

Parashat Naso 5780

Shabbat Shalom.

This Shabbat's portion, *Naso*, contains within it the laws concerning a Nazirite. A *Nazir*, or Nazirite in English, is someone who takes a vow to add additional restrictions upon him or herself particularly not drinking alcoholic beverages or any product of grapes and not cutting one's hair or shaving. The Torah and the Jewish tradition have an ambivalent attitude towards the Nazir. On the one hand, the tradition sees the extra level of piety as praiseworthy, on the other hand, at the end of the period of the Nazirite vow (which usually was 30 days long), the Nazirite had to bring a sin offering. If they were doing something praiseworthy, why offer a sin offering at the end?

Different commentators offered different explanations. Some saw it as sinful to not enjoy the world that G!d had created. The Torah characterized creation as good in the opening chapter of Genesis. Others thought that it was likely that the *Nazir* took on extra restrictions out of guilt for something excessive they had done that they were now responding to by doing something excessive via self-restrictions.

Devotion can be a wonderful thing. I tend to admire people who can devote themselves to something such as great artists or writers who are so committed to their art, great scholars that are so committed to learning, or anyone actually who devotes her/himself to something that contributes positively to the world. It's easy to overlook what their personal lives might be like. What do they sacrifice in order to devote themselves to whatever it is they devote themselves to? Devotion in itself is not necessarily a positive thing – it all depends on what the person devotes herself or himself to. Is it something worthy of devotion?

Balance and moderation is a great thing. Maimonides, following Aristotle in this regard, believed greatly in moderation. However even moderation is a relative thing. What is moderation to one person might be truly excessive for someone else.

Generally the Haftarah, a portion from one of the books of the second main component of the Bible, the Prophets (*Nevi'im*), parallels or echoes something in the *parasha*. The Haftarah for this Shabbat comes from the book of Judges, *Shoftim*, and begins the story of Samson. Samson was dedicated from birth to being a lifelong *nazir*. His name in Hebrew is *Shimshon*. Every name in the Bible has significance, in other words, the meaning of the name (deriving

from its three letter root), usually has a connotation that's relevant to the person's role. *Shimshon* could be seen as related to the word *shemesh* which means "sun" or it could be related to the word *shamash*, one who serves or attends to something, somewhat distorted in Yiddish as the *shames* (also the name for the "helper" candle in the Chanukah menorah).

I have a different relationship to Samson than someone who reads the Biblical account. First I should also mention that in Hebrew a number of characters have appellations that supplement their names. For example, Moses is not merely Moshe, but Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our rabbi or teacher). Abraham is not simply Avraham, but Avraham Avinu (Abraham our father). Samson is not merely Shimshon, but Shimshon HaGibor. Gibor could mean "the powerful one," but it could in addition mean "the hero."

My parents did not read to me bedtime stories as a child. Rather my father would tell me stories. Among the stories he told me were three strongmen stories: Houdini, Breitbart, and Samson. All of these stories emphasized Jews as powerful and as heroes. (I will assume that no one reading this will have heard of Zisha Breitbart. He was a Polish Jewish strongman who would go from town to town and do strongman shows – wrapping steel bars around his arm like Tefillin, lifting incredibly heavy objects, etc. My father and his brothers had all seen him perform when he came to their town in Poland.

The stories of judges, of shoftim, in the Tanakh are very interesting. The word Shofet, judge, also has to do with doing justice. Abraham, Avraham Avinu, when he's advocating for Sodom and arguing with G!d about not destroying the city in case there are righteous people living in it says: "Shall the judge of all the earth, not do justice?" *Hashofet kol ha'arets lo ya'aseh mishpat?* But there doesn't seem to me much of that element in the story of Samson. The stories of his power all have to do with his fighting and also his inability to control his desires for Delilah. The root of her name, *dalet, lamed, lamed* could mean "to make weak."

Shimshon is physically strong, but he cannot control himself. He has great power, which could help him serve the people, but doesn't use it for the best. At the end he finally realizes his mistakes and "sees the light" when he has been blinded and is being mocked by the Philistines at some huge gathering in a large building. His final act is bringing down the whole building upon them with himself in it.

But his story and his appellation, Shimshon HaGibor make me think of the statement in Pirkei Avot about "who is a Gibor?" Who is the powerful one? The answer, "*Hakovesh et*

yitzro” the one who conquers himself.” Being powerful doesn’t mean acting out that power necessarily. Just like someone who has attained something significant, does not have to try to convince others by saying how great they themselves are. That is a pretty strong indicator of the opposite.

There are two related qualities to this one that are also mentioned in that same section of Pirkei Avot. It asks “Who is the wise one?” The answer is not the one who tells everyone how smart he is, but rather the person who “learns from everyone.” Not the person who has to be “right” or has to “win” every argument. This also goes back to how do we perceive other people. Do we approach the world as a place where we assume everyone is guilty until proven innocent or the opposite, that everyone is innocent until proven guilty.

I never read “The Diary of Anne Frank” I have to confess. I saw the movie when it came out when I was about seven years old. Nevertheless my impression is that the phrase or sentence that is most memorable from her is the one that says that despite everything that is happening in her life and around her, she still believed that people were basically good at heart.

Near the very beginning of the morning service in the siddur we find the declaration that the soul that G!d created in each of us is pure. This perception, this conviction, determines a lot regarding how we react to various issues – whether we believe that despite the innumerable challenges we face in our world today we will somehow overcome them. This has been a week of enormous challenges. Those of us who believe that given the right conditions the vast majority of people will act according to their better natures can remain hopeful that society can improve, that injustices, no matter how long enduring, can be overcome. Sometimes things can seem so dire, it’s difficult to maintain that hopefulness. At times like that I think of the words of Rebbe Nakhman of Bratzlav, the great-grandson of the Ba’al Shem Tov who exhorted his followers: “*al titya’esh*” (never despair, never give up hope). I also look to the words of Pirkei Avot: “it is not our task to complete the work, but neither may we desist from it.” Some tasks may be too great or too difficult for us to complete, but we are still obligated to be involved in working towards those long term goals.

Wishing you all Shabbat Shalom.

Rabbi Mark