

A (Denver) Nugget of Torah

Parashat Naso

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I have come to an important decision. I have decided that I am rooting for the Denver Nuggets in the NBA Championship, and it's not just because they won the first game of the series on Thursday night. And I apologize to any Miami Heat fans who may be here; yes, I know that the owner is an Israeli-American Jew! Yes, I know that Miami is traditionally a "more Jewish city" than in Denver, but Denver is catching up! There are a lot of Jews in Denver today... But I have come to believe the Jewish thing to do is to root for Denver in the Finals. And it's really all because of this week's Torah portion.

But first, a little bit you may not know about the Denver Nuggets. The franchise ranks 21 out of 30 in most profitable NBA franchises. That means that 70% of professional basketball teams have a lot more money to spend on players and all kinds of other amenities than Denver does. Of the top selling NBA jerseys, no Denver player is anywhere near the top sellers, even though the Nuggets are one of the two best teams in the NBA! And arguably the two best players on the Nuggets, Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray are the 29th and 32nd highest paid players in the NBA respectively. Nikola makes a staggering \$11 million less than the Laker's LeBron James, even though the Nuggets swept the Lakers, winning all 4 games of the Western Conference Final. The Denver Nuggets are known to be a no drama team. The Nuggets' owner, who also owns NFL and NHL franchises, and a whole bunch of other teams, and has a couple of Super Bowls and Stanley Cups under his belt, is referred to as "Silent Sam," who rarely gives interviews or interferes with team operations. The Nuggets don't brawl with other teams or with each other. They haven't fired a coach in over a decade. Head Coach Michael Malone said: "You have to have guys who get along on the court and off the court and come together and share a common goal." "Being selfless," Coach Malone said, "is a huge part of being a Denver Nugget."¹

And that's where the "nugget" of Torah comes in! In our parasha this morning we encountered the strange phenomenon of the Nazir. A Nazir was a man or a woman who would voluntarily take a life-altering vow for a specified amount of time to abstain from various pleasures, from materialism, and from impediments to living a holier lifestyle. The word nazir means to separate, and a nazir would separate themselves from wine, from any contact with the dead, and from cutting the hair. Throughout the time-period of the vow, a Nazir would focus on refining his or her character and personal behavior. The vow would end with the Nazir coming to the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing a sacrificial offering, and cutting off all the excess hair growth during their Nazirite term. That's why we don't see many Nazirites nowadays. Since there is no Temple, and therefore no way to properly end the time-period of the vow, a person becoming a

¹ <https://apnews.com/article/nba-finals-nuggets-jokic-murray-malone-18329e13dfecae50834ebc06d409027c>

Nazir today would have to become one for the rest of their lives. There are a handful of examples of this, but very few and far between.

The Talmud² relates a story that is reminiscent of a famous Greek myth. You are probably more familiar with the Greek myth than the version in the Talmud because it has lent its name to a personality disorder called narcissism. In the Greek myth, a very handsome, very attractive young man passes by a pond he notices his own reflection on the face of the water. The boy, named Narcissus, becomes so entranced with his own beauty, so captivated by his own image, that he can't peel himself away...ever! He spends the rest of his life staring at his reflection, and after he died, in that very spot, a flower grew where his reflection once was. That flower is called the narcissus, which is a member of the daffodil family. Nowadays we say that someone who is so self-centered, so obsessed with their own self-image, so self-admiring and demanding of other people's attention and accolades is a narcissist. Narcissists are often power hungry and think of themselves as deserving of special treatment. They often lack empathy and are easily slighted when they think they are not getting enough approval from others.

Now, listen to the version from the Talmud. Another astonishingly handsome young man, in this case a shepherd came to a spring that he was using to give water to his sheep, and he also happened to notice his reflection on the surface of the water. The Talmud reports that he was *y'fei einayim, v'tov ro'I u'kevutzotav s'durot lo taltalim*: He had beautiful eyes, was very attractive, and his hair was coiffed in lovely curls. Shimon Ha'Tzaddik, the high priest at the time, asked this young man with great hair why in the world he would have decided to become a Nazir, which of course meant that he would have to shave off all those gorgeous locks at the conclusion of the vow. The young man admitted that like Narcissus, he was transfixed by the image of his own beauty as reflected in the spring. As he admired himself in the water, he felt a surge of selfishness and self-indulgence inside of him. But unlike the Greek version, the Jewish shepherd got a hold of himself, immediately declared himself a Nazirite, so that he could concentrate on being less selfish and more concerned with others. Shimon Ha'Tzaddik, who had probably seen his share of Nazirim at the Temple, reportedly said: *Kamocha yirbu nozrei nezirut be'Yisrael*. "May there be many more Nazirites like you among the Jewish people."

This is such a great example of a Torah-approach to a human condition! In the Greek myth, the boy is unable to pull himself away from his own image, his obsessive focus on himself to the exclusion of everyone and everything else. It is truly a Greek tragedy, because he can't possibly love anyone or anything more than himself. Indeed he becomes his own *korban*, his own sacrifice, because the only thing that can separate him from self-admiration is death! The Talmud, however, offers a way out. Becoming a Nazir frees this handsome boy and forces him to step away from that pervasive sense of self. Becoming a Nazir helped him to focus on maintaining his character instead of his curls.

² Nazir 4b

Undoubtedly one of the most famous phrases in all of rabbinic literature, familiar even memorized by Jews of all religious backgrounds and educational levels is Hillel's great teaching in Pirkei Avot (1:14):

Im ein ani li mi li?

If I am not for myself who am I. If I do not look after myself, take care of myself, who will? But then he continues

U'keshe'ani le'atzmi mah ani? But if all that I do, if all of my energy, if all of my concentration is on myself then what kind of a person am I?

Judaism does not teach that you should be completely selfless...You have to care for and nurture your body, your mind, your soul. In fact, you can't actualize the second part of the teaching of caring for others if you don't have the stamina, the health, or the energy yourself. Judaism teaches a balance of self-care and care for others. In fact, they are interconnected. I came across a beautiful teaching by Rabbi Shimon Shkop, who was the famed rosh yeshiva in the city of Grodno in Belarus in the late 19th century.³ He said the definition of human greatness is how big is your "Ani," your "I." He said most people think about *ani* or I in terms of themselves: the proverbial 'me, myself and I.' Even better is if your *ani*, your "I" includes your spouse, your children, your parents. But a true *adam gadol*, a truly great person understands the word "I" or "me" to include much more than themselves, much more than their immediate families, much more than their neighborhood, but all of *klal Yisrael*, all of the Jewish people and indeed all of humanity. That's true *gadlut*. That is the definition of greatness that we should aspire to.

And that is why I am so enamored with the Denver Nuggets, and why I think there is real Torah to be learned from them. The truth is that I feel like I am jumping on the bandwagon with everyone else. Nobody was talking about this team or its players until recently. But when a superstar, an *adam gadol* if you will, announces "I don't need to shoot and I don't need to score in order to effect the game in a positive way,"⁴ who feels just as successful when he is passing the ball and facilitating plays as when he is making them himself, people's heads turn. What if we approached life with that same wisdom. I don't always need to shoot, and I don't always need to score in order to have a meaningful life, in order to have self-confidence or feel a sense of purpose. I don't always have to be the center of attention to know that what I am doing in this world is important. I don't have to have all the power or the constant approval in order to be happy. When we start to feel ourselves gazing too much at our own image in the pond, or becoming self-obsessed to the exclusion of others, we may not be able to become a Nazir to restore the balance between self-care and care for others, but we can certainly remember the

³ [Rabbi Frand - Confronting Narcissism](#)

⁴ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/nba/nikola-jokic-s-selfless-play-the-difference-in-nuggets-game-1-win/ar-AA1c1yCi?li=BB15ms5q>

nugget of wisdom from our parasha, from the great sage Hillel, and also from the Denver Nuggets that sometimes being the MVP means being the most selfless player on the court.