

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

The parsha of Naso contains the laws relating to the nazirite -- an individual who undertook, usually for a limited period of time, 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.

The Torah does not make a direct evaluation of the nazirite. On the one hand it calls him "holy to G-d" (Num. 6:8). On the other, it rules that when the period comes to an end the nazirite has to bring a sin offering (Num. 6:13-14), as if he had done something wrong.

This led to a fundamental disagreement between the rabbis in Mishnaic, Talmudic and medieval times. According to Rabbi Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the nazirite is worthy of praise. He has voluntarily chosen a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos (2:11) says, "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 G-d. The reason he had to bring a sin offering was that he was now returning to ordinary life. The sin lay in ceasing to be a nazirite.

Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. The sin lay in becoming a nazirite in the first place, thereby denying himself some of the pleasures of the world G-d created and declared good. Rabbi 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

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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 self-denial -- among them the Hassidei 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 Hassidei 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 toward 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 G-d was not the creator of the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. 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.

What is 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 The Laws of Ethical Character, he adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer ha-Kappar: "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 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." (Hilkhot Deot 3:1)

Yet in The Laws of the Nazirite he rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of Rabbi Elazar: "Whoever vows to G-d [to become a nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy... Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet." (Hilkhot Nezirut 10:14) 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 one of Maimonides' most

original insights. He holds that there are two quite different ways of living the moral life. He calls them respectively the way of the saint (hassid) and the sage (hakham).

The sage follows the "golden mean," the "middle way." The moral life is a matter of moderation and balance, charting a course between too much and too little. Courage, for example, lies midway between cowardice and recklessness. Generosity lies between profligacy and miserliness. This is very similar to the vision of the moral life as set out by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

The saint, by contrast, does not follow the middle way. He or she tends to extremes, fasting rather than simply eating in moderation, embracing poverty rather than acquiring modest wealth, and so on.

At various points in his writings, Maimonides explains why people might embrace extremes. One reason is repentance and character transformation. (See his *Eight Chapters* [the introduction to his commentary on *Mishnah, Avot*], ch. 4, and *Hilkhot Deot*, chapters 1, 2, 5 and 6.) So a person might cure himself of pride by practicing, for a while, extreme self-abasement. Another is the asymmetry of the human personality. The extremes do not exert an equal pull. Cowardice is more common than recklessness, and miserliness than over-generosity, which is why the hassid leans in the opposite direction. A third reason is the lure of the surrounding culture. This may be so opposed to religious values that pious people choose to separate themselves from the wider society, "clothing themselves in woolen and hairy garments, dwelling in the mountains and wandering about in the wilderness," differentiating themselves by their extreme behavior.

This is a very nuanced presentation. There are times, for Maimonides, when self-denial is therapeutic, others when it is factored into Torah law itself, and yet others when it is a response to an excessively hedonistic age. In general, though, Maimonides rules that we are commanded to follow the middle way, whereas the way of the saint is *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, beyond the strict requirement of the law. (*Hilkhot Deot* 1:5)

Moshe Halbertal, in his recent, impressive study of Maimonides, (*Maimonides: Life and Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2014, 154-163) sees him as finessing the fundamental tension between the civic ideal of the Greek political tradition and the spiritual ideal of the religious radical for whom, as the Kotzker Rebbe said, "The middle of the road is for horses." To the hassid, Maimonides' sage can look like a "self-satisfied bourgeois."

Essentially, these are two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create a decent, just and compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both.

That is what makes Maimonides so acute a thinker. He realises that you can't have both. 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? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's own country? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what 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. Ultimately, saints are not really interested in society. Their concern is the salvation of the soul.

This deep insight is what 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 hassid. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable and exemplary.

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 and the others within one's own community. There is a country to defend and an economy to sustain. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For we are called on by G-d 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 him 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 halakhist and sage. He worked to exhaustion. There were times when he was almost too busy to study from one week to the next. 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 seems to me a profound judgment, and one still relevant to Jewish life today. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2015 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks z"l and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to Aaron and to his sons saying so shall you bless the children of Israel; say to them, may the Lord bless you and keep you...' (Numbers 6:22-27)

There are very few passages of the Bible which are as well known as the Priestly Benediction. In Israel, the kohanim-priests rise to bless the congregation every single morning. In the Diaspora, however, the Ashkenazi Jews include this special benediction only on the Festivals. Nevertheless, there are many life-cycle celebrations such as circumcisions, redemptions of the first born, bar and bat mitzvot and even weddings which are punctuated by this Priestly Blessing. In effect, the kohen-priest stands as God's representative, as the "agent of the Compassionate One", as the spiritual leader and as the Torah teacher – and in this function as teacher and guide he calls upon God to bless the congregation. As Moses declares in his final blessing to the Israelites, "[The Priests and Levites] shall guard Your covenant, shall teach Your laws to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel..." (Deut. 33:9,10)

The Talmud (in the ninth chapter of Berachot) as well as our Prayer Liturgy declare "At the time of the priestly blessings, the congregation responds, 'Master of the Universe I am Yours and my dreams are Yours.'" Apparently, our Sages saw a profound connection between the dreams of the Congregation of Israel and the function of their priest leaders. Exactly what is the nature of that connection?

I would suggest that first and foremost a leader and an educator must inspire his students/congregants/ nation with a lofty vision, an exalted dream. The Psalmist and sweet singer of Israel King David declares in the Psalm which we recite each Sabbath and Festival before the reciting the Grace after Meals, "When the Lord returned with the restoration of Zion we were as dreamers"; after all, had the Jews not dreamt of the return to Israel throughout their long exiles, we never would have returned to our homeland.

One sees the same idea from the opposite vantage point when one realizes the cause of the great tragedy of the Book of Numbers. In Numbers, the Jewish people descends from the great heights of the Revelation at Sinai to the disastrous depths of the sin of the scouts, the rebellion of Korah, the sin of Moses and the destruction of that entire generation in the desert. What caused such a mighty fall? The Bible itself begins its account of the descent with the words, "And it happened that the nation kvetched (mitonenim) evily." (Numbers 11:1)

The 18th century Netziv explains the difficult Hebrew word mitonenim as meaning "wandering hither and thither" aimlessly and without purpose or direction, from the Hebrew *anna*. Simply put, this great Torah

leader was saying that the Israelites had lost the dream and the vision which they felt at Sinai when they had cried out "We shall do and we shall internalize," when they accepted upon themselves the Divine mission of being a "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." They descended into destruction because they lost the dream.

Secondly, the Hebrew word for dream is *halom*, and – with a simple switch of letters, it spells *hamal*, which means love and compassion. The priest-leader who inspires with his dream must first and foremost love his nation; only if he loves the Israelites will they believe themselves worthy of being loved, will they believe in their ability to realize the dream and achieve the vision. Great leaders such as Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and David Ben Gurion lifted their respective nations to unheard of heights because they helped make them believe in themselves.

Thirdly, the Hebrew word *halom* with another switch of letters spells *lohem*, which means fighting, warring (if need be) to achieve the necessary goals. A great measure of imparting a dream is to impart idealistic sacrifice on behalf of that dream.

Fourthly, the Hebrew word *halom* also spells *lehem*; a dream must be nourished with the material necessities of program, tactics and strategy necessary to accomplish the dream.

Fifthly, the Hebrew word *halom* also spells *melah*, or salt. Salt symbolizes tears – the tears of sacrifice and commitment – as well as eternity, since salt never putrefies. Salt is therefore the symbol of our Covenant with God, the Covenant which guarantees Jewish eternity and ultimate redemption.

And finally, *halom* is linguistically tied to *halon*, a window; a light to the outside world. The dream with which the priest-kohen must inspire the Israelites is a dream which encompasses the entire world, the dream of "Through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth", the dream of "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks".

Those who believe in a God who is invisible may well dare to dream the dream which is impossible but only those who dream the impossible will ever achieve the incredible. ©2022 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The book of Bamidbar contains many puzzling portions. In this week's Parsha, the Torah records the sacrificial offerings by the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel, upon the dedication and consecration of the tabernacle. These twelve offerings were identical in every detail. Yet, the Torah describes each of these offerings individually, as though the offering of each leader was his decision and was unique and different from the offering of his colleague who was the leader of

very different tribe.

Over the ages, many ideas and interpretations have been offered for this seeming redundancy. The overwhelming number of interpretations concentrate on the idea that even though the offerings may physically have been identical, the spirit and motivation of each differed from individual to individual, and tribe to tribe.

This type of interpretation lends itself to understanding how one Jew can achieve personal prayer while reciting a set number of printed texts which everyone else around him or her is also reciting at the very same moment. Since no two people are alike physically, they certainly are not alike mentally, emotionally, or spiritually.

Prayer is derived not only from the brain and lips of the person praying but, rather, it also comes from the emotions and unique perspective that each human being brings to the relationship with one's creator and to life. So, too, the offerings of the leaders of the tribes of Israel in the desert may have been physically identical, but the emotional perspective and spiritual elevation of each of the offerings was truly unique and distinctive for that tribal prince who brought it and gave it as a service of the public in the Mishkan.

Another lesson that is to be learned from this seeming repetition of the offerings of the leaders of the tribes of Israel, is the triumph of constancy over flashes of brilliance. It is the old parable regarding the race between the tortoise and the hare. And repetition always leads to a feeling of security and hope. Much of Judaism is based upon repetitive behavior. With each recurring action, we absorb and internalize it into our very being, so that doing the right thing in fulfilling the commandments of the Torah becomes second nature to us.

This is especially true in the field of prayer. I once read a memoir of an Israeli soldier who fought in the battle for Jerusalem's Ammunition Hill in 1967 during the Six Day War. The Jordanian army was entrenched on that hill, and most military experts believed it was suicidal to try and dislodge them. The hill was the central point in the battle for Jerusalem, and by controlling it, the rest of the West Bank was open to mobile contact and conquest. The soldier wrote of the terrible battle that waged that night, and how hundreds of his comrades were killed and wounded, while the Jordanians also suffered great losses. He wrote that at one moment in the battle he was alone and nearly surrounded by Jordanian troops. He said that he felt an overwhelming urge at that moment to pray, but he then realized that since he had never prayed in his life, he did not know what to do. He resolved, therefore, that if he survived -- and he did -- he would learn how to pray, so that when he had to pray, he would know what he must do. ©2022 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

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RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The sotah laws seem so out of sync with our ethical sensibilities (Numbers 5:11–31). To demand that a woman suspected by her husband of infidelity drink “the waters of bitterness” and, if guilty, suffer the brutal death of her “belly swelling” and “thigh falling away” seems contrary to basic Torah ethical standards. The rationale that, if innocent, the sotah suffers no bodily injury and is forever blessed falls short, as the profound emotional and psychological trauma of the ordeal may last forever.

Perhaps it can be suggested that this law was instituted as a response to “honor killing,” a horror prevalent in many parts of the world to this day. Honor killing allows a husband or a close relative who suspects a wife or sister or daughter of immorality to kill her without trial.

Can it be that sotah laws were introduced in response to this horror? These laws come with an important caveat that seems to speak to the issue of honor killing: The Torah insists that the accuser cannot act unilaterally. Rather, the matter is transferred to the aegis of the priest, who oversees an elaborate, complex investigation of the suspected woman.

Indeed, the Talmud spends page after page restricting the circumstances in which the waters are drunk. Even if all these obstacles are overcome and the accused woman drinks, the Mishnah declares that the effects of the waters are suspended if the sotah has done something meritorious (Sotah 3:4). In fact, if her husband was himself unfaithful, the waters are inoperative (Sotah 28a).

The sotah laws offer a useful example of how the Torah approaches repulsive social norms of ancient times such as honor killing. Recognizing that outlawing such norms unilaterally may be too sudden for people accustomed to them, thereby inhibiting meaningful change, the Torah allows them on paper while insisting that they be ethicized to a higher level – with an arrow pointing in the direction that the law one day be completely voided.

And so it came to be: the Talmud declares that, after the destruction of the Temple, as society changed, the sotah laws were entirely suspended (Mishnah, Sotah 9:9).

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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Ritual Purity and Impurity

The concept of Tumah and Tahara, ritually impure and pure, is a difficult concept for us to understand

since we have been in a state of tumah since the destruction of the second Temple. When one comes into contact with tumah, he becomes ritually impure and must be “cleansed” by going to a mikvah and being sprinkled with the ashes of the Red Heifer. Without the Temple, these ashes cannot be prepared and our “cleansing” cannot take place. Still, we learn the laws of purity to prepare us for when we will rebuild Hashem’s Holy Temple and be able to observe these laws fully. At that time, we may struggle to become accustomed to the level of concentration we will need in order to avoid things which might cause us to be in a state of tumah. We will also become much more aware of a few p’sukim from this week’s parasha.

The Torah tells us, “Command the Children of Israel that they shall send away from the camp everyone with tzara’at (skin disease that is associated with leprosy), everyone who had a zav emission, and everyone impure by a corpse. Male and female alike shall you send away, to the outside of the camp shall you send them, so that they should not make their camps impure within which I dwell. The Children of Israel did so and they sent them outside of the camp as Hashem had spoken to Moshe so did the Children of Israel do.” These few sentences state the requirement that those who are ritually impure (unclean) must be sent out of the camp.

The Torah tells us that there were three camps: Machane Shechinah where the Mishkan stood, Machane Leviya, the Levite camp that surrounded the Mishkan, and the Machane Yisrael or D’galim, the Israelite camp which was the dwelling place of each of the tribes. When the Temple was built in Jerusalem, these same divisions applied in the following way: Machane Shechinah was the Temple compound on the mountain, Machane Leviya was the remainder of the Temple Mount, and Machane Yisrael was the city of Jerusalem within the city walls. This designation had an effect both on the properties of tumah as well as the designation of within which areas certain sacrifices were to be eaten and items such as orlah had to be brought.

Our parasha does not clarify to which camp we are referring when we are told to send out the person with tzara’at (skin disease), the zav (one who had an emission), and the tamei nefesh (one who came into contact with a corpse). The m’tzorah, a person with tzara’at, has the greatest tumah of all three categories. He is sent out of all three camps and may not return until the signs of tzara’at have passed. The second category of the zav, which includes a zav or ziva, a person who has a blood emission that is not menstrual because of its time, a nidah, a woman with a menstrual blood emission, a ba’al keri, a seminal emission, or a yoledet, a woman who has had bleeding because of childbirth. This second category is not permitted to enter the second camp, Machane Leviya, but may

remain in the Machane Yisrael. The third category is that of the tamei nefesh. This category is considered tumat maga, tumah which is caused by touch, and includes also someone who touches a crawling insect or a carcass of a dead animal. This third category is only excluded from the Machane Shechinah but may remain in the other two camps.

HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the Torah hints at this distinction between the three groups with three references to the word “camp” in this section. The first is the reference “and you shall send out from the camp”. Since this discusses all three categories it must be referring to the Machane Shechinah as only from here are all three categories sent out. The second phrase is “to the outside of the camp”. The only category which distinguishes between sexes is the zav, so this reference must be to the Machane Leviya. The third reference is “and they will not contaminate your camps” which implies all of the camps. This can only refer to the m’tzora who is excluded from all of the camps.

Rashi tells us that these laws were given to the B’nei Yisrael on the day that the Temple was established. Harav Zalman Sorotzkin asks why this explanation comes at this juncture? He explains his answer in two ways. First, there is a practical reason. The Torah speaks of sending the person with tumah out of the camp. We understand that this refers to the Machane Shechinah. Until the Temple was established, and the other camps surrounded it, there was no Machane Shechinah. Prior to the establishment of the Machane Shechinah the B’nei Yisrael were unaware of their camping arrangements around it. Their first thought was that this camp was the purview of the Kohanim and the Levi’im. Since they knew that the Temple was Holy and would contain Hashem’s presence, they assumed that the Kohanim and Levi’im would guard it and they would be camped in a different area of the desert. In this way they would not approach the holy areas and would not affect the holiness of the place. When Moshe erected the Mishkan and informed the people that they would now be part of the three camps that surrounded it, they became frightened. Hashem then gave the instructions concerning the three categories of tumah and which categories were excluded from which camps.

We could easily ask why it was necessary for the three camps to be set up in that fashion. Would it not have made more sense for the B’nei Yisrael to be in a separate camp as they had envisioned? But Hashem said, “within which I dwell.” This was always Hashem’s intention. He desired to be in their midst, not kept separated on the side to be visited on occasion. Hashem wished to bring His Holiness to dwell among the people so that they would understand that holiness must become a part of their daily lives. But this kedusha can become sullied either by an act of our own

volition or by circumstances beyond our control. When this happens, we must strive to regain our purity and our closeness to Hashem.

Tumah and its consequent separation from Hashem is not the only lesson here. It is true that we must separate ourselves from tumah, but that is only part of the message. It is the fact that we can regain our spiritual purity and rejoin the camp of righteousness that is Hashem's true message to us. And we should remember that Hashem is there to assist our efforts to become righteous once again. © 2022 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

The Kohain shall stand the woman before Hashem, and uncover her hair, and place the mincha upon her hands... (Bamidbar 5:18)

One of the most interesting, and sometimes jarring, portions in the Torah is that of the Sotah. This was a ritual performed upon a woman who was warned not to seclude herself with a man who was not her husband. She did so anyway, and her fidelity is in question.

Rashi on this posuk asks the obvious question that the Torah had previously stated she was stood before Hashem. Why does it repeat that now? He answers with the language of the Gemara in Sotah (8a) that she would be led from place to place to tire her out.

A similar reasoning is given for uncovering her hair. Since her hair was usually covered, and perhaps braided, it would make her uncomfortable and embarrassed for it to be uncovered and unbraided. Having to hold the offering in her open palms would also tire her out and hopefully get her to confess the truth.

However, it is important to note that we are not "out to get" the woman, and the desire for a confession is not out of malice. On the contrary. Since we know that if she is guilty and drinks the waters, she will die a terrible death. Worse than that, she will have no opportunity to repent. Though her death will be an atonement, her soul will bear the scars of the sin and the arrogance which caused her to drink anyway.

The fact that we try to get her to confess, speaking words of understanding that she may have been misled by passions beyond her control, shows how much we value the sanctity of human life. If so, why go through this procedure at all?

One reason given by R' Yaakov Kamenetsky zt"l is that without Hashem, Himself, attesting to her innocence, her husband would not be able to remove all doubts from his heart. This gives them a chance to reconnect and have peace in their home.

Another aspect is that though we value human life, we also value the eternal life of the soul, and prefer that one perfect themselves here on earth, so they might live on with Hashem in a more perfect form. Therefore, we go through this ceremony and do our

best to convince her to correct her errors herself, and not to add insult to injury by causing G-d's name to be erased.

Klal Yisrael and Hashem are compared to a choson and kallah, a husband and wife. It behooves us to work towards enhancing the relationship and if we have been unfaithful, to admit it, and seek to make amends. It may be embarrassing to acknowledge our faults, but it will be well worth it in the end.

Someone once came to R' Aharon Leib Shteinman zt"l with a complaint about something. In the course of the conversation, the fellow got rather hot under the collar and said some very unflattering words about the sage. When he calmed down, he apologized for embarrassing R' Aharon Leib.

R' Aharon Leib, unfazed, smiled and said, "I don't mind the bizonos (embarrassment.) It helps me get rid of sins and makes me very happy. Of course, for you, embarrassing an old man, it's not such a good idea to do it."

Another time R' Aharon Leib was asked about how to break up the relationship between a teenage boy and girl who were not "dating for marriage." R' Aharon Leib asked the questioner, "Tell me. When he looks into her eyes and sees love and acceptance, are his parents offering something better? That's the only thing that would make him give her up." © 2022 Rabbi J. Gewirtz and Migdal Ohr

RABBI AHRON LOPIANSKY

Double Blessing

Birchas Kohanim is undoubtedly the central blessing administered to Klal Yisroel. This is the formula that HKB"H Himself has given to the kohanim to utter every day. If we examine it closely, we see that it has a peculiar structure. It starts with a blessing, followed by Hashem's name, and then ends with another blessing. Regarding the first of the blessings, Rashi explains the structure:

The L-rd bless you -- that your property may increase. And may He guard you -- that no robbers come upon you to take your property. For, a human being who gives a present to his servant cannot guard him against everybody, and if a band of robbers attack him and take it away, what pleasure can he, then, derive from this present?! The Holy One, Blessed be He, however, both gives and guards -- against everybody.

If we take a closer look at the other berachos, we will discover a very similar pattern. The second beracha bestows "heoros panim" which is a sense of Hashem being favorably disposed towards us, which is then followed by "viy'chunekah" meaning that Hashem will endow us with chen, a type of charm which makes one more easily favored. And finally, we are told that Hashem will act towards us in ways that we receive better than we deserve, and then it says that He will

bless us with peace. This too goes hand in hand, for when someone is given preferential treatment it tends to arouse the ire and jealousy of one's neighbors. Thus the passuk is telling us that despite the fact that Hashem is endowing us with extraordinary favors, He will still make sure that no one becomes jealous and fights us on that account.

How are we to understand all of these gifts and the guarantees? Do we look at them as two blessings? Do we say that Hashem is giving us both the blessing for wealth and also a blessing that he will guard it? The answer is that these are not two separate but related blessings, rather Hashem is bestowing upon us two complimentary parts that form a stable and complete whole.

Let us explain this with the words of the Rabbeinu Bachya in Parshas Mishpatim, concerning the words, "I am Hashem your Healer". He points at a grammatical difference between the word "refuah" when it is used regarding Hashem as Healer vs. its use regarding a human doctor. He says that any human medical intervention is perforce harmful in some way, whereas Hashem's healing is perfect. The reason is that when man heals, he intervenes. Every medication must therefore have some negative effect as well. But when HKB"H heals, He fixes the problem from within. And just as the world was perfectly balanced when Hashem created it, so too when He rights the world, it is perfectly balanced as well. Hashem's healing does not disrupt the order, rather it rebalances it.

This then is the meaning of the berachos of Birchas Kohanim. When a human gives a gift to someone, he is "upsetting" the natural order [see, for example, what happened when Yaakov Avinu gave an extra coat to Yosef], and that is why jealousy sets in and the possibility of robbery exists. But when Hashem bestows a blessing, it means that He has changed the very economic order. Hashem's name in the middle of each beracha, implies that both blessings emanate from HKB"H simultaneously, with each blessing complementing the other and, together, creating a new order. They are not two distinct blessings, but two halves of one great all-inclusive beracha. ©2022 Rabbi A. Lopiansky and TorahWeb.org

RABBI AVROHOM LEVENTHAL

One Nation, Under G-d

There are many categorizations of the 613 mitzvot, commandments. Perhaps the most common is the division between those commandments that are between Humans and G-d (Bein Adam Lamakom) and those which are interpersonal- between people (Bein Adam Lachavero).

There is no distinction between the 2 in regard to importance. Living a true Torah life requires one to be aware of and careful in the performance of commandments without regard with whom (or Whom)

we are interacting.

This principle of faith is underscored in Parshat Naso: דבר אל בני ישראל איש או אשה כי יעשו מכל חטאת האדם למעל מעל בה

"Speak to the children of Israel: When a man or woman commits any of the sins against man to act treacherously against God."

This refers to one who steals or withholds money from another. While such an act would be a severe trespass of a mitzvah Bein Adom Lachavero (and it is), it is also called a "treachery against G-d".

Taking from others or denying them their due is as much a sin against G-d Himself as it is against people. It as if he or she is challenging what G-d has decided to bestow on another.

This idea, however, is not limited to matters of money. The wording is clear. One who commits any of the sins against another is being treacherous towards HaShem.

Our purpose in this world to make it a better place through our observance of the entire Torah. In addition to our duties to G-d, we must coexist with others, be it our relatives, friends, neighbors or strangers. The Mitzvot Bein Adom Lachavero sanctify that coexistence.

A Godly person is one who works for excellence in all of his/ her actions. Shabbat, Kashrut, Prayer, etc. are no more important than honesty, integrity, kindness and compassion (to name but a few).

While sinning against G-d is terrible, it is called just that, a sin. When the infraction is toward another person, it becomes treachery against G-d.

Yet, there is a common thread throughout the events a of the parsha- relationships. Different types of relationships on all levels. Between the tribe of Levi and HaShem/the nation, husband and wife, between people and their Creator, between the mundane and the holy, and between each other.

The message is clear. No matter what or with whom the relationship is, we should strive to make it the best, and holiest, it can be. ©2021 Rabbi A. Leventhal, noted educator and speaker, is the Executive Director at Lema'an Achai lemaanachai.org

SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

One of the laws in this week's Parashah is that of the "Nazir," introduced with the words: "Ish oh ishah ki yafli" / "A man or a woman who shall disassociate himself..." R' Avraham ibn Ezra z"l (1089-1164) observes that the word "Yafli" also can mean: "Who does wonders." He explains that a Nazir, who disassociates himself from wine, is doing something wondrous--unlike the typical person, who is controlled by the pursuit of pleasure.

One can be a Nazir for as few as 30 days.

What is so wondrous about abstaining from wine for only 30 days? asks R' Yitzchak Leib Kirzner z"l (1951-1992; Mashgiach Ruchani of Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef in Edison, N.J.). We might be impressed if a person abstained from all delicacies for 30 days, but from wine alone?!

There is no doubt a Nazir has done something special. A Nazir is not permitted to come in contact with the dead because, says the Ba'al Ha'turim, there is a possibility that a Nazir will experience Ru'ach Ha'kodesh / Divine Inspiration, and we do not want anyone to suspect that his visions result from necromancy! Also, a Nazir who completes his term is required to bring a sin-offering to atone, according to Ramban, for stepping down from his high level. But, what has a Nazir done that is so special?

R' Kirzner answers: A human is a partnership between a body and a Neshamah / soul. Ideally, the body "understands" that its role is to be subservient to, and supportive of, the Neshamah. The status of Nazir is intended for someone who recognizes that the relationship between his body and Neshamah is not as it should be, that his body has become a priority. It is not that abstaining from wine for 30 days is so impressive; it is the fact that this person came to the recognition that some action is needed to fix the body-Neshamah relationship that is impressive. A person who can recognize that fact, which too few people do, is on the road toward achieving Ru'ach Ha'kodesh. (Ma'oz La'tam) © 2022 S. Katz and torah.org

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Reb Yeruchem

"All the days of his abstinence he is holy to Hashem." (Bamidbar 6:8) Hashem concluded His offer of the Torah to the Bnei Yisrael with the following: "'You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the Bnei Yisrael." (Shemos 19:6) Rashi comments: "'These are the words' -- no less, and no more." What is Rashi trying to tell us? Surely, he is not simply praising HKBH -- "Boy, He did a good job with that one!"

Before we explain Rashi, we will have to turn to a more general question that has long plagued many of us. If midos tovos/developing good character is so important, why does the Torah say so precious little about it? I once heard the Alter of Kelm address the question with a mashal. Imagine that you have a really bad blockage in a bathroom sink. (The Alter's mashal used a tailor, not a plumber, but would be less effective today than when he employed it. [YA]) Not being the do-it-yourself type, you call a plumber. You then take a pipe wrench in hand, and begin to explain. "What you have to do is open the jaws to fit around this section of pipe. Then close the jaws around it, while holding the wrench in your left hand. When tight, loosen the pipe by

turning it clockwise, and then..."

The plumber interrupts. "Why are you telling me this? I'm a plumber. That's what I do! I know my tools and how to use them. Why are you speaking to me as if I'm an attorney? Just tell me what job you want done, and I'll do it!"

Similarly, explained the Alter, Hashem made a job offer to Klal Yisrael: You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. No less, and no more.

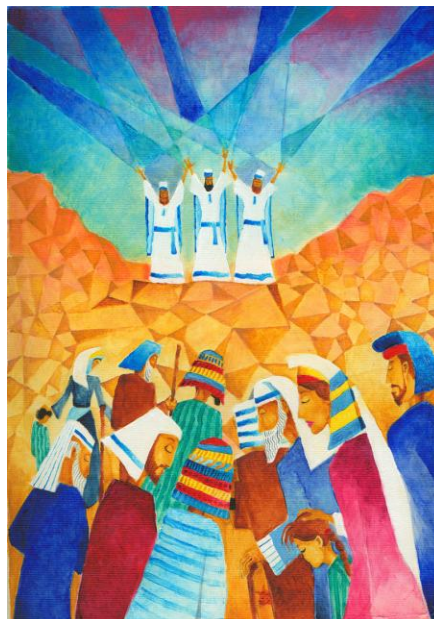
When Klal Yisrael agreed to accept the job, they understood what tools of the trade would be needed. They realized that to be priests and to be holy required certain achievements. Artisans of this craft needed to be free of anger, free of hubris, free of a host of bad midos. All those were part of the minimum skill set necessary to practice the holy nation role. No less, and no more.

The gemara (Nedarim 9b) tells of the dim view Shimon HaTzadik had of those who became nezirim. Yet one nazir won his warm approval. He was a simple shepherd boy, who apparently had never looked in a mirror. One day, however, he chased down a missing sheep to a watering hole. As he bent down to grab the animal, he found himself facing his reflection. He was taken aback by how good looking he was! Immediately, though, he recoiled. Addressing the yetzer hora directly, he said, "Rasha! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours, and attempt to drive me from this world?!" He vowed to become a nazir, and therefore to have to shear off his long attractive hair.

Shimon HaTzadik kissed him on the head. "May there be many more like you!" Shimon HaTzadik praised the shepherd, because he -- unlike so many others -- genuinely got it. He understood that the essence of nezirus is that which is stated in our pasuk: to be holy to Hashem. It is not perishus/ abstinence per

se; it is not virtue-signaling. It is to accept open himself the job of becoming holy. No less, and no more.

The restrictions of nezirus are just tools of the trade. (Based on Daas Torah by Rav Yeruchem Levovitz zt"l, Bamidbar pgs. 38-41) © 2022 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org



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