

**PARSHAT NASO**  
**JUNE 4, 2011**  
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Each year I choose a Talmudic tractate to study. Each morning, right after Minyan, I retire to my office and spend some time studying the ancient folios of the Talmud. Not only is this part of my continuing study of Jewish tradition, but it also serves a secondary purpose. I try to end my study of a particular tractate just before the holiday of Pesach so that on the eve of Pesach I, along with my fellow firstborn colleagues, can celebrate a Siyyum, the completion of a Talmudic tractate, and therefore not have to observe the fast of the firstborn.

The Talmud tractate that I have chosen for this year is the tractate of Nazir. It is quite difficult because it deals mostly with the laws of the Nazirite and its accompanying regulations. As I proceed from Mishna to Mishna and folio to folio one can see that the Rabbis have mixed feelings about the Nazirite.

The law itself is found in our Torah portion this Shabbat. The Torah tells us that if one assumed the vow of becoming a Nazir he had certain responsibilities that were now incumbent upon him. It was an ascetic vow during which time the Nazirite would abstain from wine, from cutting his hair, would observe extra degrees of sexual purity and would not come into contact with a dead body. The Torah seems to look upon this vow with a sense of approval, but not an enthusiasm.

As Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his commentary in the *Etz Hayim Humash* writes: “Opinions are strongly divided concerning the Nazirite. Is he or she a saint, aspiring voluntarily to higher levels of holiness, or a person with trouble controlling his or her impulses, having to impose limits on behavior beyond what normal people do?” The Rabbinic commentaries, the medieval Biblical commentaries and even modern scholars have various opinions having to do with this particular conduct.

In the Talmud there is a disagreement between Rabbi Elazar and his Talmudic colleague, Samuel. The former suggests that the Nazir is a holy individual. The reference is to letting his hair grow to which Rabbi Elazar says: “If he is called holy even after mortifying himself in one way, how much more should he be considered holy when keeping from himself additional pleasures?” Samuel, however, notes the Torah’s labeling of the Nazir as a sinner, for when he completes his vow, which must last at least 30 days, he brings a sin offering. Samuel states: “For just as anyone imposes upon himself a fast should be considered a sinner, similarly anyone who keeps himself from the enjoyment of one of G-d’s blessings should be considered a sinner who must thereby seek atonement.”

The medieval Biblical commentators disagreed as well on its efficacy. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra considered it a wonder that a person could control his appetites so completely. Maimonides, however, writes: “It’s not enough that the Torah has forbidden many things; but you impose upon yourself additional prohibitions?”

In our modern age there are some who see holiness in asceticism, in private spirituality, in hiding oneself away from the troubles of the world, in attempting to attain a higher level of communion with G-d through holy isolation. Others see holiness present in everyday life, in the work of community, in relationships with others and in taking advantage of the world's blessings. I feel more in consonance with the latter point of view. Spirituality on a personal level is all well and good, but if it only elevates the individual to a higher plane and has no effect upon the society, community or the world in which we live, what good is it? In the Jerusalem Talmud Rav taught: "In the world to come, people will have to account for all the good food G-d put in the world which they refuse to eat." Rav believed that we had to take advantage of the blessings that are ours. In fact, Rabbi Meir teaches us that we are to recite 100 blessings a day enabling us to take advantage of all the gifts that are found in our world. Jewish law, such as Kashrut and Shabbat, does not deny acceptability or the desirability of food and work. The institutions attempt to balance the temptations to overindulge in eating and working. In other words, limits are appropriate, but denying oneself of the benefits of human life is not the Jewish way.

However, there are times when personal abstinence for the purpose of arousing communal responsibility is not only worthwhile but admirable. A new book has just been written by Rafael Medoff and David Golinkin entitled "*The Student Struggle Against the Holocaust.*" The book details the lives of three Rabbinical students at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. These students, Noah Golinkin, Jerry Lipnick and Moshe Sachs were students at the Seminary during the 1940's. Each of them became aware of what was happening in Hitler's Europe during WWII and were aghast that the American Jewish community did not rise up in protest. The book details how they attempted to gain the favor of Rabbi Stephen Wise, who was a close associate of then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and engage the major leaders of American Jewry enlisting their help and support for the beleaguered communities of Nazi Europe. A number of times their approaches were rebuffed, but periodically they were able to make a difference and highlight the tragedy that was occurring overseas. Starting with their fellow students and then working towards the major leadership of American Jewry they worked to raise the level of recognition of the disaster that became the Shoah.

In April, 1943 they worked together with the Synagogue Council of America to issue a press release establishing the Sefira Campaign across the United States. In a document which I saw for the first time in this book, the Synagogue Council writes that the Sefira Period, in which we currently find ourselves between Passover and Shavuot, should be used to mourn the loss of 2 million European Jews exterminated by Hitler and to make urgent pleas for governmental action to rescue as many as possible of those remaining in Nazi-held Europe.

A press release was issued which outlined details for a memorial service to be held on the last day of Pesach and a week of mourning following which was to be observed in the tradition of Shiva. They asked people to wear black ribbons just as mourners do at this time. During this 6-week period, until the holiday of Shavuot, they

asked Jews to observe Mondays and Thursdays as partial fast days, to limit occasions of amusement and to make extra contributions to the United Jewish Appeal. They called the period a time of mourning and intercession for Europe's Jews.

From newspaper articles placed in the Appendix of the book it seems that a number of communities followed their advice. The period concluded with a Rabbinic rally on May 24, 1943 at Congregation Kehilath Jesurun in New York City. This Orthodox congregation led by Rabbi Joseph Lookstein opened its doors to the rally in which Rabbis of all denominations participated after two other Orthodox synagogues refused to house the rally because of the involvement of non-Orthodox rabbis.

Here was an example of the use of ascetic devices, a period of mourning, the wearing of a black ribbon, customs of Shiva and twice a week partial day fasts, to arouse communal responsibility and action. Unlike the Nazirite, who seems to be solely concerned with his own spirituality and used ascetic tools to elevate only himself to a higher level of holiness, this ascetic behavior attempted to create a spur for moral responsibility to arouse within community members the need to be sensitive to other human beings.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his commentary quotes Astruc, who is Abba Mari, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century French Rabbi, who suggests that the Nazirite's sin was neither abstinence nor the ending of abstinence, but rather the life of self-indulgence that proceeded and led to his or her vow. Far be it from me to be against spirituality. But if it is spirituality for its own sake, then that is not enough. Life is lived within community. In Jewish life one must be responsible one for the other. We are part of a larger community. Spirituality and its practice should not only elevate us to greater sanctity, but make us more sensitive to the needs of others for the purpose of the betterment of the human condition. In a recent New York Times' Op-Ed column David Brooks writes that the purpose of life is "not to find yourself. It is to lose yourself." From the Nazir we can learn the best of strenuous religious regiment, however, there does not need to be the unwillingness to see the pleasures of G-d's world as a source of blessing to do so.

As one modern commentator stated: "All the commandments related to holiness touch the relationship which each individual has or is to have with the general community, with his elders and relatives, with the impoverished in his society, with his fellow citizens. Of what value is it to the general public if an individual becomes a Nazirite merely to sanctify himself?"

May we learn to use the best of the motives and practices of the Nazirite and through them the ability to sensitize ourselves to the needs of others to create a better world for all.