

נשא

THE NAZIR

The Torah introduces the unusual concept of *Nazir* —Nazirite—with the *pasuk*:

איש או אשה כי יפלא לנדר נזיר להזיר לה'

When either man or woman utter a vow of a *Nazir*, to separate themselves to Hashem (*Bamidbar* 6:2).

The *Nazir* is subject to three limitations:

- a) He may not drink wine.
- b) He may not cut his hair.
- c) He may not become *tamei* (ritually impure due to contact with the dead).

Rabbeinu Bechaya (ibid.) explains that abstinence from wine helps a man to curtail his materialistic desires. When he refrains from trimming his hair or beard, when he is, in essence, careless about his appearance, he will effectively drive away his desires. The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 3:48) emphasizes the importance of denying oneself the pleasures of the vine: “for it has killed the many and the mighty.” The *Nazir* is thereby elevated to a status of holiness, similar in station to that of the *Kohein Gadol*. Hence, like the *Kohein Gadol*, he may not become ritually impure through contact with the dead.

The Seforno (*Bamidbar* 6:8) extols the *Nazir* as an individual who wishes to separate himself from materialism. His abstinence is to be limited to wine-drinking and hair-trimming, nothing more. Hashem wants the *Nazir* to limit his sinful behavior; Hashem has no wish to effectively limit all worldly and natural desires. Tormenting one’s body is sinful and prohibited, but a sincere desire to come close to Hashem by altering one’s behavior approaches holiness.

Conviviality is the key to jovial, affable social interactions. But a *Nazir* is forbidden to be present at any celebration or function at which alcohol is normally served; this, in effect, stifles all his social companionship. He has more time, therefore, to concentrate on *tefilah*, Torah learning and increased *yiras Shamayim*—fear of Heaven. So too, his hirsute growth results in the “crown of his G-d . . . on his head” (*Bamidbar* 6:7). His slovenly appearance marks him and limits his contact with civil society. The final injunction revolves around not visiting cemeteries. Again, this is another limitation on his activities, allowing him a maximum amount of private time to devote to Hashem. Having said all this, *Chazal* nevertheless convey a negative attitude towards the *Nazir*. Rabbi Eliezer *Hakapor* claims the *Nazir* is “sinning against his own soul,” for any kind of self-denial is only the work of a sinner (*Nedarim* 10•). Rabbi Shimon writes that the original pious Jews avoided *Nezirus* in order that they not be called “sinners” (ibid.). Rabbi Shimon *Hatzadik* never, except for one unique circumstance, ever partook of a defiled *Nazir*’s sacrifice, for he felt it was the sacrifice of a sinner (ibid. 9:; see *Tosfos Bava Kama* 91:). Rabbi Eliezer *Hakapor* comments that if one places himself in distress through an act of self-denial he is

called a sinner (*Ta'anis* 11•). Rabbi Yosi says that it is forbidden for a man to torment himself by fasting (*ibid.* 22:).

In the *Nevi'im* three individuals are presented as being *Nezirim*: Shimshon (*Shoftim* 13:7), Shemuel (I 1:11), and Avshalom (*Shemuel* II 14:25). Shimshon was a unique historical figure, a great *Shofeit*—Judge—a potential candidate for *Melech Mashiach* (*Bereishis Rabbah* 98:14), yet he did exhibit certain shortcomings (see page 421). Shemuel was truly dedicated to Hashem, and he was holy in the highest sense of the term. Avshalom was a scoundrel who led a rebellion against his father, David *Hamelech*.

The *Navi* Amos (2:11,12) complained to *Klal Yisrael* that “I have raised up prophets from among your sons, and *Nezirim* from among your young men . . . But you gave the *Nezirim* wine to drink, and commanded the prophets, saying, ‘Prophecy not.’ ” The Ramban (*Bamidbar* 6:11) comments that Amos presents a parallel in holiness between the prophet and *Nazir*.

Shimon ben Shetach, brother-in-law of Yannai *Hamelech* and brother to Shelomis *Hamalka* (*Berachos* 48•), pleaded with the king to subsidize the *Nazir karban* for three hundred poor *Nezirim*, who could not afford the cost of the sacrifice (*Yerushalmi Nazir* 23:3). Helena, the converted queen of Adiabene (Chadaya) (first century C.E.), declared herself a *Nazir* for seven years to demonstrate her purity. When she arrived in *Eretz Yisrael* to offer her sacrifices she was informed that *Nezirus* is invalid outside of *Eretz Yisrael*. She consented to undergo an additional seven years of *Nezirus* in *Eretz Yisrael* (*ibid.* 15:). It becomes obvious that historically *Nezirim* did exist in *Klal Yisrael*.

The *Chovos Halevavos* (*Sha'ar Haprishus* 6) parallels the separation of the *Nazir* within the context of the separation of the *Shabbos* from the mundane world. On *Shabbos* a man's mind is free of materialistic pursuits so that he may be free to seek perfection. Similarly, a *Nazir* is separated from this world so that he will abstain from worldly striving and instead focus on achieving greater spiritual heights. Why then must a *Nazir* bring a sin-offering “when the days of his *Nezirus* are fulfilled” (*Bamidbar* 6:13)? The Ramban (*ibid.* 11) explains that “until now [during his *Nazirite* tenure] he was separated in sanctity and [in] the service of Hashem, and he should therefore have remained separated forever.” Thus, when he completes his period of *Nezirus* he requires atonement because he goes back to be defiled by the material desires of the world.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Dei'os* 3) lays down a framework for everyday living. These are rules of behavior which are applicable to everyone who seeks to get close to Hashem. Everything taught by the Rambam is contrary to the concept of *Nazir*. The Rambam seems to indicate that the *Nazir* has no real place in Torah life. The *Chinuch* (365) points out that man must serve Hashem with the facilities given to him. Man is invested with physical matter and spiritual intelligence, and he is obligated to serve Hashem within these parameters. To create an artificial state of existence is not the intent of creation. The *Nazir*, to a large extent, denies a certain facet of man which should be used in the service of Hashem. Hence, he is labeled a sinner.

The *Kuzari* (*Sha'ar* 5) affirms that an individual who seeks ascetic solitude brings only distress and sickness upon his body and soul. The human condition demands a variety of behavioral rites of a person. It is natural for man to have an urge to see and hear new things, to converse with others, to keep occupied, and even to accumulate wealth. The human body demands food and cohabitation, companionship, and social undertakings. The person who lives in

seclusion and abstains from these things is in conflict with his human nature, and his life is filled with regret and frustration. Therefore, the *Kuzari* concludes that this individual will regret his abstention, which will in turn remove himself even further from the Divine Influence for which he so earnestly sought and strived (see Maharal, *Nesivas Olam, Nesiv Hateshuvah* 7).

In essence, the *Nazir* torments himself in a limited fashion in order to get close to Hashem. He denies himself the pleasure of wine with all its social ramifications, he sets himself apart from society with his unkempt appearance, and he segregates himself from social intercourse, to the extent that he is no longer just another cog in society. Obviously, *Nezirus* is a controversial concept and must be understood in proper context.

The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 99:) reveals a remarkable secret of *Olam Hazeih* by analyzing a *pasuk* in *Mishlei*:

כי אדם לעמל יולד

But man is born for trouble (*Iyov* 5:7).

Chazal confirm an immutable fact of life: man is born to suffer. This suffering can take place in one's everyday conventional activity or, ideally, it can be voluntarily directed to the acquisition of Torah.

“He who forfeits joy in this world, is guaranteed joy in the next world” (*Avos D'Rabbi Nasan* 28:5). Implicit in this idea is the notion that it is a virtue to forgo joy in this world.

אחרית שמחה יגון ואנחה

Joy is always followed by pain and grief (*Gevul Binyamin* 3, 48:1).

This indicates that joy is not substantive in and of itself, it is merely superficial, for pain and grief are always in its aftermath. The *Gemara* states, “Hashem reviewed all the good qualities in order to give them to Israel, but the only good quality He found befitting Israel was poverty” (*Chagigah* 9:). Suffering derived from Divine love is an essential element in human spiritual advancement. It is an aspect of Hashem's grace, a great gift and a great privilege. Nevertheless, when great men were asked:

חביבין עליך יסורין

“Do you appreciate suffering?”

they responded:

לא הן ולא שכרן

“Neither the suffering nor its reward!” (*Berachos* 5:).

The *Mesilas Yesharim* presents three brilliant chapters on the concept of *perishus* — separation from worldly matters. He explains that “the majority of the people cannot be saintly [i.e. *Nezirim*]. It is enough if they are righteous” (13). He teaches that by and large “man was created to enjoy [this world],” of course in a kosher sense. Hashem declared that “everything that He had made was very good” (*Bereishis* 1:31). It means that He wants mankind to enjoy His munificence and benevolence. This world is replete with Torah-affirming pleasures, and man was intended to enjoy every bit of them.

At the conclusion of most days of creation Hashem remarked “It is good” (*Bereishis* 1:4). The final day of creation is crowned with the exultation: “It is very good” (*Bereishis* 1:31). The

Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 9:2) is moved to exclaim: “He had made everything beautiful ...” (*Koheles 3:11*). Hashem created everything good and beautiful so that man may enjoy this world. For the good and beautiful is only a small reflection of Hashem, and appreciation of Hashem’s work is the primary method by which mankind is to come to recognize and appreciate Him. Mankind is further commanded to “rejoice in every good thing which Hashem has given you” (*Devarim 26:11*). It is the will of Hashem that mankind enjoy this world and come to appreciate Him.

How does separation, suffering, and vicissitude come into this beautiful, enjoyable world? Life is definitely not about suffering — it is to be enjoyed — but in every life there must be a certain degree of suffering in order to gain *Olam Haba*. This allocated suffering is inevitable, but certainly not a contradiction to the enjoyment Hashem bestows upon mankind. If one must suffer, would it not be wise to suffer in the service of Hashem? Would it not be wonderful if this pain and suffering could be expended in the acquisition of Torah (*Sanhedrin 99:*)? If a certain degree of pain is necessary in this lifetime, why not focus it in the direction of spiritual achievement? If one must experience an “X” amount of suffering, why not do it as a *Nazir*, and then hopefully have satisfied that “X” quotient, and at the same time, achieve a significant spiritual elevation?

My Rebbe, *Harav* Avigdor Miller שליט"א suggested the following two anecdotes to illustrate the aforementioned point.

Rabbi Akiva was imprisoned by the Roman authorities for teaching Torah at public assemblies. A short time later, his ideological opponent, Papas ben Yehudah, was also led into the prison, whereupon Papas declared, “Praised are you Rabbi Akiva, for you were punished on account of teaching Torah; woe is to Papas who was punished for committing foolishness” (*Berachos 61:*). It was ordained by Heaven that both Rabbi Akiva and Papas must undergo a certain amount of tribulation in this world. Papas squandered his punishment in the pursuit of vanity. Rabbi Akiva earned his punishment with the acquisition of Torah.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai dreamed that his nephew would have property confiscated by the Roman government. Rabbi Yochanan coerced and arm-twisted his nephew into donating large sums of money to charity, without revealing the dream to him. A short time later the government did indeed confiscate a small sum of money from the nephew. This sum represented the difference between the large sums donated to charity and the total monetary value revealed to Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai in the dream (*Bava Basra 10•*). If Heaven destines that a certain sum of money will be lost, that money will be lost. Is it not wise to lose it in the very best way possible? Donation to charity is the service of Hashem, while mere confiscation is certainly a wasted opportunity for suffering.

Not every individual is up to self-imposed suffering. By and large, everyone wants to enjoy the bounty Hashem has to offer. The unique individual who wants to attain additional holiness, while at the same time expending his allotted quotient of suffering, was given the option of becoming a *Nazir*.

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