



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

The Parsha Discussion: Naso: Nazir - Sacred or Sinner?

The Nazirite is an individual who took a vow not to drink wine, to cut his or her hair, nor to become ritually defiled by contact with the dead.

- Why would a person take such a vow?
- Why would an individual seek to remove themselves from wine, haircuts and impurity?
- Is the Nazirite considered as a holy person? Is this behaviour lauded and recommended or is it a fringe allowance for a person who needs religious intensity?

This Nazirite is disputed in the Talmud, but the discussion takes a wider view, discussing ascetism in general. Is self-denial a recommended religious course of action?

Shmuel said: Whoever abstains from food [as a religious practice of denial] is labeled a sinner, as it is inappropriate to take unnecessary suffering upon oneself. Shmuel accords with the opinion of Rabbi Elazar HaKappar who says: When the verse, regarding a Nazirite, states: "And he will atone for he sinned" (6:11) how did this nazirite sin? – By abstaining from wine. And if a nazirite, who abstains from wine alone, is called a sinner and requires atonement, then one who fasts abstains from all food and drink, all the more so should he be considered a sinner.

Conversely, Rabbi Elazar said: One who accepts a fast upon himself is called sacred, as with the nazirite: "He shall be sacred!" (6:5) And if this nazirite, who abstained only from wine is called sacred, then a person who practices denial from every foodstuff, all the more should he be considered sacred! (Talmud Taanit 11a)

On the one hand, the *Nazir* brings a sin offering, maybe he sinned by removing himself from the orbit of normal living, by adopting stringent restrictions and by denial of wine and personal grooming? Here is Maimonides:

A person might say, since envy, desire, [the pursuit] of honor, and the like, are a wrong path and drive a person from the world, I shall separate from them to a very great degree and move away from them to the opposite extreme. For example, he will not eat meat, nor drink wine, nor live in a pleasant home, nor wear fine clothing. ...This, too, is a bad path and it is forbidden to walk upon it. Whoever follows this path is called a sinner as is stated concerning a nazirite: for he sinned regarding [his] soul (6:11). Our sages declared: If the nazirite who abstained only from wine requires atonement, how much more so does one who abstains from everything. Therefore, our Sages directed man to abstain only from those things which the Torah denies him and not to forbid himself permitted things ... (Deot 3:1)

And yet, the *Nazir* is also determined as “holy” and our chapter talks of his hair as “the crown of God is upon his head... he is consecrated to the Lord.” (6:7-8) All this is highly indicative of a positive assessment of the *Nazir*.

The *Nazir* is like a *Kohein* – a priest. Like the *Kohein*, he cannot become defiled. A priest too must steer clear of intoxication when serving in the sanctuary – And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying: Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting (Lev 10:9). It is as if the *Nazir* is constantly a priest of sorts; although he serves no ritual function he is evidently set aside to God. He is holy to God(6:8) just as the *Kohein* is described as Holy (Lev 21:6).

The priest may exercise his sanctity in the Temple, but how may a person who is part of the camp of Israel set himself apart and ascend to a more sacred status? Evidently, the institution of *Nazir* facilitates this unusual status and allows a person who is spiritually attuned and in need of a distinct segregated space to separate themselves in this prescribed manner.

Please discuss:

- Do you see a value in standing outside society to climb to a higher holiness?
- Is society sometimes abrasive to a spiritually attuned life? How do we navigate that?
- Can you see the value in the institution of the *Nazir*? What might it do to a person?
- Why does the Rambam feel that one should “abstain only from those things which the Torah denies him and not to forbid himself permitted things”?
- In religion, do you think that personal denial or ascetism is the “better” path or is engagement with life and its pleasures? Please discuss advantages and disadvantages of each.
- What message does the *Nazir* bear for our society?

Shabbat Shalom!