



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Naso 5770

By Daniel Bloom

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'Meat is Murder'—at least that's what was painted in large letters on an overpass near my family's home. At the time, I dismissed it as extremism—after all, if meat was murder, what did that make me? It was only after an extended period of nuanced education that I slowly evolved to become a more conscious eater despite—not because of, exposure to such extreme judgments. Sometimes, even when motivated by an imperative for righteousness, spiritual or social activists run the risk of isolating themselves and alienating the very communities they are trying to change.

Parshat Naso provides a framework for, or a concession to, a personality desirous of this kind of righteous absolutism. In it we read the laws regarding the *nazir*—a man or woman who initiates an ascetic vow during which the *nazir* must refrain from wine, is forbidden to get a haircut and is also required to avoid graves and corpses, including those of his or her immediate family. The Torah describes the *nazir* as “holy unto God,”¹ yet at the conclusion of the period of *nezirut*, the *nazir* must bring three sacrificial offerings including a *korban chatat*, a sin offering.

This contradiction of holiness and sin has provoked differing approaches to the *nazir* among the sages. Numerous voices within the tradition idealize the *nazir*; others claim that the *nazir* has sinned against his own soul by denying himself the pleasure of wine.² Rambam explains that this individual is needlessly avoiding pleasures that are permitted by the Torah, with the reasoning that “since material desires lead a person to sin, I will distance myself from those things.” Such a person, according to Rambam, is called a sinner, in that one should only withdraw from those things that the Torah itself explicitly forbids.³

These reproachful voices present the *nazir* as someone who struggles to cope with contradiction and complexity within the ethical life. Wine can be used for sanctification and joy, yet it can also lead to degradation and violence. Personal grooming, exemplified through the cutting of hair, can grant an individual a dignified appearance or can lead to narcissism. The *nazir* resolves these tensions by withdrawing to a place where there is a fence around temptation. In doing so, however, the *nazir* loses the possibility to actualize a Torah lifestyle in the world. It is in the mundane material realm, precisely at moments of coarsest physicality—such as drinking intoxicants—that the Torah provides great opportunity for holiness.

Sometimes when we discover a social justice issue that inspires us, we begin to resemble the *nazir*. We can take it to the extreme, acting or speaking in absolutes. For instance, after discovering the destructiveness and iniquity of the food system we may cease to eat at other people's homes because we cannot be certain of the food's environmental impact or that the farm workers were not exploited. Upon learning about the objectionable activities of some transnational corporations, we might decide that we cannot invest our money in any companies at all, as we run the

¹ Bamidbar 6:8.

² Talmud Bavli, Taanit 11a.

³ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot, 3:1.

risk of bankrolling or benefiting from some global injustice in which they are involved. And when we express our views in extreme terms or in inappropriate settings, we risk offending those who we intend to teach or motivate to take action.

When we take extreme positions like these on social justice issues and attempt to isolate ourselves from harmful influences and unjust practices, we may end up—like the *nazir*—overly distant from the community. Others may resent our behavior, rightly or wrongly believing that we view ourselves as superior or are motivated by self-righteousness. Furthermore, such extreme, and especially puritanical, behavior is often intended not only as a method of personal refinement but as a means to propagate a specific religious or ethical example. Ultimately, extremism often serves to alienate rather than encourage others, making them less receptive to our intended message.

If, in the case of the *nazir*, this type of extremism requires a sin offering, why does the text call the *nazir* holy? The Rema, a 16th-century Polish legalist, cites the future-tense phrase “holy he will be,”⁴ claiming that “the principal holiness of the *nazir* will be in the future, after the completion of the days of *nezirut*; that he will then be capable of moderation.”⁵ The Rema posits that *nezirut* was intended not as an end unto itself, but only as a vehicle to drag a person away from the opposite extreme—his inclination to sin; and that the holiness is to be found in the middle path achieved at its conclusion.

As social justice activists, we may, on occasion, be overcome with a zeal for righteousness that is both unsustainable and counterproductive, in that extreme and isolationist behavior can alienate others from the very causes we are attempting to promote. If we follow the Rema's interpretation of the *nazir*, we may later develop a more moderate, nuanced approach, allowing us to work with the community rather than in isolation. There, in the complexity and contradictions of an integrated worldly and communal life, can we find true holiness and our best hope for effecting change.



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⁴ Bamidbar 6:5.

⁵ Rema, Torat Ha'olah, chapter 71.

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