

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Nasso

In this week's parsha, we are presented with an alternative Jewish lifestyle called nezirut. Any Jew can take a vow of nezirut, and once committed, the nazir is restricted by a short, but unique, set of laws. A nazir may not drink wine, take a haircut, or come in contact with a corpse. At the end of the nezirut period, the nazir shaves his or her head and bring special offerings to the Temple. He or she then reverts back to his or her original status as ordinary Jews (Bamidbar 6:1-21).

The Torah is obviously offering us nezirut as an option, but how does the Torah feel about someone who actually takes it on? Does it make you a better Jew? Or is the Torah just throwing a bone to the fanatic who seeks to escape the realities of life?

A closer look at the text provides us with more questions than answers.

The Torah states explicitly that the nazir is holy. "As long as he is a nazir, he is holy to G-d" (6:8). This is definitely a good thing. However, the Torah also instructs the nazir to bring a sin offering to the Temple when his term is complete (6:14). Clearly, it is in some way sinful to become a nazir. Well, which one is it? Are you holy or are you a sinner? You can't possibly be both simultaneously. Or can you? The Talmud (nazir 4b) describes the ideal nazir with the following episode: "Rabbi Shimon the Righteous said, "... Once a nazir came from the south, and I noticed that he was really good-looking with beautiful eyes and braided hair. I said to him, 'My son, why would you destroy this beautiful hair?' (As we mentioned before, the nazir must shave his head at the end of the nazir period.) He replied, 'Back home I was a shepherd for my dad. [Once, when] I went to draw water from a spring, I was captivated by my reflection [in the water]. [As I began to realize my powers of attraction,] my evil inclination was aroused and it tried to distract me from [my purpose in] life. I said to [my evil inclination], 'Evil one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours and with someone who is destined to be [consumed by] worms and maggots? I will shave you off for the sake of heaven!' (This fellow certainly did not consider baldness to be attractive, despite what Michael Jordon and Bruce Willis might think.) I immediately arose and kissed him on his head. I said to him, 'My son, may there be many nazirs like you in Israel! The Torah was referring to the likes of you when it said, '... A man who expresses a nazir vow for the sake of G-d'" (6:2).

There is one puzzling part of this story. If our hero is indeed concerned about his powers of attraction, why not shave off the hair right away? Why wait until the end of the nazir period?

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Apparently, before you reject your physical beauty, the Torah wants you to experience it in a positive way. You think it's profane; the Torah wants to show you that it can actually be holy. This idea is explicit in the text: "Until he completes his term as a nazir to G-d, the uncut hair that grows on his head is holy" (6:5).

The *raison d'être* of Judaism is its message of the potential holiness inherent in all things physical. Rather than be dragged down into materialism and narcissism by our physical needs, our mission is to accomplish the exact opposite. We are to elevate the world by imbuing all things with the holiness of Torah. *Nizirut* instructs us not to react with drastic measures when we discover the evil face of our physicality. Our job is to bring out its spiritual beauty by revealing its true purpose and using it in the way that G-d intended. Only after the nazir learns to appreciate and experience the spiritual potential of his own beauty do we allow him to take the plunge into self-induced baldness. This might be why, when he does cut his hair, it is actually brought as an offering in the Temple (6:18).

The Mishna in *Avot* (3:9) sounds, at first glance, quite harsh: "Rabbi Yaakov said: 'One who is reviewing Torah while traveling on the road, and he interrupts his learning to comment, 'What a beautiful tree! What a beautiful field!' – the Torah considers it as if he has caused his soul to be guilty of sin.'" How are we to understand this? Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok HaCohen Kook (1865-1935) explained Rabbi Yaakov's teaching in this way: The beauty of nature should never interrupt Torah study. On the contrary, it should be an inspiration. If you view it as an interruption, if nature distracts you from Torah, then you have not yet succeeded in incorporating and synthesizing physical beauty with Torah. In the eye's of the Torah, all things are potential vessels for holiness; the physical can be elevated and the conflict between heaven and earth can be resolved. Peace between physical and spiritual is the hallmark of Torah.

Maybe now we can understand the sin of the nazir. He failed to reconcile his body with his soul. His physical beauty distracted him from his spiritual life. Although he is definitely an extraordinary individual with a healthy fear of sin and the courage to enter the exalted rehab center of *nizirut*, however, he is faulted for not having the strength to go it alone. The nazir is indeed a holy sinner.

Shabbat Shalom!

