

The Temporary Nazir
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I am not proud of this fact but until recently I had never opened one of the world's great works of literature – The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoyevsky. Now that I have opened the book, I am mesmerized by it. As a religious Jew and as a rabbi, I am especially interested in Dostoyevsky's description of Father Zosima, the elder in the local monastery.

Prior to writing this novel, Dostoyevsky suffered the tragic loss of his son, Alyosha. In deep mourning he took refuge in an Eastern Orthodox monastery in Russia -- The Optina Pustyn. It is highly likely that Dostoyevsky's time in the monastery inspired one of the greatest literary works in the history of humanity.

As a Jew, I am fascinated by the concept of monastic life – a group of people living a religious life that is intentionally separate from society--because there is almost no direct parallel to this concept in biblical, Talmudic, or medieval rabbinic literature. There are some ancient sects of Jews like the Essenes, for example, which seem to have lived a quasi-monastic life, but those communities should not be seen as following rabbinic ordinances.

Although we do not have examples of monastic life in our faith, and although I have not personally become even superficially acquainted with a monastic community, the attractiveness of a monastic community is apparent to the spiritual soul; it is a secluded community established in order to achieve a deep connection with the Creator in a pure form. I imagine that incredibly creative ideas can be generated in such a setting. As such, it should not be surprising that Dostoyevsky wrote this classic work which delves deeply into matters of faith and spirituality after spending time in a monastery.

Our Torah portion does not discuss a monastic life but it does discuss the concept of achieving spiritual greatness via a period of separation. This is the concept of the nazirite.

A nazir is a person who takes upon himself or herself to:

- a-not cut one's hair,
- b-not go near a dead body,
- c-not eat grapes or drink wine (Bamidbar, 6:2-3).

All of these activities are actions that isolate a person from society. A person who does not cut his or her hair is skipping basic grooming practices. A person who does not drink wine is secluding oneself from the primary drink of the day which was a staple at all communal meals and parties. Not being able to go near a dead body forces a person to be isolated from the rest of the community. Taken as a unit it is clear that these prohibitions necessarily cause the nazir to be a social outcast who lives separate from society.

There is not unanimity amongst the rabbis about how we are supposed to feel about the nazirite.

On the one hand, Maimonides clearly calls the nazirite a sinner for prohibiting those items which the Torah clearly permits. He writes:

Peradventure man will say: Seeing that envy, desire and vainglory and like tendencies are evil tendencies and remove man from life, I will separate myself from them exceedingly and reach their remotest extreme. Until he will eat no meat, drink no wine, marry no woman, dwell in no comfortable quarters, dress in no proper clothes but in a sack and coarse wool, and the like, as for instance the idolatrous priests do. Even such is an evil way, and it is forbidden to follow it. He who follows this way is called a sinner, for it is said of a Nazarite: "And make an atonement for him, because he hath sinned against the soul" ([Num. 6.11](#)), whereupon the sages said: "If the Nazarite, who did not separate himself from aught but wine must have atonement, he who deprives himself from each and every thing how manifold must his atonement be" ([Baba Kama. 91b](#))! See [Ta'anit, 11a](#). G. Therefore did the sages command, saying: A man shall not deprive himself of ought save the things which the Torah itself deprived him of; nor shall he bind himself by vows and oaths to abstain from things which are permitted. They have even said: "Is it not enough for thee what the Torah has forbidden, that thou doest forbid thyself even other things" ([Yeru. Nedarim. 7.37](#))? And in this rule are included such who are continuously fasting, for they are not in the good way, and the sages prohibited one from punishing himself with fast days (Deot, 3:1).

On the other hand, there is a story in the Talmud that indicates that under certain circumstances it is admirable to accept upon oneself the limitations in life that are associated with becoming a nazir. The Talmud tells of a man who became a nazir because he was worried that he was becoming too arrogant and too much in love with his own body. As the story goes:

"Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik said: In all my days as a priest, I never ate the guilt-offering of a ritually impure nazirite except for one occasion. One time, a particular man who was a nazirite came from the South and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and was good looking, and the fringes of his hair were arranged in curls. I said to him: My son, what did you see that made you decide to destroy this beautiful hair of yours by becoming a nazirite? A nazirite must shave off his hair at the completion of his term. If he becomes impure before the completion of his term, he shaves off his hair and starts his term of naziriteship again. He said to me: I was a shepherd for my father in my city, and I went to draw water from the spring, and I looked at my reflection [babavua] in the water and my evil inclination quickly overcame me and sought to expel me from the world. I said to myself: Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? Why are you proud of someone who will eventually be food in the grave for worms and maggots, i.e., your body? I swear by the Temple service that I shall shave you for the sake of Heaven. Shimon HaTzaddik said: I immediately arose and kissed him on his head. I said to him: My son, may there be more who take vows of naziriteship like you among the Jewish people.

About you the verse states: "When either a man or a woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord" (Numbers 6:2). This is an example of voluntary acceptance of naziriteship, i.e., becoming a nazirite with entirely pure intentions rather than as a rash statement, e.g., while in a fit of anger" (Nedarim, 9b).

Thus, despite the Maimonidean ruling that a nazir is a sinner, there are sufficient sources to indicate that living the life of a nazir is an appropriate lifestyle choice under certain circumstances.

Indeed, Rashi cites the first page of tractate Sotah to teach us that the whole motivation of the nazir in the Torah is the disgust that he sees in the world. The paradigmatic case of the biblical nazir is the person who reacts to a repulsive situation by accepting a severe spiritual life in order to escape from a terrible situation:

Why is the section dealing with the Nazarite placed in juxtaposition to the section dealing with the Sotah? To tell you that he who has once seen a Sotah in her disgrace should abstain from wine, because it may lead to adultery (Sotah 2a).

In the Talmudic imagination the passage of the nazir follows the passage of the Sotah in the Torah to teach us that one who sees an adulterous woman put on trial will be so repulsed by the spectacle that he or she will desire to separate from society and become purer.

The Gerrer Rebbe asks a simple question about this: If the nazir's removal from society is a reaction to witnessing the adulterous Sotah then how come when the tractates of the Talmud are ordered, the tractate of nazir is listed before Sotah?

The Gerrer Rebbe answers that in biblical times the world was much purer and hence it was acceptable to imagine the nazir as a reaction to the Sotah, but already in Talmudic times people were living in a world that was full of many more sinful people. The world had become so corrupt and licentiousness had become so pervasive that it was necessary for a person to become a nazir even before witnessing the debauchery of an actual Sotah woman.

In Talmudic times it was understood that there was a need to become a nazir as a reaction to the general corruption of the world. But this was not seen as living a full life forever as a nazir. We should remember that the rabbis did not imagine that the average nazir was a person who foreswore society forever. Rather, it was assumed by the Talmud that a nazirite vow was only for a temporary period that was necessary to recharge the nazirite's spiritual growth.

The Mishnah states:

A nazirite vow of unspecified duration is for thirty days. If one says, "Behold, I am a nazirite for one long [period]", or "Behold, I am a nazirite for one short [period]", or even [if he says, "[Behold, I am a nazirite for as long as it takes to go] from here to the end of the earth," he is a nazirite for thirty days. If someone vows a nazirite vow but does not specify how long the naziriteship will last, the naziriteship will be thirty days. This is true even if he says that he wants

to be a nazirite for a long time, or a nazirite for a short time, or even if he says he wants to be a nazirite for as long as it takes to walk from here to the end of the world, since he did not mention a specific period of time, he is a nazirite for only thirty days, no more and no less (Mishnah Nazir 1:3).

A nazir in this vision is a person who needs to take a break from society in order to recharge spiritually and impact the world in a positive manner – perhaps like Dostoyevsky did when he needed to recover from the trauma of his son’s death.

The verse says about a nazirite’s prohibitions:

“he shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant; he shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any other intoxicant, neither shall he drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried” (6:3).

On the basis of this verse, the Talmud says that we learn an important concept called *ta’am ke’ikar*, or “taste is like the essence.”

As the Talmud states: *“it comes to establish the principle that the legal status of the flavor of a forbidden food is like that of its substance. This principle states that any food that absorbs the taste of a forbidden item assumes the status of this forbidden item itself”* (Nazir, 37a).

On a technical level as it relates to the laws of kashrut, this principle means that even if a prohibited food item is no longer physically present, as long as the taste of the item lingers, it is as though the food item is still fully present.

On this basis, my zeyde, the Noam Elimelech teaches that we do not need to live our entire lives as a nazirite in order to acquire some of the spiritual benefits of the nazir. Just a taste of the nazirite’s life is enough for us to grow tremendously in a spiritual sense and rekindle our souls in service of Hashem.

Today, in our post-Temple world we no longer have the institution of a nazir. What then is our path to igniting our religious and spiritual soul? In one sense, this is what the holidays are about. They have specific themes and rituals intended to inspire us to rekindle our relationship with our Creator. But on a daily basis from where do we gain this much needed inspiration? Each of us has to find our own answer to this question. For me the answer lies in connection to Hashem through constant Torah study. The more Torah we intake the more we connect to Hashem. By increasing our dedication to Torah study even for a short period of time we have the ability to achieve some of the spiritual heights and inspiration gained by the nazir.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld’s D’var Torah:
<https://youtu.be/77ndxtMo6N4>