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Parshat Naso: Ambivalent Asceticism

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In memory of the 49 LGBT souls killed in Orlando on June 12, 2016.

Parshat Naso introduces to us, among other things, the character of the nazirite.

1 The Lord spoke to Moses saying: 2 Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If anyone, man or woman, explicitly [or wondrously] utters a nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord, 3 he shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant; he shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any other intoxicant, neither shall he drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried. 4 Throughout his term as a nazirite, he may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seed or skin. 5 Throughout the term of his vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch his head; it shall remain consecrated until the completion of his term as nazirite of the Lord, the hair of his head being left to grow untrimmed. 6 Throughout the term that he has set apart for the Lord, he shall not go in where there is a dead person...8 Throughout his term as a nazirite, he is consecrated to the Lord (Numbers 6:1-6,8)

א וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבֵּר
אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ
אִוְ-אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לְנַדֵּר נֶזֶר לַיהוָה
לָהּ: ג מִיַּיִן וְשִׁכָר יִזִּיר חֲמֹץ יַיִן וְחֲמֹץ שִׁכָר
לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה וְכָל-מִשְׁרֵת עֲנָבִים לֹא יִשְׁתֶּה
וְעֲנָבִים לַחִים וְיֵבֶשִׁים לֹא יֹאכַל: ד כָּל יְמֵי
נְזָרוֹ מִכֹּל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה מִגֶּפֶן הַיַּיִן מִחֲרָצִים
וְעַד-זֶג לֹא יֹאכַל: ה כָּל-יְמֵי נְזָרוֹ תֵּעַר
לֹא-יַעֲבֹר עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ עַד-מְלֵאת הַיָּמִם
אֲשֶׁר-יִזִּיר לָהּ קִדְשׁ יְהוָה גְּדֹל פְּרַע שְׂעָר
רֹאשׁוֹ: ו כָּל-יְמֵי הַזִּירוֹ לָהּ עַל-נֶפֶשׁ מֵת
לֹא יָבֹא...ח כָּל יְמֵי נְזָרוֹ קִדְשׁ הוּא לָהּ:
(במדבר ו:א-ו,ח)

Three abstentions define the vow of the *nazir*: grapes, haircuts, and contact with (and impurity from) the dead, even those closest to him or her. Together, these form the core of a strong disembodied ascetic commitment. The *nazir* gives up an iconic this-worldly pleasure, intoxication; forgoes physical grooming; and literally distances him/herself from bodies devoid of spirit. To "set [one]self apart for the Lord" requires that one set oneself apart from human embodiment, it seems. The result is total consecration. "*Kadosh hu la'Hashem.*"

Though Samson and Samuel would later be identified as a nazirites for life, the vow described by our *parsha* need not be a lifetime commitment. On the contrary, there is a prescribed pathway out of this time period of intense spiritual devotion.

13 This is the ritual for the nazirite: On the day that his term as nazirite is completed, he [or it, meaning the consecrated hair] shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. 14 As his offering to the Lord he shall present: one male lamb in its first year, without blemish, for a burnt offering; one ewe lamb in its first year, without blemish, for a sin offering; one ram without blemish for an offering of well-being... (Numbers 6:13-14)

יג וְזָאת תּוֹרַת הַנָּזִיר בְּיוֹם מְלֵאת יָמָיו
 נָזְרוּ יָבִיא אֹתוֹ אֶל-פֶּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד:
 יד וְהִקְרִיב אֶת-קָרְבָּנוֹ לַיהוָה כֶּבֶשׂ
 בֶּן-שָׁנָתוֹ תְּמִים אֶחָד לְעֹלָה וְכִבְשָׂה
 אֶחָת בֶּת-שָׁנָתָהּ תְּמִימָה לְחַטָּאת
 וְאֵיל-אֶחָד תְּמִים לְשִׁלְמִים:(במדבר
 ו'יג-יד)

To end the nazirite vow, three sacrifices were offered by the *kohen* on his/her behalf: a *chatat* (sin offering), an *olah* (burnt offering), and a *shlamim* (peace offering). The *nazir* would then shave his or her head in the outer courtyard of the Temple and burn those locks together with the *shlamim*. This highly choreographed ritual officially ended the *nazir's* obligations, but it also, importantly, cast them in a distinct light. What is the meaning of the multiple sacrifices? In particular, what is a sin offering doing as a capstone to the very heights of holiness? Is the *nazir* a saint or a sinner? Is asceticism a value or a vice? Our tradition is very much divided on the subject. Consider this debate from Tractate Taanit:

Samuel said: Whosoever fasts [for the sake of self-affliction] is termed a sinner. He is of the same opinion as the following Tanna. For it has been taught: Eleazar ha-Kappar Berabbi says: What is Scripture referring to when it says [of the Nazirite], "And make atonement for him, for that he sinned by reason of the soul" (Num. 6:11). Against which soul did he sin? [It must refer to the fact that] he denied himself wine. We can now make this inference from minor to major: If this man [nazirite] who denied himself wine only is termed, Sinner, how much more so he who denies himself the enjoyment of ever so many things. R. Eleazar says: He is termed, Holy. As it is said, "He shall be holy, he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow long" (Num. 6:5). If this man [nazirite] who denied himself wine only is termed, Holy, how much more so he who denies himself the enjoyment of ever so many things. (BT Taanit 11a)

אמר שמואל: כל היושב בתענית
 נקרא חוטא. סבר כי האי תנא,
 דתניא: רבי אלעזר הקפר ברבי אומר:
 מה תלמוד לומר (במדבר ו') וכפר
 עליו מאשר חטא על הנפש, וכי
 באיזה נפש חטא זה? אלא שציער
 עצמו מן היין, והלא דברים קל וחומר:
 ומה זה שלא ציער עצמו אלא מן היין
 נקרא חוטא, המצער עצמו מכל דבר
 ודבר על אחת כמה וכמה. רבי אלעזר
 אומר: נקרא קדוש, שנאמר (במדבר
 ו') קדוש יהיה גדל פרע שער ראשו.
 ומה זה שלא ציער עצמו אלא מדבר
 אחד נקרא קדוש, המצער עצמו מכל
 דבר על אחת כמה וכמה. (תענית
 יא.)

In a dizzying dichotomy, Samuel, following R. Eleazar ha-Kappar, contends that the *nazir* is decidedly a sinner, a "*choteh*," whereas (the other) R. Eleazar deems the *nazir* unequivocally a saint, a "*kadosh*." S/he must be one or the other.

Maimonides did not help resolve the matter when he later codified *both* positions in his *Mishneh Torah*. According to *Hilchot Deot* 3:1:

A person might say, "Since envy, desire, [the pursuit] of honor, and the like, are a wrong path and drive a person from the world, I shall separate from them to a very great degree and move away from them to the opposite extreme"... This, too, is a bad path and it is forbidden to walk upon it. Whoever follows this path is called a sinner [as implied by Numbers 6:11's] statement concerning a nazirite: "And he [the priest] shall make an atonement for him, for his having sinned regarding [his] soul"...Therefore, our Sages directed man to abstain only from those things which the Torah denies him and not to forbid himself permitted things by vows and oaths [of abstention].

שמא יאמר אדם הואיל והקנאה והתאוה והכבוד וכיוצא בהם דרך רעה הן ומוציאין את האדם מן העולם אפרוש מהן ביותר ואתרחק לצד האחרון... זה דרך רעה היא ואסור לילך בה המהלך בדרך זו נקרא חוטא שהרי הוא אומר בנזיר וכפר עליו מאשר חטא על הנפש... לפיכך צוו חכמים שלא ימנע אדם עצמו אלא מדברים שמנעתו התורה בלבד ולא יהא אוסר עצמו בנדירים ובשבועות על דברים המותרים.

In other words, asceticism is a path of sin and must be avoided.

And yet, according to *Hilchot Nezirut* 10:15:

...If a person takes a nazirite vow to God in a holy manner, this is delightful and praiseworthy and concerning this [Numbers 6:7-8] states: "The diadem of his God is upon his head...He is holy unto God." And Scripture equates him with a prophet, as [Amos 2:11] states: "And from your sons, I will raise [some] as prophets, and from your youths, [some] as nazirites."

...הנודר לה' דרך קדושה הרי זה נאה ומשובח ועל זה נאמר נזיר אלהיו על ראשו קדש הוא לה', ושקלו הכתוב כנביא (שנאמר) ואקים מבניכם לנביאים ומבחורכם לנזירים.

Not only is the pure *nazir* free from sin, s/he is as holy as a prophet. We can thus see that conflicting attitudes toward asceticism were manifest in the Torah itself, within the pages of the Talmud, and even within individual thinkers. There was, and is, clearly something about singular "consecration to the Lord" that both inspires admiration and invites aversion.

Tractate Nazir 29b gives implicit form to this ambivalence. There, a discussion ensues about how old one has to be to take the oath of *nezirut*, and the answer rests on the age of manhood. R. Yosi son of R. Yehudah explains that one must legally be an "*ish*"--i.e. 13 years or older-- to become a *nazir*, based on the opening verse of our discussion, "*ish or isha ki yafli lindor neder nazir...*," "If a **man** or woman explicitly utters a nazirite's vow..." (Num. 6:2). Rashi then explains that the establishment of that age of adulthood originates in Genesis, in the story of Shimon and Levi, brothers who kill the entire city of Shechem to avenge the honor of their sister Dina.

Now it came to pass on the third day, when they were in pain, that Jacob's two sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, each **man** took his sword, and they came upon the city with confidence, and they slew every male. (Genesis 34:25)

כה ויהי ביום השלישי בהיותם כאבים ויקחו שני בני יעקב שמעון ולוי אחי דינה איש חרב ויבאו על העיר בטח ויהרגו כל זכר: (בראשית לד:כה)



Bracketing the question of how the ages of Shimon and Levi might be established, Rashi's insistence on linking the *nazir* to these bloody characters is highly suggestive. I believe that, subtle as it is, this juxtaposition helps explain the deep-seated ambivalence that we've witnessed regarding asceticism.

What do the vowing *ish* and the fighting *ish* share? A tremendous amount of righteous passion. The *nazir* is fired up for God, ready to sacrifice him/herself to become "*kadosh...la'Hashem*." The brothers are fired up for honor and dignity, for family and purity. They all share zeal, singularity of focus, detachment from places or people who matter, all in the name of a higher principle. Sometimes that intensity yields magnificent holiness. Sometimes it yields horrific violence. Passion can be so very precarious, so very dangerous.

The sinner-saint dialectic of the *nazir*, and the broader ambivalence toward asceticism that has played out over generations of Jewish thought, speaks to this awareness and this well-deserved anxiety. The very same instincts that drive holiness can also drive hate and we bear witness to this sad reality time and again. He who is holy wholly unto God all too often leaves his humanity behind. A *chatat* is no doubt in order for every vow that sacrifices human beings on the altar of sanctity.



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