

Parashah One Hundred and Three

Numbers 6:1–21; Judges 13:2–14; Acts 21:17–26

notes by Tim Hegg

The Nazirite Vow

The portion for this week’s reading deals with the Nazirite vow. The word “Nazirite” is נָזִיר (*nazir*) in the Hebrew, and has a base meaning of “separation.” These same consonants make up the word for “crown” or “diadem,” as in the dress of the High Priest (Ex 29:6), which marked him out as separate from the other priests, and sanctified to God (written on the High Priest’s *nezer* was קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה, *kodesh le Adonai*, “Holy to the Lord”). *Nazar* should not be confused with *natzar* (נָצַר), the root word from which the Messianic term “shoot, root” is derived (cf. Is. 11:1).

The purpose for taking a Nazirite vow is not specifically given in our text, but it seems likely that the motivation was a heartfelt need to express a specific or heightened dedication to the Lord. The Sages note that sometimes a wife who longed for a child but was barren would undertake the Nazirite vow. They also encouraged a husband who suspected his wife of unfaithfulness to enter a Nazirite vow (b. *Ber.* 63a) [derived from the fact that the Nazirite portion follows the law of the jealous husband and the bitter waters].

We know from our Apostolic section that the Nazirite vow was practised in the 1st Century, and that followers of Yeshua took the vow of a Nazirite without any sense that it conflicted with their faith in Him. Paul was encouraged by James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem community to help a group of men who were completing the Nazirite vow (Acts 21) and Luke indicates that Paul had taken a Nazirite vow previously (Acts 18:18).

What was involved in a Nazirite vow? The Torah section for today does not specify a minimum or maximum time-frame for the vow, but the Sages fixed the minimum at 30 days (m. *Nazir* 1:3). There was no maximum, as we are aware of those who took the Nazirite vow for life, which is the obvious link to our *haftarah* portion.

The requirements of the Nazirite vow were that one abstain from eating or drinking anything which came from the vine (wine, strong drink, vinegar, grapes, raisins, etc.), abstain from touching any corpse (even a family member), and not cut the hair on one’s head for the length of the vow. Since the hair was to remain uncut during the vow, it was the ruling of the Sages that one was to shave his hair prior to taking the vow. Apparently the length of the hair was to be an indication of the length of the vow. Since a Nazirite would shave his hair before taking the vow, the community could immediately recognize how long he had been under the vow. Thus, when the vow had been completed, the hair is cut and burned in the Temple, dedicating the entire vow to the Lord as a sacrifice.

What is more, the Sages ruled that if a Nazirite vow was taken while residing outside of the Land, it had to be repeated when one entered the Land (m. *Nazir* 3:6). Some think that this may account for Paul having shaved his head and reinstating the vow when he arrived in Jerusalem. But it is more likely that Paul had become ritually unclean through corpse defilement while under a Nazirite vow, in which case he would have been required to cut his hair as our Torah section states (vv. 9-12). If this were the case, he would have had to come to Jerusalem to become ritually pure (through the ashes of the Red Heifer) in order to restart his vow.

Why would any one want to take a Nazirite vow in the first place? When the requirements for a Nazirite vow are considered against the requirements of the priesthood, the parallels are obvious:

perhaps the Nazirite vow was viewed as a way for the person of non-priestly descent to experience drawing near to God even as the High Priest did. For instance, the priesthood was forbidden to drink wine (יַיִן, *yayin*) or strong drink (שֵׁכָר, *shekar*) while serving in the Tabernacle or Temple (Lev 10:9; Num 6:3). The priest was also to avoid contact with the dead (Lev 21:1-4; Num 6:6f), and the High Priest was prohibited from corpse defilement even for his family, just like the Nazirite (Lev 21:11; Num 6:5). Likewise, the priests were not allowed to shave their heads (Lev 21:5, cf. Ezek 44:20; Num 6:5).

This similarity between the Nazirite and the High Priest is likewise noticed in that the crown worn by the High Priest is called a “nezer,” and that he was said to be separated (*nezer*) by virtue of the anointing oil at his ordination (Lev 21:10-12). In our *parashah*, the Nazirite is described as having the “separation to God upon his head” (Num 6:7). Thus, the Nazirite vow allowed the common Israelite to participate in the same sanctification unto God that was expected of the High Priest.

The rigid life of the Nazirite, abstaining from any thing which came from the vine (a symbol of joy), separating himself from any corpse defilement (the normal cycle of life), and letting his hair grow (marking him out as different from everyone else) should not be confused with the ascetic movement of the 3rd and 4th Centuries CE in which the Platonic idea of separation from the material world brought about the monastic orders of the emerging Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the Sages were so concerned that such a connection might be made, that they nearly outlawed the Nazirite vow (cf. *b.Bava Batra* 60b). Many Jews were using the Nazirite vow as a ritual of mourning for the destroyed Temple and thus it looked all too much like the self-abasement of the monastic movement.

But the Nazirite vow was never intended as a means of self-denial in order to afflict one’s soul. Rather, the Nazirite vow made visible the inner desire to identify with the priesthood and the redemption they effected as they ministered “before the Lord,” drawing near to Him in the redemptive act of sacrifice. That the vow was for a specific time with both a beginning and ending ritual indicated that the vow had its fulfillment in a heightened appreciation for the manner in which the priesthood acted as the representative for all Israelites. Indeed, the conclusion of the vow is performed by the priests who offer the necessary sacrifices, including burning the hair of the *nazir*, symbolic of the complete time he had performed the vow. Thus, the self-denial included in the Nazirite vow was for the purpose of identification with the priesthood, indicating a desire for service to God, not self-affliction.

That the conclusion of the vow involved the complete shaving of hair, symbolically returned the *nazir* to the state of a new beginning. Through his dedication to the Lord, and his identification with the priesthood, he had come to a complete rededication of himself to God in all of life’s aspects. But he had also come to a new appreciation for the means by which sinful man could draw near to God: only through the appointed priest. Hair in the ancient world was, in many cultures, a symbol of life. It was not lost on the ancients that hair continued to grow even after death. As such, it was viewed as the place where life remained the longest, and thus a sign of the vitality of life. To offer one’s hair was to offer one’s life, a symbol of complete dedication to the Lord.

The Scriptures record three who were Nazirites for life: Samson (Judges 13:5), Samuel, (1Sam 1:11) and John the Baptizer (Matt 11:18-19). These were set apart as Nazirites prior to birth, all born to women who were otherwise barren. Though not a life-time Nazirite, Joseph is twice referred to as a *nazir* (Gen 49:26; Deut 33:16), and the Sages conclude this is the case because he

vowed not to drink wine as long as he was separated from his brothers (Mid. Rab. *Genesis* 93:7). One cannot help but connect this interpretation to the words of Yeshua at His final seder in which He vows not to drink of the fruit of the vine until He returns to His brethren. Like Joseph, His dedication to the salvation of His people marks His present dedication to serve as our High Priest. The Sages ruled that anyone who vowed to abstain from wine had taken the vow of a *nazir* (m. *Nazir* 1:1-2). That Yeshua had taken such a vow is likewise emphasized by His refusal to take the vinegar offered to Him while upon the execution stake. That the sour wine was put to His lips at the point of His death (John 19:29) indicates that He had accepted the ultimate defilement by death and would therefore need to reinstitute the vow. This may explain His statement after the resurrection that He not be touched since He had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17). Was He speaking of His desire to begin the vow over again? One may reason that this is a possibility, for in the Messiah's resurrection and subsequent ascension, He would function as our High Priest, ministering in the heavenly Tabernacle not made with hands. As such, He would not partake of the fruit of the vine until His priestly work was completed.

How does this affect us today? May we engage in the Nazirite vow in our times? Obviously, one is unable to undergo the Nazirite vow in its completeness apart from the Temple and the Temple priesthood. In modern Israel, the followers of the late Rabbi Kook are known for a kind of "alternative" Nazirite vow in which various *mitzvot* are substituted for the necessary sacrifices at the end of the vow. But from a biblical perspective, while parts of the vow could be accomplished without the Temple and priesthood, the completion of the vow is impossible in our day, and thus its symbolism would be lost. In reality, like all of the sacrifices detailed in the Torah, the Nazirite vow is suspended until the rebuilding of the Temple. This is not to say that the Nazirite vow is somehow in conflict with our faith in Yeshua as the complete and ultimate sacrifice for our sins. For Paul himself became a Nazirite showing that in his mind the ritual in no way conflicted with his faith in the completed work of the Messiah on behalf of His chosen ones.

Our consideration of the Nazirite vow, however, brings to our minds the whole matter of self-dedication to the Lord. Though we cannot properly take upon ourselves the Nazirite vow (since there is no way to complete the vow), the whole matter of one's dedication to God is well worth our contemplation. How dedicated are we to Him? In what ways do we commit ourselves to Him, giving our lives entirely for His service?

The three primary elements of the Nazirite vow are instructive for us as we consider our own dedication to God. Abstaining from the fruit of the vine symbolically marks one's willingness to forego the joys of this life for the sake of the Master. We all know that often one's dedication to a cause involves one's willingness to give up that which is good for the priority of that to which he is called. There is nothing wrong with the fruit of the vine. It is a symbol of joy—something God has given as a blessing. Yet in service to our God, sometimes we are called to forego that which is our right, and even our joy, in order to accomplish the task to which He has called us. This is often the case in relationship with others. As parents we regularly give up that which is rightfully ours in order to bless our children. As husbands and wives we willingly give to our spouse that which we otherwise would keep for ourselves. Indeed, at the heart of what we call "love" is the happy relinquishing of things that would give us joy so that the one we love might be joyful. And in giving we discover an even greater joy. So the Nazirite, in temporarily abstaining from wine, did so in order to find in his dedication a closer communion with God and a joy that only such a dedication could bring.

The separation from corpse defilement also sets the Nazirite apart from the common events of life. While this could only last for a limited period of time, the desire to rise above the death-laden, fallen world, made known the Nazirite's desire for the *'olam haba*, the "world to come," in which death would be swallowed up in victory, and where life would reign supreme. It is worthwhile for us to meditate upon what has been promised to us in the world to come. At times we may be so burdened with the cares of this fallen world that we begin to despair of God's goodness. But He calls us to set our gaze upon the return of our Savior, and the promise of eternal life with Him in a world free from the woes of sin. Paul wrote: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). A part of the hope we have is the promise of our full salvation when our own groaning, and the groaning of the created world itself, will give way to the joys of life lived in the uninterrupted presence of the Almighty.

The fact that the Nazirite was to let his hair grow throughout the period of his vow indicates that his vow would be known publicly. The fact that a woman could also take a Nazirite vow shows how obvious a Nazirite would be in the community, particularly if one followed the ruling that one was to shave one's head entirely at the beginning of the vow. Whether male or female, those undergoing the vow would be clearly recognized in the community. This might teach that one's full dedication to God cannot be hidden within one's own heart or soul. Such a dedication inevitably is seen in one's life—it would be evident to all. The Nazirite vow teaches us that genuine dedication to God is a life changing event. Not in a "holier than thou" kind of hypocrisy but in a genuine dedication to serve the Lord first and foremost—a dedication which tempers the life to walk in holiness unto Him. Such a dedication will necessarily affect all aspects of life, and will draw others to see Him in the life of the one dedicated to His service.

Our Apostolic portion (Acts 21:17–26) relates the story of Paul's return to Jerusalem from his journeys as one sent out (*shaliach*) from the Antioch community. His report to the apostles in Jerusalem was one of great success, for through the message of the Gospel, many Gentiles had come to faith and were being joined to the synagogue communities of The Way. However, Jewish believers who were zealous for the Torah had come to the conclusion that Paul was teaching against the Torah, and that as a result, his work was deficient. Indeed, they had been told that Paul was teaching the Jewish people to abandon their covenant relationship made between God and Israel. We might first ask how such a rumor could have gained any traction. Surely Paul was not guilty of such an accusation, but how could it have been received as credible by the Jewish believers in Jerusalem? It would appear that Paul's strong stand against the prevailing rabbinic teaching, that inclusion into the covenant of Israel was based upon having a "Jewish status," may have been the basis of this rumor against Paul. Since the prevailing viewpoint among the rabbis of Paul's day (as far as we can ascertain) was that only Jews could be in covenant with God, their message to the Gentiles who were interested in worshipping the God of Israel was: "you need to become a Jew" (cf. Acts 15:1). Paul's message was obviously different. He maintained that covenant membership was based upon faith in Yeshua, not on one's bloodline, or gaining "Jewish status" by becoming a proselyte. In preaching this message, it appeared that Paul was speaking against the Jewish leaders and their theology, and this, in turn, was considered to be setting aside the Torah. To say that a Gentile believer, without ever becoming a proselyte, had equal status with the native born Israelite, seemed not only preposterous, but just plain wrong.

But, in fact, Paul was not teaching against the Torah. Like his Master Yeshua, Paul was simply

bringing the Torah back to its original purpose, unwrapping it from the decades of rabbinic interpretations that had all but put the Torah out of the reach of the common man. It is apparent that James and the others understood the reality of the situation. They knew that there was no substance to the allegations against Paul.

But it is instructive to note how James and the apostles intend to prove Paul's innocence in relationship to the rumors that had circulated. They do not frame a written document to send out to all of the communities of The Way, but they ask Paul to *demonstrate* his love for Torah by engaging in a specific *mitzvah*, i.e., helping others fulfill and complete their Nazirite vow. This illustrates a very important point: it is not so much what we say, as what we do, that demonstrates what we honestly believe. Lip service requires no great effort, nor does it prove one's beliefs. Action—what one does, is the true litmus test of what one believes. As our Master taught, it is by the fruit of one's life that one's heart is revealed (Matt 7:20).

In the perspective of James and the elders in Jerusalem, participating in a Temple service involving sacrifices as the manner in which the Nazirite vow would be concluded, in no way went contrary to the Gospel of Yeshua. For them, Paul's involvement with the four men who were completing their vow was in full harmony with a genuine faith in Yeshua as the final and ultimate sacrifice. So we learn from this that the sacrifices of the Temple were not viewed by the early followers of Yeshua as contradictory to a complete faith in His salvific sacrifice upon the execution stake.

We do well to have the same perspective. The sacrifices of the Tabernacle and Temple were never given as a means of having one's sins forgiven in the court of God. They were the divine means for restitution for matters of purities within the community of Israel, and for a demonstration of the ultimate sacrifice that would be offered by Yeshua. They did not compete with the sacrifice of Yeshua, nor will they when they are reinstated in the millennial Temple. They will function in the future in precisely the way they were intended to function from the time of their being instituted at the hand of Moses. They will teach the grand lesson of God's means of forgiveness, and the manner in which one must deal with his or her sins. They will demonstrate that God's way of forgiveness is through the sacrifice of the innocent on behalf of the guilty.

It is obvious that had James and the elders of Jerusalem honestly believed that the Torah had been set aside by the work of Yeshua, the situation they faced would have been the perfect opportunity to express this belief. They could have said: "Paul, we know that Yeshua abolished the Torah, and that this is your constant message. So let's find a way to express this to all of those who are concerned about your message. Let's affirm what they have heard: you do teach against the Torah, and you do tell the Jewish believers to stop following it." But of course, this was not the case! In the very fact that they wanted to demonstrate the opposite through Paul's participation in the Temple, they likewise affirm the truth that the Torah was not abolished by Yeshua, but that He came to bring the Torah to life within the community of the faithful. They realized that the Jewish believers should remain Jewish, and should not abandon the godly traditions inherited from their fathers. But they also affirmed that Gentiles should not attempt to "become Jews," as though having a "Jewish status" through the ritual of a proselyte gave them greater favor with God. In short, they affirmed the eternal viability of the Torah, while at the same time teaching that the prevailing view of covenant membership taught by the rabbis was contrary to the central and core issue of faith in Messiah, Yeshua.

Unfortunately, in the history of the Christian Church, this was not affirmed, but mingled with

anti-Semitism, the growth of an anti-Torah sentiment caused the Church to find the teachings of Torah at odds with the teaching of Yeshua and His Apostles. Having made up their minds that the Torah was given as a punishment to Israel for their sins, it was natural that the Church would teach that Yeshua had abolished it, and that anyone who remained obedient to the Torah was at odds with the Gospel. It was also a natural step, therefore, to interpret all of the Apostolic Scriptures as teaching this.

Some have even suggested that in our Acts 21 text, James, the elders of Jerusalem, as well as Paul, “gave in” to errant theology in order to appease the Jewish believers who were zealous for the Torah. But the Scriptures teach differently: the Torah is God’s eternal teaching in righteousness, for all times, and for all people.