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Spiritual Specialization

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

At 176 pesukim, Parshat Naso "tops the charts" as the longest parsha in the entire Torah. Its heft is a product of the protracted final section of Naso which delineates the gifts of the twelve nesi'im or tribal leaders. Even though their gift-packages were identical, the Torah enumerates each and every one of the twelve collections. Evidently, there is a deeper lesson to this "gift-giving"- a lesson important enough to justify extensive repetition of seemingly redundant information.

Commenting on this pageant of gifts, the Midrash portrays the mindset of the respective leaders as they offered their tributes. Each tribe possessed a unique talent and a distinct historical calling. These traits and tendencies had been announced by their patriarch, Ya'akov, and the tribes had preserved these different "identities" for hundreds of years. Finally, these mishkan-gifts presented an opportunity to express these tribal ambitions and dreams. The gifts symbolized their tribal hopes for future roles in Jewish History.

For example, Yehuda anticipated a future as monarchs and the rounded plates of silver denoted their projected expansive global kingdoms. Zevulun, for their part, were sea merchants and, to them, the plates implied the vast oceans upon which they would sail to assure a commercial "stream" for the rest of the nation. The population of Reuven took great historical pride in having served as "first responders" during the sale of Yosef. Viewing themselves as national heroes, they viewed the plates of silver as a symbolic encapsulation of their heroism. The Hebrew word for plate is "ke'ara"; the letters of this word, if scrambled, can be conjugated to form the word 'ikar' which would suggest 'primary or principal' and would depict their role as early interveners. Ironically, the very same silver plates represented monarchy for the tribe of Yehuda, seafaring for the tribe of Zevulun and heroic first response for the tribe of Reuven. Though, to the naked eye their gifts seemed identical, they resonated with different symbolism for each distinct tribe.

This phenomenon provides an important dual lesson about religious growth. Each tribe took pride in their unique calling and their unique talents. Too often, we adopt one universal standard of religious excellence and attempt to stretch it collectively. Naturally, people are endowed with very different talents and interests and authentic religious identity is better achieved when those unique personal talents are developed and channeled for religious growth. Often we hear a story about a gadol and the inspiring trait which they modeled. Almost immediately that trait becomes "gold standard" or the "paradigm" which everyone is expected to aspire to. It is completely valid to deeply admire a trait in another while appreciating our individualism and acknowledging that this trait may not be ideal for our lives and for our religious ambitions. During the era of prophecy, personal interviews with prophets would conclude with personal guidance based on each person's unique character and individual personality. This assessment would assist each individual in developing a personal program of religious experience. Sadly, we no longer have access to supernatural character assessment, but identifying and assessing our own individual personality and traits is no less crucial in constructing genuine religious identity.

What is true on an individual level may also be true at a communal level. No particular community or ideology is perfect, and each community adopts different and hopefully complementary agendas. Proposing one single communal pattern ignores the reality that no

single community can fully encompass the entire gamut of interests and agendas. Each community excels uniquely at its own 'project' and adopts norms which may be beneficial for that community but irrelevant or even counterproductive for another. Sometimes we disparage "other" communities

because they don't meet a particular objective standard without sufficiently appreciating their own 'individual' or 'particular' trajectories. This Midrash highlights a nation of specialists – each tribe specializing in their particular area of national and religious mission. It reminds us of the value of religious specialization.

However, despite their marked differences and despite their specialized roles, each leader offered an identical gift. When expressing our individualism we crave difference and ultimately distinction. We sometimes feel suffocated by conforming to behaviors and cultural mores of others. Human beings have a deep-seated desire to act differently and express their individualism through unique personal action and behaviors. Sometimes the pursuit of individualism yields vanity and self-promotion. In our attempts to assert our independence and individualism, we often loudly announce our personalities and compromise the dignity of privacy.

The tribal leaders provide an important second lesson- individual and personalized identity can be expressed through identical "practice". Even though the external activities may seem duplicate, these activities can be motivated by very different motivations and narratives. Preserving our individualism doesn't demand dissimilar behavior or vastly differing "expressions". It is possible to homogenize behavior and actions without suffocating emotional individualism. While donating the exact same gift, the leaders of Naso were driven by a range of different motivations and aspirations. Their identical gifts created grandeur and decorum while avoiding the one-upsmanship which could have ruined the harmony of the mishkan induction.

As we seek individual experience we musn't underestimate the value of social conformity and cohesion. All too often, people from more diverse communities assume that members of more conforming communities are all identical, and lack any individualism. When communities adopt common dress codes this assumption of conformism becomes even more strident but remains largely inaccurate. Though conforming social modes do encourage group-think and less personal expression, individual experience still surges under the mask of conforming social mores. Each person and each community struggles to strike a balance between individualism and collectivism. We should avoid simplistic assumptions based on "optics" without carefully understanding and appreciating personal journey for identity which are undertaken by humans across the social and religious spectrums.

"And He Will Grant You Peace" - On Faith and Trust

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

The ancient words of Priestly Blessings resonate strongly still today. May G-d bless you and guard you; May He shine the light of His countenance upon you and endow you with grace; May Hashem lift His countenance to you, וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם, and grant you peace (Bamidbar 6:24-26).

As our world seems to descend further and further into chaos, we pray for peace, as we longingly await the day when the ultimate fulfillment of these blessings will be realized, with peace for our world, our people, our Land and our City of Peace.

And in the interim, we hold onto our faith, knowing that the RS"O has a master plan, and kol d'avid Rachmanah l'tav avid - all the Merciful One does is for the best (see Brachos 60b).

The Chazon Ish (Rav Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, zt'l, 1878-1953), in his classic work Emunah u'Bitachon, teaches, "There is an old misconception rooted in the hearts of many when it comes to the concept of trust in Hashem (bitachon). This term, used by the righteous to name a celebrated and central character trait, has undergone a change, and has mistakenly become a term to describe the obligation to believe in any situation a person finds himself in where he faces an undecided future with two ways apparent - one good and the other not - that surely the good outcome will be the one to occur; if one is doubtful and fears the possibility of the opposite of good occurring, he is lacking in trust in Hashem.

"This understanding of trust is not correct, for as long as the future has not been revealed through prophecy, the future is not decided, for who knows Hashem's judgements and rewards?

"No - trusting in Hashem is not that, but rather the belief that nothing happens by chance, and that everything

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that occurs under the sun is the result of a decree of the Almighty" (Emunah u'Bitachon, Perek 2, Bitachon).

Jews are a ma'amin bnei ma'amin - believers, the sons of believers. We live by our faith and trust, knowing Hashem's plan - not ours - will be the one to unfold. And we daven, hope and pray, that it will be for revealed good, יְבָרֶכְךָ ה', וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ, that Hashem will bless us and guard us.

On faith, R' Dr. Norman Lamm z'l teaches, "The fact remains that faith is a very hazy concept, and that its causes and effects are not always understood…

"The first thing to be said about faith is that it makes life livable. Without faith in G-d, life is neither intelligible nor worth enduring… Life without faith is a dull, mechanical, meaningless routine. With it, life takes on meaning… With faith, life is a song; without it - a dirge. With it, life is a smile; without it - a smirk. With faith there is enough laughter in life to buoy a man up so he can ride the waves of adversity; without that faith, he must inevitably sink, pulled down by the dead-weight of drudgery. Without faith, life is dull and boring and desperate and hopeless; with it, you have cheer and hope and firmness and equanimity.

"But it would be a sad mistake if we were to think that this is the only or major reason for faith… This leads to our second point, which is this: While it is true that faith leads to song, that religion gives a man security and peace of mind and peace of soul, the real and compelling reason for belief in G-d is truth… Religion should not be accepted because it gives man a sense of security, anesthetizes his complexes and bolsters his ego; rather it should be accepted because of a firm belief that its teachings are true and its principles are correct.

"… The famed Hasidic rebbe, Reb Moshe Leib Sassover (d.1807), in one of his piquant remarks, once observed, "How easy is it for a poor man to depend on G-d - what else does he have to depend upon? And how hard for a rich man to believe in G-d - all his possessions cry out to him: Believe in us!" If religion is to become only a matter of security and peace of mind, then religion is only for the poor, the insecure, and the weak-minded. Our understanding of faith and religion, however, is such that it is for all people, for the wealthy and the happy and the well-adjusted, as well as for all others…

"The third and last point that must be made is that we must apply the Jewish test of what it accomplishes. The test of faith is the behavior that it produces. As long as man's faith exists in a vacuum it is meaningless… When a world is unsettled, when waves of hate and enmity and sadism flood entire continents, when storm-clouds gather ominously on the horizons, when the smell of war and the stench of genocide again are felt, when the enemy of all decency and the self-confessed assassin of the divine in mankind is in the ascendancy, when your people again face extinction, when persecution and discrimination and bigotry rule the minds of human beings, then, least of all, is the time for profession of faith… if the seas of hate and cynicism are flooding your world, then go ahead, stretch out your hand and save all who can be saved. If there is but one individual who needs your help, then your task is not to talk of faith, but to lend a helping hand… Forget the preaching, get down to practice. Forget sentiments, show results. Don't talk of how religious you really are until you live a religious life. For only then does faith become meaningful… (We must proceed from) 'ani ma'amin - I believe', to 'hineni mukhan umezuman lekaym - behold I am prepared and ready to fulfill' (Derashot LeDorot, Exodus, The Meaning of Faith, p.79-84).

The world around us is in flames… a global pandemic, political insecurity, the rise of anti-semitism, riots destroying cities, businesses, property, our sense of security and stability. Once again, we are reminded that ain lanu al mi li'hi'sha'ain, elah al Avinu she'ba'shomayim - we have no one upon whom to rely, only upon our Father in heaven.

Let us pray for the day when וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם will finally be realized, in its truest sense. And until that great day, let us live and practice by our trust and faith in G-d, come what may.

With heartfelt tefilos for better times, בברכת בשורות טובות ושבת שלום.

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Rabbi Dr. Lamm's Balanced Perspective

Rabbi Sammy Bergman

The importance of nuance and balance feature prominently in the thought of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l, who passed away this past Sunday. In the toxic societal climate following the horrific killing of George Floyd, and the violent protests that have followed, it's worth reflecting on Rabbi Lamm's articulate, balanced, Torah perspectives on the difficult issues of activism, violence, and racism.

Activism

In his derashah for Bamidbar in 1968, Rabbi Lamm addressed worldwide protests by university students, exploring the Jewish notion of law and order. In Rabbi Lamm's vision, the diglei midbar, the majestic procession of the tribes of Israel as they sojourned through the desert, represented the notion of order. "The peregrinations of the Israelites through the great desert of Sinai was not to be a helter-skelter rush of an unruly mob; it was to be an orderly march of the hosts of the Lord who follow His direction in the prescribed manner." The Torah understands that the alternative to an orderly society is chaotic anarchy. For this reason, despite the unscrupulous behavior of kings during his lifetime, Rabbi Chanina instructed in Avot (3:2): "Pray for the peace of the kingdom, for if not for its fear, each man would swallow his neighbor alive."

Nevertheless, Rabbi Lamm contended that Judaism doesn't require submission to bad government. After all, Moshe began his career by destroying the unjust Egyptian empire. Rather, we need to balance our. support for authority over chaos, with protests against the imperfections of an unjust society. "There must always be an equilibrium between law and freedom, between system and spontaneity, between order and liberty, between rigidity and fluidity. But at no times must we ever submit to either of the extremes: tyranny on the one hand, or anarchy on the other."

Violence

In his derashah for Beha'alotcha that year, Rabbi Lamm noted that Yaakov, father of the Jewish people, bitterly castigated Shimon and Levi for using weapons of death, which a midrash (Bereishit Rabbah 98:5) label as more appropriate for Esav. In Rabbi Lamm's words: "When a Jew takes up weapons, he is indulging in an un-Jewish theme; he is appropriating what is more in accord with the character of an Eisav."

Nevertheless, Rabbi Lamm argued that Judaism doesn't subscribe to pacifism. Jewish law allows for the death penalty, and for killing murderous attackers in self-defense. This conflict between accepting and condemning violence is expressed by Rashi (Commentary to Bereishit 32:8), who explains that while preparing for an encounter with Esav, Yaakov was afraid lest he be killed and distressed lest he have to kill Esav. Yaakov saw both excessive restraint and excessive retaliation as morally reprehensible.

Racism

In his derashah for Vayera in 1966, Rabbi Lamm quoted Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, who contrasted Adam and Avraham. Rabbi Lamm explained that both Adam and Avraham had guilty consciences - Adam for eating from the Tree of Knowledge, and Avraham for neglecting to invite any but the greatest members of society to the feast he made upon weaning Yitzchak. [See Kav HaYashar, Chapter 10.] However, while Adam hid from his bad conscience, Avraham harnessed it to overcome the challenge of Akeidat Yitzchak.

Rabbi Lamm used this idea to broach the topic of racism in the Jewish community. He argued that while Jews weren't responsible for the status of the African-American community in the United States, the Jewish community did participate in an economy which thrived upon the exploitation of minorities, and shared deeply held prejudices against those minorities.

How should the Jewish community respond to our guilty conscience? Once again Rabbi Lamm presented a nuanced approach. We cannot dedicate our whole lives to the civil right movement while ignoring the preservation of our own community. However, we cannot simply shift our feeling of guilt toward others. Rather, we must attempt to address the problems of racism in our community in a constructive way.

Tragedies such as the death of George Floyd often inspire extreme stances on complex issues. Let us instead follow Rabbi Lamm's example and respond passionately, effectively, and thoughtfully.

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The Ordeal of the Sotah — Barbaric or Enlightened?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's Torah portion, Naso, with 176 verses, is the longest parasha of the Torah, and always follows the festival of Shavout. Coincidentally, the longest chapter in the Book of Psalms, chapter 119, also contains 176 verses, and the longest tractate of the Talmud, Baba Batra, consists of 176 folios (2-sided pages), as well. On this Shabbat, the first Shabbat after celebrating Shavuot and the receiving of the Torah, the Jewish people show their great love and passion for Torah by extending their Torah reading, demonstrating their unwillingness to bring the study of Torah to an end.

Parashat Naso has many interesting and important themes, but certainly one of the most controversial topics in the entire Torah is the topic of the סוֹטָה "Sotah," the woman who is suspected of being unfaithful to her husband.

At first blush, this portion seems quite similar to the parallel laws found in the Code of Hammurabi, which read:

If the finger is pointed at the wife of a citizen on account of another man, but she has not been caught lying with another man, for her husband's sake–she shall throw herself into the river.

In our Torah portion, if a woman is suspected of being unfaithful to her husband, but hasn't been caught in the act, the woman doesn't drown herself, but, instead, is brought by her jealous husband to the Kohain, the priest, to the Tabernacle. A special sacrifice, symbolic of her straying, is brought for her, and she is forced to drink holy water from an earthen bowl, containing dust from the Tabernacle floor and the scrapings of ink that have been scraped from the writings on a parchment scroll containing a terrible curse. If the woman were guilty of adultery, she would die from the drink. If innocent, she would live and become pregnant. All this seems very similar to the barbaric trials and ordeals of medieval times, to which women were subjected to prove their guilt or innocence.

But, truth is, that the test of the Sotah, when properly understood, is hardly barbaric at all. To the contrary, it is quite enlightened when studied in the light of the Talmudic commentaries and the Jewish legal codes, and is intended to greatly benefit the suspected adulteress.

The Talmud points out that the Torah verses indicate that the husband's accusations of his wife's infidelity are not groundless or contrived. The verses imply, and the Talmud amplifies, that the woman had been seen by witnesses in a compromising position (secluding herself with another man behind closed doors) even after her husband had taken legal action to warn his wife not to be associated with the suspected paramour. What this implies, is not necessarily the woman's guilt, but that the marriage was already in trouble, and that the woman had definitely given her husband ample and legitimate reason for suspicion. The real question is, can this marriage be saved?

In light of modern psychology, we know that suspicion of infidelity is one of the most corrosive, and destructive elements in a marriage. In fact, once suspicion has entered into the marital relationship, it is so pernicious that it can hardly ever be eliminated. While some husbands or wives might forgive a spouse's indiscretions, the suspicion usually lingers, and often festers, and, in most instances, a meaningful subsequent relationship becomes virtually impossible.

The Torah, through the ritual of Sotah, provides a Heavenly mandated method to heal the suspicion, and to provide the couple that wishes to repair their relationship the ability to start afresh without the taint of suspicion, since G-d Himself testifies that the woman is guiltless.

In fact, argue the rabbis, only a guiltless woman who wishes to save her marriage, would go through the ritual, either because of her love for her children, or because she realizes that she had, indeed, misled her husband. On the other hand, a woman, guilty or not, even after she had been accused, could choose not to subject herself to the ordeal, by opting out of the marriage and declaring that she wants a divorce. Since there is no concrete evidence that she has ever committed adultery, even a guilty woman is not punished. That is why a guilty woman would never go through the ritual, even though the whole test might very well be a Divine "psychosomatic" examination, resulting in true physical manifestations.

The Talmud tells us that, remarkably, the innocent woman who was subjected to the ordeal will not emerge from the trial tainted or degraded. In fact, she will emerge blessed, and will become a source of pride for the community, since her chastity has been confirmed by G-d.

What about the man? The Talmud tells us that if the

accusing husband had been guilty of any infidelity, this ritual would not work on his wife. And, if the woman were guilty, and would die from the Sotah drink, her paramour, her lover, would somehow die as well. But, on the other hand, there is no comparable test for men suspected of being unfaithful since men are not given the benefit of the doubt, as are woman.

We today, live in a very complex and confused environment, with much too much improper and immoral behavior. Almost 50% of American marriages terminate in divorce, for one reason or another, and an even higher percentage of second marriages fail. Once suspicion sets in, there is little recourse to rebuild the trust that has been shattered. Once faithfulness has been questioned, in most cases, it is, almost always, downhill.

Should we pray for the restoration of the Sotah ritual? Well, I don't know, since it only functioned in a chaste society, and ours is certainly not worthy. But, I do believe that the many fascinating truths and insights that are to be found in the complex ritual of Sotah are worthy of examination and consideration. Surely, we should not be quick to ridicule, condemn, and dismiss the lessons to be gleaned from the ritual of the Sotah.

Thematic Tie-Ins in Torah – More than Meets the Eye

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

When studying Chumash, one is naturally motivated to develop an understanding of the unique episodes and commandments by isolating one particular commandment and analyzing it, or delving into a specific story and attempting to comprehend its ideas. Yet another methodological issue confronts us when trying to tie together two seemingly unrelated commandments or stories, demonstrating a thematic continuity in the Torah. More often than not, both the Talmud and various commentators on Torah offer possibilities as to why subject A follows subject B. And often, a cursory reading of these correlations seems to raise even more questions than answers. The Torah portion of Naso is no exception.

The Torah introduces us to the laws of the sotah (Bamidbar 5:12):

"Speak to Bnei Yisroel and say to them: If any man's wife goes astray and acts treacherously toward him.

Rashi (based on Berachot 63a) comments as follows:

"What is written [immediately] above this subject? 'A man's sacred objects shall be his.' (ibid 5:10) [This implies that] If you withhold the kohein's gifts, then by your life! You will find it necessary to visit him, to bring the sotah to him."

Rashi is referring to the end of the previous section, where the Torah emphasizes the requirement to bring the matnot kahuna, the priestly presents, (i.e. teruma) to the kohanim. Commenting on that previous verse, Rashi explains that the phrase, "a man's sacred objects shall be his," is referring to someone who chooses not to give any of his produce to the kohen.

So, according to Rashi, the tie-in is as follows: A person who fails to give the required produce to the kohen will be meeting up with the kohen soon enough due to a sotah situation. Clearly, this causal relationship seems to be lacking in intellectual efficacy.

The Ibn Ezra offers a different possibility as to the relationship between the two sections. He writes (ibid 5:12 "and the reason..."):

"The reason for the sotah is 'וּמָעֲלָה בוֹ מָעַל' "

This seems quite vague.

Rather than looking at the end of the previous section, the Ibn Ezra turns to the beginning of that section, where the Torah uses the similar terminology-- "לִמְעֹל מַעַל בַּד' " -- in reference to the general sin of the individual and the need to bring a sacrifice. Earlier (Vayikra 5:21), where the Torah first uses this expression, the Ibn Ezra (ibid "לִמְעֹל מַעַל בַּד' ") explains that it refers to the violation of commandments between a person and his fellow man--בין אדם לחבירו.

The Ibn Ezra's correlation can be boiled down to one notion--the use of these same terms implies a central theme or concept. What exactly is this idea? How does one incorporate the overall sin between a person and his fellow man with the sotah?

As noted above, leaving these tie-ins without any deeper explanation is problematic. There are those who tend to take these commentators literally, as if just reading their words somehow leads to a greater understanding of Torah. However, without delving deeper, asking the necessary and obvious questions and applying a rational approach

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to comprehending these important ideas, the deeper concepts these great talmidei chachamim are teaching us remain hidden.

Looking at Rashi, we see a focus on the problem of the individual not setting aside the necessary food for the kohen. An understanding of the flaw of this individual might set the stage for the tie-in. Why might a person be unwilling to give to the kohen? It could be that this individual sees no problem in bringing his sacrifices to the Beit Hamikdash – this is not where he has resistance. Furthermore, he understands the kohanim have a job to do. His distortion emerges in his view of their role—it is strictly utilitarian, a practical role, a job like any other. Everyone has a job – farmer, accountant, doctor. The kohen is no different, his job being to administer the functions of the Bais Hamikdash. Why should the kohen be deserving of his produce? In essence, this individual views the relationship between Bnai Yisrael and the kehuna as a purely functional dependency. Herein lies his flaw. The role of the kohen is qualitatively different from any position that exists within Bnai Yiarael in that they act to bring people to a higher state of perfection. Whether through korbanos and kapara, identifying tzaraas and the flaw of lashon hara, teaching the nation Torah (an often over looked primary role of the kohanim), or rectifying the dysfunction brought about through the situation of sotah (through her drinking of the waters), the kohen is always functioning to guide the Jewish people on the road of being ovdei Hashem. The dependency is a metaphysical one, and the individual who does not give his produce to the kohen is, by definition, denying this role. It is interesting to note that these are referred to as matnos kehuna – the gifts of the kohen. One gives a gift to someone else in part because he values the other person. With the kohen, giving this food is not charity. It is recognition of the value of the system of the kehuna. It is when the individual sees the role of the kohen affecting his own perfection, such as in the case of the sotah, that the clear understanding of this role can emerge.

There could be one more additional element Rashi is offering us. The situation of sotah is always the result of a damaged relationship between husband and wife. A marriage, in Jewish theology, is not to be viewed as a functional phenomenon, existing merely to satisfy one's physical needs. The role of husband and wife is to help perfect one another, to bring one another to a higher level in their pursuit of the derech Hashem. When one views marriage as merely functional, the stage is set for the suspicion of sotah to emerge. Therefore, Rashi might be intimating that there is a subtle common issue between resistance to matnos kehuna and the emergence of sotah.

The Ibn Ezra offers a different possibility. He focuses on the repetition of language, concluding that this is what creates the relationship between the two sections. He explains that:

" לִמְעֹל מַעַל בַּד ' " refers to sins between mankind. In general, the defect that leads to the violation of these commandments emerges from a misguided sense of self importance. Once an individual views himself as superior to the rest of society, he will engage in these actions that destroy the social fabric crucial to the existence of Bnai Yisrael. The Ibn Ezra is explaining that the very issue that directs one to the violation of בין אדם לחבירו leads to the dysfunctional marriage associated with sotah. It is true that the nature of the relationship between husband and wife is of a completely different nature from the bond between an individual and society and one might therefore deduce that two different flaws exist that lead to the problems within each. Not so, says the Ibn Ezra. The inflated ego, the distorted view of the self, is the common defect. Therefore, it is more than the use of the same terminology that creates the relationship; the common flaw that leads to these issues is what ties the two parshiyos together.

The above is just one example of how analysis is a crucial component when studying the words of the commentators on Torah. Without this analysis, it is easy to miss the fundamental ideas that we are meant to glean, not just from the content of the Torah, but also the context within which that content is placed. The commentators offer more than just cursory explanations of what is occurring and it is imperative that we, in our pursuit of greater learning and yediyas Hashem, delve into the minds of these great talmidei chachamim and bring to light their brilliant ideas

.

Situational Control

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

The struggle for self-control is one of the most important, hardest-fought battles of all time. Unfortunately, there are many casualties, and our will often loses to temptation. To become a Nazir, we are told in Parshat Naso, one must take a vow, which commits one to abstain from grape products, from defiling oneself to a human corpse and from having one's hair cut. The pasuk uses a strange word to describe the act of vowing, namely, yafli. Ibn Ezra presents two possibilities as to what the word could mean. The first is that it connotes setting oneself apart (yafrish). The second is that it means wonder (pelah). Most people just give into their temptation. The Nazir's commitment to self-control, Ibn Ezra argues, is so rare and powerful as to be called wondrous. On the one hand, the Nazir inspires us to have more self-control, and on the other, reminds us that most people fail, or even worse, don't even try.

The topic that immediately precedes that of Nazir, is that of Sotah. A woman whose husband warns her in front of witnesses not to seclude herself with another man, and she does so anyways, must go through the Sotah ceremony to determine whether she committed adultery. Intrigued by the juxtaposition of these two otherwise seemingly different concepts, the Midrash proposes a connection. Nazir comes after Sotah because anyone who witnesses the downfall of the Sotah will be so dedicated to avoiding such demise, that he or she will commit to not drinking any wine out of fear that wine could lead to adultery.

The connection the Midrash is making between Nazir and Sotah is not tangential or coincidental. It is revealing the core message behind both concepts. The ideal way to deal with temptations, both the mitzvah of Sotah and the mitzvah of Nazir are telling us, is by avoiding the battle in the first place. To avoid becoming a Sotah, don't put yourself in an environment that is conducive to sin. This includes not drinking wine as well as avoiding situations of seclusion that are more primed for temptation. Along comes the parsha of Nazir and the idea becomes intensified. Usually the Sages are responsible for implementing additional restrictions as fences and barriers to protect Biblical commandments but the case of the Nazir is one of the few examples where the Torah itself provides added restrictions serving to protect the original law. Don't just avoid wine, but avoid any grape products. Don't just avoid grape products, but avoid even approaching a vineyard!

In a 2016 article entitled "Situational Strategies for Self-Control," Dr. Angela Duckworth argues that situational strategies are the most salient and effective ones to avoid self-control failures, yet they are also the most underappreciated and underutilized. We often take the battle against temptation head on and eventually lose to that delicious looking piece of chocolate cake. We think we will be able to study, but become powerless to avoid the allure of our phones. The smartest and most effective strategy is to not buy the chocolate cake in the first place and to leave our phone off when we want to focus.

Yes, the struggle for self-control is a difficult one, but perhaps we are going about it all wrong. Fighting a head-to-head battle between willpower and temptation is only a last resort. Many have fallen in the heat of passion or the intenseness of an emotion. The better way, learning from the Sotah's mistakes and taking the lead from the Nazir, is to avoid the battle in the first place. Avoid temptations and situations that could lead to sin. In so doing, perhaps we can have better luck in succeeding in our self-control goals and become happier, healthier, and more spiritually refined people.

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