they shall confess their sin which they have committed.'"

Detailing the nuts and bolts of repentance, Maimonides divides the process into four pragmatic steps: recognition of sin, confession, the act of resolving never to repeat the sin, and – in order to effectuate "total" repentance – resistance from repeating the transgression when faced with a similar temptation under similar circumstances. Hence guilt, the inevitable accompaniment of sin, can be dealt with by means of repentance, which has the power to totally obliterate the act of wrongdoing.

In contrast, Freud, when he discovered the Oedipal complex, assigned mankind a guilt so profound that his message of the "haunted soul" permeates the modern sensibility, from the bleak no-exit landscapes of the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman to the comic-cosmic ones of Bergman's disciple Woody Allen. According to them, not only are we doomed to repeat the sins of our parents, but we are also limited – and even crippled – by the transgressions of our past. All of us, the theory goes, suffer from primal guilt. The past is inescapable. And inevitably, being born into a situation beyond our control, guilt is coupled with gloom. At best we learn to acknowledge our past, and make do. The past controls our present as well as our future!

But in Judaism, as we began to see from Maimonides, a violation of any of the commandments – whether it was purposeful or accidental, conscious or unconscious – may be repented for and forgiven. That

and more: a sin may become the means – a sort of pogo stick – for creative betterment; a transgression may be transformed into a good deed, a black mark into a brilliant jewel – a sort of alchemy for the soul. No, Dr. Freud, not only is our present not controlled by the past, but our present has the ability to change the past. As Professor Mordechai Rotenberg of the Hebrew University establishes in his work, *Rebiographing and Deviance*, repentance is built into the theology of Judaism, allowing us not only to escape from the permanent scars of past misdeeds but through a transformative ascent, our sins become virtues – not just in the metaphoric sense, but in real psychological and interpersonal terms. Through the gift of repentance, each individual can re-biographize the events of his life, transforming transgression into a virtue.

Sources for such transformation can be found in a wide range of classic texts. For example, the Talmud (Yoma 86b) cites Resh Lakish, himself a repentant armed robber, as saying that "when true repentance takes place all transgressions are turned into merits," and Rabbi Abbahu (Berakhot 34b), who taught that "where the penitent stands is higher than that of the completely righteous individual." How is this possible? After all, "of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'" How can we recreate, recast, the past? My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, discusses this issue in his classical work *Al HaTeshuva* (On Repentance, edited by Pinhas Peli), and he explains it on the basis of the realization that it is usually only when one loses something – an object or a relationship – that one truly appreciates its value. Hence, tragically perhaps, only when one has lost his closeness to God and the Jewish tradition can one truly re-embrace them in depth, and then with even greater fervor and appreciation than before. As the great Psalmist King David cried out, "From the depths [of despair] do I call upon you, O God" (Psalms 130:1); it is precisely the depths of my despair that provide me with a jump-start, a push upwards to achieve a close relationship.

I would like to suggest a further insight. After all, the pen used to rewrite our lives (rebiographing) is called repentance, as we have just seen, and it itself is one of the 613 commandments in the Torah. And to repent means to turn back, to turn ourselves back to the period before we sinned, to turn the clock of our lives back as well. Even though Maimonides divides the process into four steps, confession must be particularly important to him because, in his first law in the chapter of repentance, a paragraph of eighteen lines (in my edition of *Mishneh Torah*, published by Mossad Harav Kook), the Hebrew word for confession, *vidui*, is repeated no less than thirteen times.

Perhaps by repeating "verbal confession" so often, Maimonides provides us with a clue as to the

process by which Judaism turns sins into virtues.

Confessions which lead to a change of heart and personality (recognizing a sin and truly determining, and garnering the strength, never to repeat it again) differ qualitatively from confessions when lying on a psychiatrist's couch or in a dark confessional booth. Authentic confession must be expressed directly to the individual one sinned against. Such a verbal confession – when the lips utter the words to be heard – becomes not only an “at-one-ment” between two individuals who had become alienated and estranged from each other, but it also makes the individual “at-one” with himself, the self he would like to be and the self he has sadly become. It also brings together and makes “at-one-ment” between conflicting parts of a person's consciousness: heart and mind, internal feeling and external communication. It allows the individual to confront and verbally express his sin, his imperfection, his failure, to conceptualize what he has done, first to himself, and then to the other he has wronged. It enables him to reconnect with his full self as well as with others, without the mask of self-deception and without the curtain of separation. Only from such a brutal and truthful encounter with oneself as well as with other can the difficult process of change begin.

A sin (het) is literally a missing of the mark, a disconnect, a failure to make the proper connection and reach out to the other in love. It's clear that Erich Segal's ridiculous message that love means “never having to say you're sorry” is in direct opposition to the Torah's view. Much the opposite! Saying you're sorry to another is recognition of the other, of realizing the pain of the other. Saying you're sorry in a relationship is an admission of love, a cry from one heart to another that one feels and sees the hurt that one has caused the other, that one has the courage to admit one's smallness, one's selfishness, one's self-centeredness in the presence of the other, whose love will empower the beloved to become whole, to grow, and to give again.

Words are the first tangible, external expression of a new reality; real change can only be proven by different external actions. If verbal confession cannot be spoken, if the individual cannot bring him or herself to at least face and express the crime against the other with words of sorrow and remorse, change will never be effectuated and the relationship between the two will never be repaired. Words can at least begin to create new realities, and a new reality can hopefully create a new individual and a new relationship.

Many years ago a married woman with two children came into my office, confessing that she had encouraged a relationship with a single man; they had stopped just short of adultery, her husband had found out and he now wanted to divorce her. She confronted

her guilt, recognized who she had become and how much she had sacrificed for momentary lust, and spoke of how she truly loved her husband and desperately wanted to save their marriage and make amends for what had happened. After meeting with both of them, it also became clear that the husband had been neglecting his wife, that his business had taken him away from home much more often than he should have traveled, and that he too shared in her guilt – although not to the same extent. Each confessed wrongdoing to the other, each recognized the need for change, and not only did the marriage continue but it became much improved. In a very real way, the woman's transgression became transformed into a merit; it served as a spark-plug and wake-up call for two individuals to learn how to live with one another in love, consideration, and mutual commitment. Their present repentance redeemed the past and dramatically changed their future. There is no greater tribute to and confirmation of human freedom than the possibility of change, of growth, of renewal – than the mitzva of repentance. ©2019 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The Torah reading this week begins with a commandment to Moshe to count the Levites, especially the family of Gershon. The Hebrew words that are used to make this count, literally translated, mean “raise the head” of the family of Gershon, who are an important section of the tribe of the Levites.

There are many different interpretations as to why the Torah chose to use this formulation of words to indicate a count of that family. The Torah certainly could have used a simpler and more direct verb to indicate to Moshe that he was to take a census of that family of the Levites.

I remember that when I attended law school long ago, we students had to prepare the cases that would be discussed in the lecture of the professor for that day. The professor had a very prickly personality and oftentimes was even slightly inebriated when teaching the class. His methodology was to call upon a student to read and discuss a case at first before expounding upon what principle of law that case illustrated. The professor was very short tempered and usually skewered the hapless student attempting to read and explain the case. Because of this, no one in our class ever wanted to volunteer to read the case and lead the discussion about it. So, at the beginning of every class all of us had our heads lowered and refused to make any eye contact nor any other apparent physical connection with the professor. He was, hands down, a terrible person and we put our heads down to avoid having to deal with him.

Perhaps this is the reason why the Torah use

this phrase of 'raising the head' when discussing the role of the Levites in Jewish public life and their tasks in the service of the Temple and the Tabernacle. It is a privilege to be a Levite, to be in the service of the God of Israel and the people of Israel. It is a matter of pride and accomplishment and not to be viewed as a burden or something to be minimized. One has to volunteer enthusiastically for the work in the service of God in Israel.

If one is proud and enthusiastic about one's role within the Jewish community and sees one's self in the perspective of generations and tradition, as doing holy work and contributing to eternal projects, can one really feel the pride and joy of being a Levite... and in fact, of being a Jew.

The Torah abhors slackers. Those who attempt to escape or avoid the necessary commitment and effort to be Jewish and to serve the cause of Jewish survival and success eventually are not destined to remain part of the eternal people. Jewish history testifies to this basic fact of Jewish life. Only by raising one's head and, in effect, saying count me in, can one expect the blessings of eternity. ©2019 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The enigmatic process of the sotah (Numbers 5:11-31) is found in this portion of the Torah. Many rationales have been used to explain this concept, but this week I would like to show how the sotah laws (which, actually, due to rampant immorality, soon after the destruction of the Second Temple, were suspended by Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zakki) can explain a comment made by Rabbi Eliezer in Talmud tractate Sotah: "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her tiflut (sometimes translated as 'obscenity')." (Sotah 3:4)

Although Rabbi Eliezer's dictum is often quoted as a primary source for excluding women from Torah study, an analysis of the talmudic context of Rabbi Eliezer's comment could yield a different conclusion.

A sotah, a woman suspected by her husband of infidelity, was forced to drink bitter waters. If she was guilty, these waters had a devastating physical effect upon her. If she was innocent, the waters had no effect. In fact, if the sotah's husband had himself acted immorally, the bitter waters were inoperative.

Concerning the laws of sotah, the Mishnah states: "If she (the women accused) has merit, that merit [causes the water] to suspend its effect upon her. Some merit suspends the effect for one year, another for two years, and another for three years. Hence, declared Ben Azzai, a man is under the obligation to teach his daughter Torah, so that if she has to drink

[the waters of bitterness], she may know that the merit of her learning suspends its effect. Then Rabbi Eliezer says: Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her tiflut."

The first three chapters of Tractate Sotah describe how the rabbis use every legal means at their disposal to make it unnecessary for an accused woman to drink the bitter waters for it is preferable that women not drink the sotah waters due to the fact that they may actually be irrelevant to deciding the case of accused adultery.

Ben Azzai feels that this ability to use Torah to ward off the devastation of the bitter waters is advantageous. Therefore he declares that every father should teach his daughter Torah. With that merit, the waters, if ever tasted, would be rendered null and void.

Rabbi Eliezer responds by saying that Torah should not be used for such a purpose. Firstly, it would give women carte blanche to commit immoral acts, knowing that their Torah learning would make them immune to the effects of the bitter waters. Secondly, Rabbi Eliezer may have been saying that using Torah for this type of personal insurance policy would be an outrage and an abuse of the power of Torah.

From this perspective, Rabbi Eliezer's statement is not a sweeping restriction of woman's place in Torah study. The statement rather teaches us the important lesson that while all of us should continue to strive to learn more and reach higher, any Torah learning is valueless unless it is used to enhance our personal morality and foster a closer relationship to God. ©2019 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI DAVID LEVINE

The Challenge of the Nazir

Parashat Naso contains the laws of the Nazir, the Nazarite. The Torah tells us, "Speak to the children of Israel and you will say, a man or a woman when he sets himself apart by taking a Nazarite vow to set himself apart for Hashem. He shall abstain from wine and hard drink and he shall not drink vinegar of wine or vinegar of strong drink, anything in which grapes have been steeped he shall not drink and fresh and dried grapes he shall not eat. All the days of his status as a Nazir, anything made from wine grapes, from pips to skin, he shall not eat. All the days of his Nazarite vow a razor shall not pass over his head, until the completion of the days that he will be a Nazir for the sake of Hashem, holy shall it be, the growth of hair on his head shall grow. All the days of his being a Nazir for the sake of Hashem, he shall not come near a dead person. For his father and for his mother, for his brother and for his sister he shall not make himself impure by them upon their death for the crown of his

Elokim is upon his head. All the days of his status as a Nazir, he is holy to Hashem.”

Our Rabbis explain that this section of the Torah follows immediately after the laws of a Sotah, a woman who is accused by her husband of adultery. She is required to drink a mixture that is described in the Torah, and if she is innocent, she will be fine and remain with her husband. If she is guilty, the drink will cause her belly to swell and her insides to fall out causing her death. Our Rabbis tell us that a person who witnesses this test will be frightened that he will suffer the same consequences unless he does something to raise his spiritual level. He sets himself apart as a Nazir to raise his level of spirituality so that he will be strong enough to resist temptation. HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin demonstrates his growth: When the Nazir begins his journey, the Torah uses the words “taking a Nazirite vow to set himself apart for Hashem.” At the end of his time as a Nazir, the Torah uses the words “all the days of his vow as a Nazir.” As he begins the journey, he has not yet incorporated the vow into his life and is acting strictly in his servitude to Hashem. As he continues, the values of his spirituality have become internalized and he refers to the journey as his vow. HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that not only does a Nazir separate himself from others in social situations (drink, cutting one’s hair, and caring for a corpse) in order to raise himself spiritually, the term nezirim (vines during the seventh year which are left to themselves) indicates that the term “Nazir in any case does not mean he who keeps away from others but from whom others have to keep away, from whom others must be separated.” The Nazir must lift himself “out of and above the midst of the people amongst whom he lives and sets him the task to be completely holy to Hashem.”

Tractate Nazir in the Talmud lists several different kinds of Nazir. Stam Nezirut, the standard category of a Nazir, is for thirty days and can be extended at the time of the vow for an indefinite period of time. A Nazir may designate a particular time span or several consecutive standard periods of thirty days each. Two other categories of nezirut, Nazir Olam, the permanent Nazir, and Nazir Shimshon, the Samsonite Nazir, are similar in that both categories result in being a Nazir forever. The difference between them is that the Nazir Olam is permitted to cut his hair at regular intervals. A Nazir Shimshon may not shave or cut his hair. The Nazir Shimshon, however, may contaminate himself with corpse impurity. The Nazir Shimshon also may not ever have his oath annulled once he has declared it.

A Nazir’s restrictions are: (1) drinking wine or hard drink and eating any part of a grape, its seeds, skin, liquid, or any dried form, (2) shaving or cutting one’s hair, (3) coming in contact with a corpse, even of one’s parent. Our Rabbis indicate that these

restrictions are related to the incident of the test given to a Sotah. The Kli Yakar reports that we learn from Tractate Sotah (2a), “all who see a Sotah in her disgrace will separate himself from wine.” The Kli Yakar posits that the sight of the Sotah has a more devastating effect on a woman and therefore the Torah specified here “man or woman.” HaRav Sorotzkin explains that an adulterous begins with simple gestures, far from intercourse, and eating or tasting even a discarded part of a grape may develop a desire for wine.

Hirsch explains that “hair can be considered as insulating the skin and reducing receptiveness to outer influences, so that giving up inconsiderate conduct and selfishly living for oneself, and devoting oneself to the social life of the community could well be expressed symbolically by the shaving of hair on the return of the cured metzora (one suffering from a skin disease as a punishment) and the shaving of the Levi’im (at their induction to their service in the Temple).” Hirsch stresses that the life of a Nazir does not exclude interaction with others. He leads a normal life, involved with others, yet his mind is devoted to Hashem.

The third restriction deals with the separation from the impurity of a corpse. Here we have no case of the restriction acting as an avoidance of a temptation to a greater sin. A person who comes in contact with a corpse becomes impure for seven days. Hirsch explains that the Nazirite isolates himself for the same kind of closeness with Hashem that we find in the Kohanim. Death is the reminder to the Nazir of the limited nature of man’s freedom, yet “Hashem insists on the complete free-will of human beings in all matters of morality, and the consequent complete absence of compulsion to having to submit to the power of physical urges.”

The explanations reported here are only an overview of the opinions given. Much more can be said of the Nazir. We all may wish to be closer to Hashem and in that way avoid sinning, but the Rabbis fault the Nazir for taking this path. The oath that the Nazir takes and the restrictions which set him apart from the community are not looked upon positively. It is better to learn to moderate one’s behavior so as not to feel the need for a period of nezirut as a shield and a boost to a proper perspective on life. It is better for man to use his intellect to guide him on a path of moderation so that abstinence will become unnecessary. May we each learn to develop our own means of self-control and in that way become closer to Hashem. ©2019 Rabbi D. Levine

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The Holiday of Shavuot

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

When the Jewish people received the first tablets the Torah states “Beware of ascending the

mountain or touching its edge" (Shmot19;12). Similarly this warning appears again when the Jewish people receive the second set of tablets "No man shall ascend with you nor may anyone be seen on the entire mountain. Even the flock and the cattle may not graze facing the mountain (Shmot 34;3). Thus the second warning was harsher than the first in that no one, even the cattle, was allowed to approach the mountain, while in the first giving of the tablets the elders were permitted to ascend the mountain with Moshe.

From the sentence "Thou shalt not touch" (Lo Tiga Bo Yad) the Michilta deduces that this excludes the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and the Temple. Thus according to this view one may touch the Kotel wall. Though it is forbidden for a defiled (Tamei) person to enter the perimeter of the Temple, touching the outside is permitted. There are however views that one should not place their hand into the Kotel walls for that would constitute entering its perimeter. Thus there are those who do not come near the Kotel wall.

Just to note that there are those who posit that when it states 'Thou shalt not touch' it comes to include-not exclude- the Mishkan and the Temple. However this is not the dominant view. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Pennies From Heaven

The portion of Naso contains phrases that are said every day by every congregation in the world. In the Diaspora they are incorporated in the repetition of the Shemone Esrai, the (morning) standing prayer, and in Israel the kohanim themselves, the priests, recite them each morning as they bless the nation: Birkas Kohanim, the priestly blessings. In this week's portion Hashem instructed the kohanim to bless the people: "Thus shall you bless the nation of Israel, speak unto them. May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May He illuminate His countenance upon you and let you find grace. May He lift His countenance upon you and establish peace for you." (Numbers 6:22-26)

It seems that we ask for more than blessing. Why is each one of the blessings followed with its practical implication? Bless us... and safeguard us. Illuminate us... and let us find favor in the eyes of others. Lift countenance.. and establish peace for us. Is it not enough to be blessed and have the illumination of his countenance? What is the necessity of the second half of each blessing?

Noted attorney Robert Harris, Esq. of Woodmere, told me a wonderful story: A man once pleaded with the Al-mighty to bestow a bit of His abundance upon him. He implored and begged his Creator for long life and wealth. After all, the poor soul figured, G-d had an abundance of everything; why then, wouldn't He spare something for a Jew in need. He entered a huge, empty synagogue on the Lower East

Side and began to cry.

"Ribono Shel Olam (Master of the universe)," he cried "in the great extent of Your eternity what is a million years?"

The man began to tremble. He imagined that he actually heard a response. "To Me a million years is just a mere second!" boomed a voice inside his mind.

The man continued. "And," he pleaded, "to the magnitude of Your great bounty, what, may I ask, is a billion dollars?"

"A billion dollars is just a mere penny," came the resonating reply.

"Then," begged the man, "can I not have just one of your pennies?"

"Surely!" came the response. And then a pause. "But you must wait a mere second!"

It is not enough to get a blessing from Hashem. It must be given with the assurance that it will have a practical implication. Many people receive blessings of wealth and health only to lose them to thieves and aggravation. Each of the priestly blessings is followed by a safeguard -- a follow up. A blessing of wealth alone is not enough. Hashem must guard it. Illuminating us with His countenance is not enough. Unless fellow humans appreciate the grace that G-d has given the Jews, in this very corporeal world, it is a worthless gift. And of course, even if He lifts his countenance upon us we still need the blessings of shalom -- peace.

The Torah also teaches us that blessing others must be done with a full heart and full hand. To bestow generosity on others must include a vehicle to appreciate the bounty. Otherwise you have given the gift of a billion dollars -- in a million years. We may give blessings to our fellow Jews, but the greatest blessings we receive and give are those that we can use -- immediately and forever. ©2019 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & *torah.org*

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Part of the blessing which the Cohanim, the priests, bless the Jewish people is: "The Lord shall make His face shine upon you." (Numbers 6:25)

One of the 613 commandments is to emulate the Almighty. What can we learn from this verse to emulate the Almighty?

The great sage Shamai said, "Greet every man with a pleasant expression of countenance" (Pirke Avos, 1:15) -- in this manner, we are "shining our countenance upon others". How can we have a "shining" countenance?

Look at the Person -- The minimum is to turn your face towards your fellow man; don't greet anyone with the side of your face. Turn your face towards him/her.

Express Interest -- Don't look bored or distracted.

Feel Happy -- to see the person and let your face show it!

Since God deals with us measure for measure, God makes His face shine upon those whose faces shine to their fellow human being! *Dvar Torah based on Love Your Neighbor by Rabbi Zelig Pliskin ©2019 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

On the Shabbos immediately after Shavuot we are treated to the longest Torah reading of the year -- the one hundred and seventy-six verses of Naso. Interestingly enough, the longest tractate of the Talmud (Bava Basra) has one hundred and seventy-six pages, and the longest chapter of the Psalms (119) has one hundred and seventy-six verses.

The massive tractate is famous for the range and complexity of its subject matter, and the long psalm explores the full gamut of a Jew's relationship with his Creator. But what constitutes the bulk of this week's protracted Torah portion?

It is an elaborate description of the offering brought by each of the twelve tribal princes at the dedication ceremony of the Mishkan. All the offerings were identical, yet the Torah describes each offering in the same precise, meticulous, apparently repetitive detail -- twelve times! How utterly amazing! Surely, it would have sufficed to describe the offering once and point out that this selfsame offering was brought by each and every tribal prince. What's more, each letter in the Torah is so carefully measured that even a single seemingly superfluous one is considered a clear sign of a hidden message. Surely, therefore, there must be some transcendent message in this cascade of seemingly superfluous letters!

Furthermore, we find that Midrash compares the offerings of the tribal princes to the songs of joy sung by the Jewish people at the parting of the Sea of Reeds. What exactly is the parallel between the two?

The commentators explain that the offerings of the tribal princes were only identical to each other in their external appearance. But the essential element of each man's gift was not in the physical composition of the offering but in the emotions, sentiments and expressions of devotion it represented. In this respect, all the offerings were as different from each other as the men were different from each other, and each offering was the particular expression of each individual's state of mind and heart.

But the question remains: If each man's offering carried a different message, why didn't they bring different offerings?

This is the very crux of the Torah's message in this week's portion. It is not necessary to find varieties of external forms to satisfy the varieties of internal expressions. The Torah identifies the perfect physical

form, and through it, a limitless variety of expression can be channeled. At the splitting of the sea, six hundred thousand people sang the exact same song. Undoubtedly, each individual had his own nuances and personal angles on that song, yet the exact same song could serve as the conduit for the exultant expressions of six hundred thousand different hearts bursting with joy. The offerings of the tribal princes also followed this pattern. The Torah identified the perfect physical form of the offering, and each man's innermost thoughts and feelings were able to find expression through it.

How critical is this concept to our understanding of Judaism? Clearly, it is extremely critical if the Torah saw fit to repeat the offerings of the tribal princes twelve times to hammer home this message.

In our own lives, we are confronted by this paradox all the time. The prayers are exactly formulated, the times and modes of mitzvah performance are strictly delineated by Halachah. Tinkering, modifying and improvising are sometimes tempting options for frustrated people, but they are strictly forbidden. Where then is the room for individual expression and creativity, for the development of a personal relationship with the Creator?

It is there between the lines. We must learn from the example of the Jewish people who witnessed the splitting of the sea and the tribal princes who brought their offerings for the dedication of the Mishkan. They were able to take the divinely ordained formulae and find with them endless potential for personal nuance and creativity. Similarly, when the Torah or the Sages present us with the ideal forms of observance, we can give free rein to our creativity by focusing on the inner feelings of connection they are designed to engender rather than on the external physical forms themselves. Rich motherlodes of spirituality await us there. They need only to be mined.

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