

Naso

Parshat Naso contains the topic of the Nazir, one who commits himself to refrain from wine consumption, becoming ritually impure and from cutting his hair. This was done in ancient times as a means to draw closer to God through abstinence and to gain self-control.

The verse opens up these laws with, “A man or woman who will separate themselves (Hebrew: yaflee) to become a Nazir for G-d” (Leviticus 6:2). Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) makes a most famous comment on this verse. The Torah here uses the word “נָזַרְתָּ, to separate himself” because it contains the root “נָזַרְתָּ- pelah, wonder, astonishment”. The Nazir committed himself to live his life while exercising self-control. To find a human being who has the strength to separate himself from the physical drives is a complete wonder to behold!

The wonder is really twofold. To take control over one’s physical drives involves efforts on two fronts. He has committed to keep in check man’s innate physicality, his own body. The second is his commitment to banish the influences of his negative physical surroundings and societal distractions! Let us explain. Man has two distinct fronts that must be conquered in his quest to achieve greatness and perfection. First is the physical and luring surroundings that he lives in and second is his internal challenge of laziness and bodily desires that distract him from maximum performance in the service of G-d and proper treatment of others.

Two Talmudic passages illustrate these two battles. First, the Talmud (Nazir 4a) tells of a man who made himself a Nazir in order to control of his personal desires Second, the Talmud (Sotah 2a) states that one who sees the Sotah woman (who was accused of performing adultery because of promiscuity) should learn the lesson from her evil actions and separate himself from wine. Her inappropriate behavior represents all negative influences that have become the norm of society. Hence, to fight the negative influence, one proclaims himself a Nazir (nowadays, this should not be done as we are unable to bring the ritual sacrifices required at the end of the duration of acceptance which officially end the Nazir vow).

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Indeed, this two-fold battleground has been eloquently expressed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707- 1746, Mesillat Yesharim) based on a passage in Tractate Megillah 24a: “Rabbi Yossi says, once I was walking in the dark of the night and I saw a blind man carrying a torch. He was blind and it was dark outside...” Man has two areas of blindness. One is that his body can be blind to truth and the second is that he is sometimes in a dark world. Man’s mission is to gain sight and clarity and to propel forward with self-development taking on his personal challenges and the negative influences that surround him. He seeks a torch to light up the path. The passage ends: “I questioned the blind man about his mysterious action... he explained to me, true I am blind, but I carry a torch to bring light to the world so that others can direct me...”

The Nazir inspires us to commit to the goal of spiritual growth. He shows us that we can rise above the shackles of our bodies and of world influences. We take the step, as wondrous as it is, to choose spirituality!

Shabbat Shalom

JSN Team

