

Parashat Naso
May 29, 2015

Shabbat Shalom.

This week has been the kind of week where I really need Shabbat. Nothing devastating happened, just a lot of chaos that if I were tweeting, I would need to tag with “#firstworldproblems”. With even a small dose of perspective, the problems become embarrassing to complain about. BUT, as they added up, one on top of another, the frustration got a bit overwhelming.

In the midst of any one of our mini-crisises, it would have been easy to shut down, make extreme promises / threats, and emote unhealthily. And...it's possible that some of that might have actually happened, possibly directed at the Comcast customer service representative...

Even the most emotionally stable people have a tendency to trend towards the borders of extremism when a core value is compromised, when our perceived sense of justice is challenged, and when our expectations, however mundane they are, are not met. When we expect to be able to control something and we can't, it is a natural reaction to attempt to assert any power that we do have, in any way we are able.

We're seeing this happen in Israel right now. The controversy of the week is that the Rabbanut, Israel's increasingly right-wing religious

governing body, is flexing its muscles and threatening to discredit Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, the modern-Orthodox chief rabbi of Efrat, for trying to ease the conversion process for so many Jews. He is still very much within the bounds of Halacha, generally accepted Jewish law. He is just doing it outside of the very strict bounds of the Rabbanut. Thus, his very presence, and certainly his **reliability to** regular Israelis, is a threat to the Rabbanut's sense of self and purpose.

Political pundits will say that this is a power play - an attempt by the Rabbanut to grasp even more power, to demonstrate that there is actually only one way to be Jewish and it is their way. Originally established as a (mostly) apolitical body, since the 1970's the Rabbanut has increasingly become entangled in political matters. More recently, there have been outside concentrated efforts to reform the Rabbanut - to widen the circle of rabbis allowed to perform marriages in Israel, to ease the requirements of conversion allowing thousands of immigrants from the former Soviet Union to be able to convert to the religion for which they were persecuted, and to broaden the role of women in Judaism. *None of which, by the way, goes so far as to recognize me as a rabbi in Israel, able to be employed by the same governmental agencies as mainstream Orthodox rabbis nor for us to pray together as an egalitarian community at the Western Wall.* There is a constant push and pull - the more one side pushes, the more the other side pulls.

So while the political perspective is that this is a fight about power, the emotional / psychological perspective is clear that this is about vulnerability. As each small inroad is made against the rabbinat's power, their response is to dig their heels in deeper, in an effort to protect all that they know to be right and true.

It is natural that, when feeling vulnerable and when your sense of moral authority is challenged, that we would lean towards extreme actions and attitudes.

We see similar extreme behavior in this week's Torah portion, with the laws of the Nazarite - a person who makes a vow of asceticism.

There is no judgement presented in the Torah - just "when" the inevitable happens and the Nazarite takes a vow, we're told how he or she should fulfill it. And when the vow ends, we're told that the Nazir needs to bring a sin offering to the Temple.

The natural question is, why a sin offering? And that, clearly, has been a debate among rabbis for centuries. On one side, Rabbi Elazar and Nahmanides say that the Nazarite is worthy of praise. He (or she!) has voluntarily chosen a higher level of holiness, a level of extreme living,

giving up many of the pleasures of life. So the sin offering is brought when the Nazir now returns to ordinary life - the sin offering is for the sin of ceasing to be a nazirite.

The other side of the argument, held by Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappar and Shmuel (both Talmudic rabbis), is that the sin is becoming a nazirite in the first place. God created the world and declared it to be good, and the Nazir is rejecting that which God created.

Rabbi Eliezer added: “From this, we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life”.

While not *really* the same debate, the debate between the Rabbanut and Rabbi Riskin is a debate over what should be permissible and what should be forbidden. Whether or not holiness is achievable while being permissive.

So it is interesting to look at what Maimonides thinks of this debate. On the surface, Maimonides falls on the side of calling the Nazir a sinner, explaining that a person should always be moderate in his actions and not be too extreme.

However, in this week's Torah commentary, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that the Maimonides has a more nuanced position. He lays out two very different ways of living a moral life - the way of the saint (the *hassid*) and the way of the sage (the *hacham*).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes these two perspectives:

The sage follows the "golden mean," the "middle way." The moral life is a matter of moderation and balance, charting a course between too much and too little. Courage, for example, lies midway between cowardice and recklessness. Generosity lies between carelessly wasting money and being stingy.

The saint, by contrast, does not follow the middle way. He or she tends to extremes, fasting rather than simply eating in moderation, embracing poverty rather than acquiring modest wealth, and so on.

Rabbi Sacks explains that even though Maimonides generally endorses moderation, there are various points in this writing where he explains why people might embrace extremes. One of his reasons is repentance and character transformation. A person might cure himself of pride by practicing, for a while, extreme self-abasement. Another reason is the lure of the surrounding culture, that may be so opposed to religious

values, that pious people choose to separate themselves from the wider society...differentiating themselves by their extreme behavior.

And thus we have the question of the Nazir. Is this an alcoholic making a decision to remove herself from any and all alcohol? Or someone who has decided that all evil is caused by drinking and thus won't go near it? Is this a chemo-survivor deciding to embrace his newly grown hair and leave it uncut? Or is this a certain Biblical character who deeply believes that his entire physical strength comes from the length of his hair?

Which is the sin that the Nazir is committing - becoming a nazirite at all or giving it up? Both. For the alcoholic, the vow of abstinence from liquor is appropriate and the end of that vow could have disastrous consequences. Hence, a sin offering. But for someone so fearful of the potential of alcohol that they give it up (or any thing else they abstain from), making the extreme choice instead of living life in moderation is the sin.

My hope for each of us (and for the Rabbanut!) is that we are able to find that right balance, not only avoiding behavior that would require a sin-offering, but acting in a way that allows us to appreciate all that is good in this world that God created.

Shabbat Shalom.

