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Parashat Hashavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

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PARASHAT NASO

Nazir
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In Parashat Naso, the Torah discusses a number of unique halakhic subjects, including the case of the nazir,[1] which begins "If a man or a woman assumes a special nazirite vow (neder nazir), to separate himself[2] to God" (v. 1).

Why would a person choose to accept these nazirite vows? What is the reason for the three specific prohibitions which apply to a nazir? What is the purpose of this period of abstention? Does the Torah want people to undertake it? Why must a nazir offer a sin-offering at the end of the vow?

In this shiur we shall take a closer look at the parasha of the nazir, with a view to finding answers to the above questions.

I. Meaning of the Word "Nazir"

In Tanakh, the root "n-z-r" is used with two different meanings. One refers to separating oneself, as in "They shall separate themselves (ve-yinnazeru) from the holy things of the Israelites" (Vayikra 22:2); "Shall I weep in the fifth month, separating myself (hinnazer) as I have done for these many years?" (Zekharya 7:3). The other meaning is a crown, as in "the golden miter, the holy crown (nezer)" (Vayikra 8:9); "I took the crown (ha-nezer) that was upon his head" (II Shmuel 1:10).

In the parasha of the nazir itself, the word is used in both senses:[3]

Separation:

- (2) If a man or a woman assumes a special nazirite vow, to separate himself (le-hazzir) to God,
- (3) He shall separate himself (yazzir) from wine...

Crown:

- (7) He shall not make himself impure for them when they die, for God's crown (nezer) is upon his head.

Indeed, both meanings come together in defining the nazir: the nazir separates and distances himself from a number of elements characterizing this world (wine, haircuts, impurity). At the same time, he grows and approaches sanctity; his head is graced, as it were, with the crown of spiritual status and sanctity.

II. Prohibitions Applying to a Nazir and the Reasons for Them

Let us now examine the prohibitions that the nazir accepts upon himself. We shall try to understand the reason for them, and connect them with the purposes of the nazirite vow – separation and striving for holiness.

The nazir must observe three prohibitions:

- no drinking wine or consuming grape products
- no haircuts
- no contact with a dead body

Drinking wine:

He shall abstain from wine and brandy;[4] he shall not drink wine vinegar or brandy vinegar; nor shall he drink any liquor of grapes; nor shall he eat moist or dried grapes. And throughout his nazirite days he shall eat nothing that is made from the grapevine, from kernels to husk.

The Torah here (vv. 3-4) does not stop at a prohibition on wine, but broadens it to include anything that is made from any part of the vine.

This being the case, the Torah could have stated at the outset, "He shall eat nothing that is made from the grapevine;" this would have made the general principle clear. However, the Torah lists the particulars. Moreover, the Torah chooses wine to introduce the list, and only afterwards includes the other grape products:

- brandy
- wine vinegar and brandy vinegar
- liquor made from wine
- fresh grapes and raisins
- kernels and skins (i.e., parts usually discarded)

A review of the order of these products shows that the Torah lists them from the closest to wine to the furthest from wine. This indicates that the essence of the prohibition concerns wine, while the other prohibitions are auxiliary.

Indeed, the Ibn Ezra explains:

The reason for [the inclusion of] wine vinegar and liquor and grapes [in the prohibition] is as a fence, to distance a person altogether from wine.

The manner in which these prohibitions are arranged – from wine down to the parts of the fruit that are usually discarded – represents one fence after another. The fact that the Torah itself surrounds this prohibition with so many layers of prohibition indicates that the matter is of fundamental importance. Thus, we deduce that the prohibition of wine, for a nazir, is critical. What is the reason for it?

Rashi, at the beginning of his commentary on the subject of the nazir (v. 2), explains why it follows that of the sota, the woman suspected by her husband of adultery, who participates in a procedure to clear her of any suspicion and restore domestic harmony:

Why is the parasha of the nazir juxtaposed with the parasha of the sota? To tell us that anyone who observes the sota in her disgrace will abstain from wine, which leads to adultery.

This is Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi's opinion on Sota 2a; by citing it, Rashi shows his view: drinking wine leads to frivolity, loss of control, and the possibility of a person ultimately ending up committing adultery; thus, the essence of the neder nazir is abstinence from wine.

The Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) elaborates more fully:

"Neder nazir" - ...to distance himself from lusts, and he does this for the sake of God's service, for wine corrupts one's thinking and one's service of God.

The abstinence from wine is meant not only to distance a person from the possibility of adultery, but also to avoid a state of frivolity, which could lead to a variety of transgressions and which adversely affects a person's Divine service.

According to these commentaries, becoming a nazir means separation or abstinence, aimed at distancing the person from transgression. The nazir avoids drinking wine and brandy, which cause inebriation and may lead to sin. However, from the Ibn Ezra's explanation we see that there is more involved here than just keeping oneself from sin. There is also the element of acting "for the sake of God's service."

Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch discusses this point:

The avoidance of anything that is made from grapes will be a constant warning for him. As a nazir, he has a great mission – to repair his thoughts and his feelings. Therefore, he is obligated to maintain the clear head and equanimity required for this service.

Cutting Hair:

Throughout the days of his nazirite vow, no razor shall pass over his head, until the days during which he separates himself to God are completed; it shall be holy, (and) he shall allow the locks of the hair of his head to grow long.

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 10:10) connects the prohibition here (v. 5) of haircuts with the prohibition of drinking wine:

Why does God command the nazir not to cut his hair? Because cutting his hair enhances his appearance... while growing hair is a sign of sorrow and mourning. Therefore, God says, "Since this nazir has prohibited wine for himself in order to keep himself away from licentiousness, let him grow his hair long, so that he will become untidy and will be pained by it; then, his evil inclination will not overcome him."

Once again, according to this midrash, the essence of the neder nazir is abstinence from wine. The prohibition of cutting hair is added in order to reinforce the separation from adultery.

The Seforno and Alshikh adopt a similar view: the Seforno (v. 5) explains, "He thereby casts aside any thought of physical beauty and styling of his hair;" while the Alshikh states, "Lest his evil inclination rise up."

According to these commentators, the prohibition on haircuts comes to reinforce the concept of separation. Cutting one's hair symbolizes one's involvement with physical beauty, and the nazir must separate himself from such interests so as not to fall prey to the evil inclination.

However, this explanation is difficult to understand in a number of respects. Firstly, why is cutting one's hair more problematic than having long hair? After all, one could argue exactly the opposite: that long hair is an adornment. Indeed, we find support for this claim in the case of Avshalom (II Shmuel 14:25-26):

And in all of Israel there was no one so greatly praised as Avshalom for his beauty; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. And when he shaved his head — for it was, at each year's end, that he would cut it, for it was heavy on him; therefore he would cut it — he weighed the hair of his head at two hundred shekels by the king's weight.

The verses here seem to suggest that Avshalom's long hair was part of his special attractiveness, and it was this beauty that led him to excessive pride, and eventually to rebellion.

The Radak comments (v. 25):

Just prior to the story of his rebellion against his father, [Scripture] describes what led him to it: because he was handsome, and there was no one like him throughout all of Israel. And he prided himself on his looks and his hair, and thought that none of David's sons was as worthy as he to reign, and he rebelled.[5]

In addition, the verses in the parasha of the nazir do not describe long hair as something distasteful; rather, it is depicted as something that endows the person with holiness: "It shall be holy (and) he shall allow the locks of the hair on his head to grow long" (v. 5). Rashi understands the holiness as pertaining to the hair itself: "It shall be holy' – his hair."

Another difficulty is that concerning the next prohibition – that of contracting ritual impurity by touching, carrying or being under the same roof as a corpse – the Torah notes that such impurity adversely affects "God's crown upon his head," i.e., the sanctity of his hair:

(7) And he shall not make himself impure for his father or for his mother or for his brother or for his sister, when they die, because God's crown (nezer) is upon his head...

(9) And if any person dies by him suddenly, and he has defiled his nazirite head...

(11) ... and he shall shave his head on the day of his purification; on the seventh day he shall shave it... and (the kohen) shall make atonement for him on that day for having transgressed for the dead, and he shall sanctify his head on that day.

Moreover, when the period of the nazirite vow is over, the nazir brings an offering; afterwards, he ceases to conduct himself as a nazir. The Torah states explicitly, "Thereafter the nazir may drink wine" (v. 20). However, the Torah does not say: thereafter the nazir may cut his hair – because this has already taken place. The hair is offered along with the peace-offering. The shaving or cutting of hair is given heavy emphasis in the verses, and it represents part of the process of ending the neder nazir:

(18) And the nazir shall shave his nazirite head at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and he shall take the hair of his nazirite head and place it in the fire which is under the peace-offering sacrifice.

Thus, we see that the hair of the nazir is a very significant element of his vow: it is called "holy" and "his God's crown"; impurity affects it specifically; and the shaving of it occupies a central place in the ending of his neder nazir – to a much greater extent than the resumption of drinking wine.

In addition, if we take another look at verse 5, addressing the prohibition of haircuts, we see that the Torah itself does not suffice with saying, "No razor shall pass over his head", but rather adds that he must grow "the locks of the hair of his head." In other words, this is more than just a prohibition against cutting his hair; there is some significance to the nazir having long hair.

What is the reason for growing his hair long? The Abravanel and Rav Hirsch contend that his long hair sets him apart from other people; the former explains,

The hair is called "nezer" because, just as a king is recognized as such by the crown on his head, likewise the nazir is recognized by virtue of the great amount of hair on his head, like a crown.

Rav Hirsch states:

Growing the hair unimpeded expresses isolation and introversion... He seeks to be alone and to delve into himself... He wants to do some spiritual, moral work of self-education.

For Rav Hirsch, long hair represents a barrier between the nazir and the society around him, thereby allowing him to be alone. However, it would seem that the hair is not only a means of separating from society, but rather something with its own inherent sanctity. The Abravanel explains: "To show that all the knowledge that God placed upon his head will be pure; it will never be lost to him." According to this explanation, the hair is part of the head, and a person's head contains the knowledge that God has bestowed upon him. The prohibition against cutting his hair expresses the proper use of Divine knowledge, with no corruption.

Rabbeinu Bachya adopts a Kabbalistic approach to explain the sanctity of the nazir's hair:

He is prohibited to shave it because a person's hair is his strength, as Shimshon says (Shoftim 16:17): "If I shave it, my strength will leave me." Hair has no end, it grows throughout a person's life... and all of this hints to branches of the Name and to Its plantings and Its powers, which are minute, internal experiences, and they are like fiery threads that spread in all directions, and which have no end... Therefore, he is commanded to grow [his hair] and is warned not to cut it, "for his God's crown is upon his head," and if he cuts the hair of his head, which is like the plantings, it will be as if he has cut and severed the Name from Its outgrowths.

Hair is the clearest expression of constant growth and diffusion. For this reason, hair symbolizes God's constant creation. Growth of one's hair represents a connection with the power of infinite creation. Cutting hair, on the other hand, means halting this power; it creates a barrier between the power of creation (God) and the "branches" – all of His creations. Therefore, growing his hair serves to connect the nazir with God, thereby imbuing him with special powers (as recounted in Shoftim concerning Shimshon). Cutting the hair severs this special power, since it separates God – Who creates and bestows it – from man.

In summary, the prohibition against cutting hair may be understood as part of the command to separate, meant to prevent the nazir from sinning. However, since the Torah describes his long hair in positive terms and grants it a central place in the process, we conclude that this prohibition (or, more accurately, the positive requirement that he grow his hair long) brings the nazir closer to sanctity and connects him to God, such that his hair truly becomes "his God's crown... upon his head."

Ritual Impurity:

- (6) All his nazirite days for God, he shall not come into contact with any dead body.
(7) He shall not make himself impure for his father or for his mother or for his brother or for his sister, if they die, for God's crown is upon his head.

The nazir is distanced from impurity (just as he separates from certain physical actions in order to distance himself from transgression). However, this distancing from impurity is primarily a means of approaching and attaining holiness. The nazir may not become impure because "God's crown is upon his head" (verse 7), namely his hair, which in turn is described in the previous verses as "holy."

In verse 8, the Torah says, "All his nazirite days he is holy to God." Rashi explains: "This refers to [maintaining] the holiness of the body so as not to become defiled by the dead." The nazir becomes holy; in this state he cannot allow himself to become defiled.[6]

From Separation to Holiness

In summary, we have examined the three prohibitions that apply to a nazir and found that each involves some dimension of separation (from transgression or from impurity). At the same time, each also reflects a dimension of drawing closer to sanctity.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning, the Torah does not describe the nazir as "holy." Therefore, as we read about the prohibition against wine, the issue of separation makes a stronger impression. The prohibition against haircuts starts with the feeling of further separation, but then we are told, "It shall be holy; he shall grow the locks of the hair of his head," such that the growing of his hair connects back to holiness – as indeed becomes apparent in the following verses. The prohibition against become impure through contact with the dead is most clearly linked to the nazir's status of holiness.

The three prohibitions may be viewed as a progression:

Separation

Prohibition against wine

Separation and Holiness

Prohibition against haircuts

Holiness

Prohibition against ritual impurity

It may be that the Torah presents the prohibitions and their significance in this manner in order to teach us that the neder nazir includes both separation and growth in holiness; i.e., that during the period of abstinence the nazir undergoes a process. First he separates himself, distancing himself from things that may lead him to sin. In the wake of this separation he draws closer to holiness, and becomes a person who is holy and close to God. (Obviously, in practical terms, the nazir is

obligated concerning all three prohibitions right from the start, and all three include something of the original dimension of separation.)

From this perspective, although the neder nazir includes an important element of separation, the main and ultimate objective in undertaking the separation and abstinence is to grow in holiness. The dimension of holiness involved in the nazirite vow is further emphasized in the parallel between the nazir and the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, as set forth in the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba 10:11):

Everyone who sanctifies himself with his own earthly efforts will be sanctified from on High. This [nazir] – since he abstains from wine and afflicts himself by not shaving his head, so as to distance himself from sin, therefore God says, "I consider him like a Kohen Gadol. Just as a Kohen Gadol is prohibited from contracting ritual impurity through any dead person (even his close relatives), likewise a nazir is prohibited to contract ritual impurity through any dead person. Just as it is written, concerning the Kohen Gadol (Vayikra 21:12), "for his God's crown of anointing oil is upon him", likewise concerning the nazir it is written, "for his God's crown is upon his head." Just as, concerning the Kohen Gadol, it is written (I Divrei Ha-yamim 23:13), "Aharon was separated to be sanctified as the holy of holies", likewise the nazir is called holy, as it is written (v. 8): "All his nazirite days, he is holy to God." [7]

The neder nazir allows a regular Israelite to achieve a level of sanctity that approximates that of the Kohen Gadol himself!

III. The Offerings Brought by the Nazir

An overall view of the parasha of the nazir shows that the Torah describes the nazir in positive terms, as a holy person. Thus we are most surprised to discover that he is required to bring, along with a burnt-offering and a peace-offering, a sin-offering at the end of his period of separation (v. 14). What sin has he committed?

Many different answers have been proposed; we shall review them briefly.

Nazirite Existence as Inherently Sinful:

Many of the commentators maintain that the fact that the nazir brings a sin-offering testifies to the fact that this restricted existence is problematic. According to this view, a nazirite life is deficient; a person is not meant to impose all kinds of prohibitions on himself or afflict himself. This view is expressed in the Gemara (Ta'anit 11a):

Shmuel said: "Anyone who maintains fasting is called a sinner."

He held like this Tanna, for we learnt in a baraita, "Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar be-Rabbi says: 'What does the verse mean by "And he will atone on him from that which he sinned to a life" (v. 11) — against whose life did this one sin? Rather, he pained himself [by refraining] from wine.'"

Now, is this not an a fortiori argument: if this one, who pained himself only from wine, is called a sinner, one who pains himself from everything [by fasting], all the more so!

This gemara presents the nazir as sinning against himself by withholding a perfectly legitimate pleasure. Alternatively, the nazirite vows are a sin against the body, even though the soul is thereby spiritual uplifted, as the Toledot Yitzchak explains (v. 11):

We may answer that on one hand he is holy, while on the other hand he is a sinner. In terms of his soul, he is holy – for the soul is made more perfect through separation from the desires of this world, but the perfection of the body lies in not being separated from the desires of this world to an extreme, but rather by living in moderation: eating and drinking, consuming meat and imbibing wine as proper for the body's wellbeing. Thus, in terms of the soul, the nazir is called "holy," while in terms of the body he is called a sinner.

Others claim that there is no problem per se with living as a nazir, but there are inevitable side issues:

The Impetus

According to this view, the neder nazir is taken on in the wake of sin; it is this that requires atonement. This explanation is found in Rabbi Anshelomo Ashteroth's Midreshei Ha-Torah:[8] "He has sinned through his soul, since his evil inclination overtook him, such that he had to abstain from wine." [9] Thus, the sin-offering reflects the completion of a cycle of repentance.

Impact on Other Mitzvot

According to this view, the observance of the nazirite vows is at the expense of other things that a person should be doing (Meshekh Chokhma, v. 14):

The reason for the sin-offering that a nazir must bring is because he cannot perform some of the commandments, such as [contracting] ritual impurity for the sake of [dead] relatives, which is a positive commandment. Likewise, he cannot recite Kiddush and Havdala over wine. If he acted with dedication, then he is good and praiseworthy, but nevertheless he requires atonement.

Leaving the Nazirite World

According to this view, it is the cessation of the neder nazir that is problematic. Some commentators maintain that nazirite abstention is positive (in keeping with the opinion of Rabbi Elazar, further on in the gemara in Ta'anit 11a), since the Torah describes the nazir as "holy." Therefore, in their view, the sin-offering comes because of the cessation of the nazirite restrictions and the return to the mundane life of this world (Ramban, v. 14):

According to the simplest understanding of the text, this person sins when his period of nazirite separation is over, for he is now separated from his special sanctity and Divine service. He should really have abstained forever and remained a nazir, holy to God, his whole life... Therefore he needs atonement as he once again exposes himself to the impurity of the desires of this world.

The Abravanel puts it this way: "Because he forsakes a life of sanctity and separation, and chooses to return to physical desires."

IV. Nazirite Life and Human Complexity

The neder nazir creates a situation of separation, with a view to attaining a greater level of sanctity. This is a complex situation. On one hand, it is clear that the desire to attain greater holiness is positive – i.e., the objective is clearly praiseworthy. On the other hand, God created man with a physical body, not as an angel, with the intention that he live a physical life, not a spiritual life only. He must aim to give expression to the greatness of his soul specifically through the connection to his body and everything related to the material world. In this way, the

connection to holiness is far more significant: even the material world and its forces are thereby connected with holiness.

The nazir separates himself from certain things in order to succeed in attaining a greater level of holiness. While this entails assuming additional prohibitions, he is actually making life easier for himself in some ways. By means of these prohibitions, he avoids the need to deal with the complexity of sanctity within the life of this world. This position is problematic. Perhaps the sin-offering is brought for the shortcomings of human complexity, which sometimes leads a person to allow one aspect to dominate the other. Sometimes the body dominates, interfering with the aspirations of the soul; sometimes the soul is inspired to the extent that it desires to be severed from the body. The neder nazir is born of the feeling that the body is dominant, and that it must be reined in.[10] It continues with the period of abstinence, during which time the nazir cuts himself off from certain activities pertaining to the body, and strengthens his spiritual side.[11] Both of these situations are defective, and both require a sin-offering.[12]

Finally, when the period of separation is over, the nazir returns to the complexity of man's ordinary situation. What will happen to him now? Will he return to a state in which his body dominates his soul? If so, that constitutes sufficient reason for a sin-offering, as the Ramban and Abravanel explain.

However, that is not the only possibility. It may be that the holiness of the period of nazirite separation will continue to influence him, so that he will live his ordinary life in a better and more perfect way.

Rabbeinu Bachya offers the following explanation for the significance of the sin-offering brought by a nazir:

I have already noted, concerning a nazir, that he has exceeded [regular] qualities and cleaved to the essential Upper Mercies, and now he seeks to leave his situation of holiness. He seems to be distancing himself and seeking to remove himself – heaven forbid – from that level that he has attained. Therefore the Torah requires him to bring a sacrifice, but not for atonement... Rather, the purpose of his sacrifice is to bring close the powers and to unite and to draw them from the flow of the Source; the [regular] qualities will be filled up, and after that he will return to his original pleasures. Thereby the offerings that he is commanded to bring consist of a burnt-offering, a peace-offering and a sin-offering.

The Siftei Kohen[13] explains:

Even though the period of his nazirite abstention is over, he retains his holiness... And since he has ascended (in holiness) and not descended, he should not fear that his evil inclination will tempt him, even though he may drink wine.

According to Rabbeinu Bachya, the sin-offering must be seen in context: it is one of three sacrifices that a nazir brings in order to allow him to live a normal life while retaining the level of sanctity that he has attained during the period of separation.[14]

This being the case, the nazirite process expresses human complexity – the fact that man is composed of body as well as soul, and the fact that sometimes there is an imbalance in their equilibrium. By the end of his period of separation, a nazir is meant to return to the human state of complexity and live in it in a more refined and perfected way.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

- [1] This unit occupies the first twenty-one verses of Chapter 6 of Sefer Bamidbar; all citations are from there unless otherwise indicated.
- [2] Although the neder nazir can be equally undertaken by a man or a woman, the Torah refers in the default to the masculine third person.
- [3] See the New Concordance on Tanakh, by Avraham Even-Shoshan, which categorizes the words in our parasha under two separate entries: "nizzar" and "nezer," reflecting the two meanings. (The word "nazir" is explained by Even-Shoshan only in accordance with the first meaning, separated from society. The other words in our parasha are mostly interpreted in accordance with the meaning of "crown.")
- [4] Brandy (shekhar) in Tanakh, like wine, was made from grapes and not other fruits.
- [5] It is interesting that the Sages (Nazir 4b, et al.) – and the commentators, following their lead – assert that Avshalom was a nazir, and this was why he had long hair. In this case, then, the result of the prohibition of cutting hair seems to have achieved the opposite of the desired result. (The Radak comments on v. 26: "'And when he shaved' – our rabbis, of blessed memory, say that Avshalom was a nazir for life. This was a tradition that they had received, for the verses do not suggest this: it is possible that he could have grown his hair long for the sake of beauty, to pride himself on it and for enjoyment, and each year as it grew so heavy that he could no longer bear it, he would cut it. But our Sages maintain that he grew it because he was a nazir.")
- [6] It is interesting to note that Rashi attributes the "holiness" to the nazir's body. In other words, the nazir does not leave his body and thereby achieve a higher level of sanctity for his soul, but rather sanctifies his body.
- [7] For a detailed comparison of the nazir to the Kohen Gadol, see Rav Amnon Bazak's article on the VBM.
- [8] Cited by Nechama Leibowitz in Iyyunim Le-farashat Ha-shavua, Parashat Naso, p. 74.
- [9] See also Meshekh Chokhma.
- [10] Perhaps it is for this reason that the sin-offering atones, in accordance with the opinion in Midreshei Ha-Torah (cited above).
- [11] Perhaps it is for this reason that the sin-offering atones, in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar and the Toledot Yitzchak (cited above).
- [12] In the shiur on Parashat Tazria, focusing on the yoledet (a woman who has given birth), we compared the offering that she must bring with the offering of the nazir. We may now complete this parallel: both the nazir and the yoledet represent stark examples of the complexity of man, as a composite of body and soul.
- [13] Cited in Rabbi Chavel's glosses on the commentary of Rabbeinu Bachya, Mosad HaRav Kook edition. The reference is to the work of Bible commentary by 16th-century Kabbalist Rav Mordekhai Ha-kohen, not the halakhic work of the same name by 17th-century scholar Rav Shabbetai Kohen.
- [14] Perhaps this is what the Meshekh Chokhma means: the commandments teach us to live a normal life in this world with a connection to holiness; therefore, the commandments are performed through physical means, rather through some abstract means. A person who assumes the nazirite vow separates himself from some physical things, therefore missing out on the performance of mitzvot that are connected to those physical things. What this means is that by cutting himself off from those physical things he nullifies part of the special connection between the mitzvot, the world of sanctity, and the material world.

