

NASO (NUMBERS 4:28-7:89)**Wine Not?**

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

For some people, 365 are not enough.

There are 613 Commandments in the Torah; 248 positive and 365 negative. While it is forbidden to add any Mitzvahs, there is a way that a person can accept additional prohibitions within the framework of existing commandments:

*“...**A man or a woman who shall pronounce a special vow of a Nazir -- one who is separate -- to consecrate himself to G-d, he must abstain from wine... he may not drink anything in which grapes have been soaked; he may not eat grapes or raisins...”* (Numbers, 6:2-3)

A *Nazir* is a person who chooses to separate himself by prohibiting several activities that would otherwise be permitted: He does not consume grape products. He demonstrates his disdain for the social scene by allowing his hair to grow wild and unkempt. He lives a life of holy separation; he maintains a high level of spiritual purity, avoiding contact with the dead.

The *Nazir* is a person who decides to get closer to G-d by removing himself from some of the physical pleasures that the world has to offer. He is a spiritual person who has voluntarily accepted upon himself a restrictive lifestyle. The *Nazir* maintains this lifestyle for a specific amount of time, typically 30 days. At the end of his *Nazir* period, there are several offerings that were brought in the Temple, including the now-shaven hair that had accumulated during his hair-growth time.

The Torah praises a person who chooses to live this way:

All the days of his status as a Nazir, he is holy to G-d. (Ibid, verse 8)

What happens if this holy person slips up? What if the *Nazir* accidentally violates his vow by entering a cemetery? What if someone dies in the building where the *Nazir* happens to be?

He has to start all over. First he needs to undergo purification due to his contact with the dead. Then he has to shave whatever hair grew during his original, now-disqualified *Nazir* period. Next, he brings two offerings that he gives to the Priest:

...and the Priest will make one as a sin offering, and one as a burnt offering and he will provide him atonement for having sinned regarding the soul, and he will sanctify his head on that day. (Verse 11)

...he will provide him atonement for having sinned regarding the soul ... What does the Torah mean by "... having sinned regarding the soul"?

Rashi quotes the opinion of Rabbi Elazar Hakkapar that the *Nazir*'s sin was that he caused himself pain by refraining from wine.

What's wrong with refraining from wine? Didn't we just read that "...all the days of his status as a *Nazir*, he is holy to G-d?!" If his desire to be a *Nazir* is considered an act of holiness, why should he be called a sinner for refraining from wine?!

This is even more confusing, based upon what happens at the end of the *Nazir* period. After the successful completion of his designated term as a *Nazir*, he brings a whole array of offerings. Along with his meal offerings, he brings a sheep as a Burnt Offering, a ram as a Peace Offering, and a ewe as a Sin Offering. Nachmanides explains that the purpose of the Sin Offering is to atone for the sin of ending his *Nazir* status. Since he took on the commitment to live a holier way of life, it would be better to continue forever. Now that the *Nazir* is ending his life of separation, he brings a Sin Offering to atone for the "downgrade."

What is going on here? Is it good to be a *Nazir* or is it bad? Is it a sin to refrain from wine, or is it a sin to go back to drinking wine?

The answer, in typical Jewish fashion, is that it depends.

What is it that propels a person and leads him to withdraw from a normal manner of living? Why does this person decide to be different? Is he trying to tell the world that he's better? Is he taking a holier-than-thou approach to the world? "Look at me," says the *Nazir*. "I am holy. Unlike you commoners, I don't give in to the hedonistic approach of consuming fine wine. Being much more humble than you regular folks, I am unconcerned about my appearance and I don't waste my time with grooming. I'm too holy to go to funerals! I am different from the masses!"

To such a person, the Torah says, "Who are you trying to impress? Don't you have enough prohibitions as laid out for you in the Torah? Why don't you work on perfecting yourself using what G-d has given you? Why are you pursuing this superficial statement of separation from your fellows?" This is the person whom Rabbi Elazar Hakkapar calls a sinner for causing himself pain by refraining from wine.

But there is another type of *Nazir*. The Mitzvah of *Nazir* is written in the Torah immediately following the chapter dealing with the “trial” of a woman suspected of being unfaithful. Someone who sees the disgrace of adultery and the shame it brings upon all parties concerned might be well-advised to take an oath to abstain from wine, which has led to the downfall of many a marriage.

Some people lack the self-control to limit their wine intake. Such people are at risk of ethical compromise if they drink a little more than they should. For such people, the solution is abstinence. It would be best if he had his Kiddush wine on Friday night and Saturday like “normal” people. But he can’t. And he knows it. Therefore, the holy thing to do is to become a *Nazir*. Quit cold turkey.

Shimon HaTzadik was a High Priest. Although offerings that were brought to the Temple were consumed by the Priests, Shimon HaTzaddik refrained from eating the sin offerings of *Nazirs*. Apparently, he felt that, by and large, they were doing the wrong thing in acting this way. The Talmud relates that there was one time that he made an exception:

Shimon HaTzadik said: “In my entire life, I never ate of the guilt-offering of a *nazir* who had become defiled, except in one instance. There was a man who came to me from the South. He had beautiful eyes and handsome features with his locks heaped into curls. I asked him: ‘Why, my son, did you resolve to destroy such beautiful hair?’ He answered: ‘In my native town, I was my father’s shepherd, and, on going down to draw water from the well, I saw my reflection [in its waters]. My heart leaped within me and my evil inclination assailed me, seeking to compass my ruin, and so I said to it: “Evil one! Why do you become proud in a world that is not yours? For your end is but worms and maggots. I swear that I shall shear these locks to the glory of Heaven!”’ I stood up, and kissed him on his head, and said to him, ‘There should be more *Nazirs* like you in the world. Of one such as yourself does the verse (Numbers 6:2) say: “*A man or a woman who shall pronounce a special vow of a nazir, to consecrate themselves to G-d.*”’”

(Talmud, Nazir 4b; Sifri)

This doesn’t just apply to wine and haircuts. It applies to the Mitzvah of being healthy. It applies to diet and exercise. It applies to staying away from the office water cooler if that’s where all the company gossip gets spread. It applies to use of the Internet and television. It applies to knowing which of our friends bring out the best in us, and which of our “friends” bring out the worst in us.

The Torah has messages for each of us. We must study our strengths and weaknesses and address them. We are all required to fulfill every Mitzvah that applies to us. But we are not machines. Every one of us needs to fine tune the message of holiness and self control as it applies to us.

We all need to drink “L’Chaim.” For some of us, it should be with Scotch; others should stick to bottled water.

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