

PARSHAT NASO  
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When I was in my first year of college at York University in Toronto, I took a general humanities course entitled Psychology 101. One of the major issues that we discussed was nature versus nurture. Is human behavior determined prenatally by our genes or is it influenced by the environment? That question took up a good deal of our time in class and in the readings that were assigned.

The phrase was popularized by the English Victorian author Francis Galton, the modern founder of Eugenics and Behavioral Genetics, as he discussed the influence of heredity and environment on social advancement. He was influenced by the book *On The Origin of Species* written by his half-cousin, Charles Darwin.

A classic definition of nature would suggest that our genes and hereditary factors influence who we are – from our physical appearance to our personality characteristics. Nurture, on the other hand, refers to all of the environmental variables that impact upon who we are, including our early childhood experiences, how we are raised, our social relationships, and our surrounding culture. Which is more important to create the person that we are today?

Kendra Cherry, the author of *The Everything Psychology Book*, puts the question in the most stark fashion: “When a person achieves academic success, did they do so because they are genetically predisposed to be successful or is it a result of an enriched environment? If a man abuses his wife and kids, is it because he was born with violent tendencies or is it something he learned by examining his own parent’s behavior?” She continues concerning the other side: “Biologically determined characteristics include certain genetic diseases, eye color, hair color, and skin color. Other things like life expectancy and height have a strong biological component, but they are also influenced by environmental factors and lifestyle.”

So which one is it, nature or nurture? There is no doubt that our genetic makeup has a great deal to do with our personal characteristics and life expectancy. Yet, the manner in which we live, how we take care of ourselves, also can have an impact upon the quality of our lives and the quantity of our days. A child born to two parents is usually a blending of their genetic components. Yet, the behavior of that child is very often influenced by what he or she sees in the household, how the parents model personal relationships, and how they reinforce positive behavior. So which one is it, nature or nurture?

In our Torah reading of this morning the question comes up in a different fashion. Much of the Book of Leviticus and the first part of the Book of Numbers is concerned with the role of the Kohen, the Priest. The Priest assumes his prominent place in the ritual of the ancient Israelite society because he is a member of the family of Aaron. One cannot join the Priesthood if one is not born into it. The Priest had to maintain himself in a state of holiness, in body and in spirit, in order to serve in the Tabernacle. The High Priest had even a higher standard of holiness attached to his lifestyle. Ultimately, the position is honored because of birth, what we might term today, genetics, or to use our phraseology, nature.

Our parasha introduces us to the Nazirite. A Nazirite is a person who vows for a specific period of time to abstain from partaking of grapes or any of its products, cutting his hair, and coming into contact with a corpse. He might do so in order to claim a closer attachment to G-d and a higher level of personal sanctity. The person who became a Nazirite was an Israelite, but his status resembled that of a Priest in that he was now “holy to the Lord.” In some ways, actually, he approximates more the higher sanctity of the High Priest in that he may not contaminate himself with the dead of his immediate family. In fact, in some ways there is even a higher sanctity than the High Priest in that he is totally forbidden to cut his hair, and while the High Priest is forbidden to shave his hair, he is compelled to trim it.

Who is the most holy person? Is it the person who comes from the family of Aaron who serves G-d through the sacrificial system of ancient times, or is it the individual by personal choice who takes upon himself a vow of asceticism as he attempts to live a life of greater sanctity? Rabbi Hayyim Angel writes: “The High Priest and Nazirite represent two means of obtaining special closeness to G-d. Although certain laws govern both of them, the High Priest priesthood is the ultimate institutionalized position, whereas the Nazirite vow is spontaneous and voluntary.” Which one should be seen as a higher level of sanctity?

Lest we think that this is merely an ancient argument which has no effect upon our lives today, I would suggest that the concept of Jewish identity in its manifold expressions also involves the question of nature vs. nurture. Donniel Hartman in an article entitled *Who is a Jew? Membership and Admission Policies in the Jewish Community* discusses what Jewish identity is in the modern age both in Israel and in the Diaspora. How do we define Jewishness today? Is it a matter of birth or membership? The religious definition is that it is a matter of birth. In traditional Judaism, both the Orthodox and Conservative movements continue the Halakhic tradition that if the mother is Jewish, the child is Jewish. What that person does during the course of their lifetime is not that important. Born a Jew, he/she is always a Jew, for as the Talmud taught us, “An Israelite, even though he sins, is still an Israelite.”

The Reform movement has extended that definition to include children born of a Jewish father as well. It is interesting to note that if you read what is known as the patrilineal decision of the Reform movement, the statement makes clear that the child must be raised with identifiable Jewish lifecycle events during the course of his/ her lifetime.

Hartman points out the during the course of Biblical, Rabbinic, and Medieval times some scholars wished to extend the definition to that fact that one must take upon oneself elements of faith or behavior, but in the end the Halakha did not accept that definition.

At the same time, Judaism has been open to conversion. One does not need to be born a Jew in order to be a member of the Jewish people. Though various Jewish societies throughout the ages had differing opinions as to standards for conversion, it is possible, and it is quite prevalent today, for people to choose Judaism willing and to become part of our people. It is not nature in this example, it is the willingness to choose to join the Jewish people and our shared faith principles which allows one to become a member of both the people and the faith.

Today, of course, there are many different opinions of as to what standards of conversion should be, but the concept remains that one can willingly join the Jewish people.

The modern situation has created a great deal of fluidity on this issue and the State of Israel has only exacerbated the problems and not solved them. Recently the Shas party and the Israeli Interior Ministry have introduced a bill which would recognize only conversions performed under its own institutions, the State Conversion Authority under the guidance of the Chief Rabbinate. This is a step backward and will only create more divisions between Israel and the Diaspora.

The problems are quite serious. For instance, what happens today when someone willingly says that they want to be a member of the Jewish faith, but are not ready to convert? How do we classify them? What happens when someone makes Aliyah to the State of Israel following the Law of Return which states that only one grandparent needs to be Jewish in order for them to become an immigrant to the state and then lives a life infused with Israeli culture, Hebrew, the Jewish calendar, and serves in the IDF. We believe that some 250,000 Jews from the Former Soviet Union can be found in this category. And, we have created difficult situations when some of these individuals, who know no other home than Israel, protect it as soldiers in the IDF and then die in the service of the country. Then the question arises: where are they to be buried if they have never officially joined the standards of membership of the Jewish people?

Donniel in his article wants to suggest that the boundaries should be more fluid. He agrees with the adoption of a policy that membership ought to be determined in accordance with any of the traditional membership policies that have been part of our history, but he also extends the boundary a little wider to suggest that anyone who makes the personal sacrifice of serving in the Israel Defense Forces and wishes to publically attach themselves to Jewish institutions “should be counted as insiders for membership purposes.” This is a great challenge for today and one in which not only Israel but the Diaspora is intimately involved.

In 2013, *A Portrait of Jewish Americans*, written by the PEW Research Center, raised some of those issues for American Jewry. The research showed that “the percentage of U.S. adults who say that they are Jewish when asked about their religion has declined by about half since the late 1950’s and currently is less than 2%.” It also shows that “among Jews in the youngest generation of U.S. adults – the millennials – 68% identify as Jews by religion, while 32% describe themselves as having no religion and identify as Jewish on the basis of ancestry, ethnicity, or culture.” According to the PEW, one who self-identifies as being part of the Jewish community is counted in the study as a member of the Jewish community in the United States.

So is it nature or nurture in Jewish identity definitions? Does one need to be born into the Jewish people or willingly accept to join that people? Does one need to show positive activity on behalf of the Jewish people, or does one simply need only to self-identify to be counted as Jewish? Perhaps the story of the Priesthood and the Nazirite, as well as psychology, can lead us in the proper manner. Today, the majority of psychology experts believe that both nature and nurture influence behavior and development. There is no simple way to disentangle the multitude of forces that exist. Nature and nurture may simply be inseparable. Some genes, for example, cannot be activated without certain environmental inputs. Environmental toxins may

alter the expression of some genes, and genes for many behaviors presumed to have a genetic basis may simply not yet have been discovered. In short, both are necessary to create not merely a human being, but a contributing member of society.

Rabbi Angel points out that the Torah wants us to amalgamate both dimensions of the High Priesthood and the Nazirite into our spiritual life and leadership. We must both follow the rules, but also show fresh creativity and spontaneity. As he remarks, “As different as the two positions might appear, they are unlikely sides of the same coin in our desire to attain increased religious experience.” Therefore what do we do with Jewish identity today? I believe both nature and nurture are necessary. I continue to believe in the religious definition of Who is a Jew, and I believe that we must open the boundaries through more flexible conversion standards to bring in those who wish to associate themselves with our faith and our people. There are enough Jewish sources which allow us to do so and a policy to welcome in those who want to join us is something we should undertake in our modern world. Those of us born to Judaism will have our lives enriched by those who choose Judaism.

At the same time, in order to solidify the Jewish people and our faith we must impress upon those who are simply born Jewish to also choose to live a Jewish lifestyle and to dedicate themselves to our people and our faith. These are standards of a high order, I understand, but only when we assume them can we create a more vital and vibrant Jewish people and enhance our spiritual existence as well.

The argument of nature vs. nurture creates a false dichotomy. Both are needed in our makeup as human beings, in the strengthening of Jewish identity, and in the challenge of recognizing that one could be holy by being a Priest or a Nazirite, This is one of the great challenges in modern Jewish life both in the Diaspora and in the State of Israel and will have a great effect upon our future.