

TIMELESS ∞ TORAH

NASO - THE SEARCH FOR BALANCE IN LIFE

From the Outside In

Parshat Naso is, in a way, a confusing parshah. Although the parshah begins and ends with the narrative of the inauguration of the Mishkan and the encampment around it, it also covers a kaleidoscope of seemingly unrelated topics with no clear or logical sequence. The commentary of the Ralbag (Gersonides, France, d. 1344), however, offers an insight that sheds light on at least four of this week's parshah's topics.

The first passage following the description of the roles of the Levites outlines the halachot of certain ritual impurities that require the person experiencing them to leave the camp until they can purify themselves. After establishing the encampment around the Mishkan, the Ralbag explains, the Torah must tell us how to remove any elements of impurity that could detract from the nation's sanctity.

The next passage teaches the halachot of *gezel hager*, detailing a very specific scenario where a person steals from a convert, initially denies his guilt but eventually admits. This person must not only repay his theft with an additional 25% fine but must also bring a korban to atone for his sin. If the convert has died in the meantime leaving no blood relatives, the money and the fine is to be paid to the Kohanim. Here, as the Ralbag continues his theme, the Torah is underscoring the need to remove interpersonal strife and negativity from within the camp, a point that is emphasised by bringing together the Kohanim, the spiritual leaders of society, with those who may have only recently joined the Jewish people.

Having dealt with spiritual and interpersonal strife on a national level, the Torah moves on to strengthen the nuclear unit of the family. This is the parshah of the sotah, the woman accused by her husband of immorality, which states the procedure that the couple must follow to determine their guilt or innocence. With these three sections, the Torah has therefore given us the depth of attaining communal peace - while the end goal may be spiritual perfection, this must begin with harmony within every family unit.

Personal Emancipation

In the fourth section of this sequence, the Parshah progresses to the nazir, a man or woman who takes a vow to abstain from certain enjoyments, most notably wine. The purpose of such a vow is to train oneself to curb any desires that might lead them to sin, and a nazir, therefore, is a person who is combatting negativity on a personal and individual level. Great weight is attributed to this exercise of self-control, and throughout Tanach and the words of our Sages, the nazir is considered the pinnacle of spiritual achievement. In fact, the Ibn Ezra (Spain, d. 1167) points out that the very name 'nazir' means 'crowned'. A nazir, he explains, is indeed crowned a king because he or she has broken free of enslavement to their desires and truly rules over themselves.

According to the Ralbag, the nazir represents an even more fundamental building-block of communal harmony than the sotah does. The laws of the sotah preserve harmony in the home; the nazir is someone who finds harmony within himself as an individual



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striving for perfection. But Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz (Jerusalem, d. 1979) finds a broader significance in the relationship between the nazir and the rest of society. We find that the nazir is compared to a prophet (see Amos 2:11) although there is little indication that the abstention from wine should actually bring about a Divine revelation. What is the meaning of this comparison? Rav Shmuelevitz explains that just as the function of a prophet is to arouse awareness about wrongdoings and inspiration for rectification, so too a nazir is awakened to their shortcomings and inspires themselves to make meaningful changes in their life.

Keeping the Balance

Of the three prohibitions that a nazir accepts upon himself, one of them does not seem to fit the general theme of asceticism. Refraining from drinking wine and letting one's hair grow wild can be understood as a certain abstention from life's enjoyments, but avoiding contact with corpses is, if anything, counter intuitive. One would perhaps have expected that, on the contrary, a nazir should be encouraged to attend funerals or mourning-houses to instil in him or her the ephemeral nature of life and the need to focus on one's spiritual health. Why is such behaviour so strongly forbidden to the nazir?

Rav Shmuelevitz found the answer to this question in a cryptic statement of the Baal HaTurim (R. Yaakov ben Asher, Spain, d. 1343) that the reason for this prohibition is so that people should not say that the nazir was involved in necromancy. Rav Shmuelevitz said that he learned two things from this statement.

The first is that it should not be surprising to find that a nazir, having set their sights on spiritual greatness, might be privy to Divine revelations such that they might be suspected of sorcery. The second point, which is more relevant to us, is that we see that it is forbidden to seek spiritual greatness in a way that might be detrimental to the wider populace. There might be benefit in a nazir entering a graveyard to impress upon themselves that they will not be in this world forever, but they may not engage in such behaviour because it could give other people a wrong impression. A nazir, despite their search for greatness, must always be careful to retain the balance of their own aspirations and living within and among their peers who have not yet joined their journey.

In light of this message of the nazir, we can perhaps explain the link to the final parashah of this sequence: Birkat Kohanim (the Priestly Blessings). The Kohanim, like the nazir, represent the highest degree of holiness in Jewish society, but they are not allowed to march forward on their own. Like the nazir, they must be sensitive to the society around them and use their holiness to bring blessing back to their people.

Next Week: Beha'alotecha: Trials & Tribulations: The Parsha of Three Books