PARASHAT NASO
Numbers 4:21–7:89

Parashat Naso concludes the census begun in the first chapters of Numbers with a counting of the Gershonites, Merarites, and Kohathites and a description of their work in the sanctuary. It also includes instructions for removing from the Israelite camp those suspected of disease or those who may have become impure by touching a dead body. Moses explains how to seek forgiveness for wrongdoing and what to do if a husband suspects his wife of adultery. The practices of the nazirite are repeated together with a description of the ritual for completing a nazirite vow. The portion concludes with the threefold priestly blessing for the people of Israel and with a description of the offerings brought by the twelve tribal chieftains to the sanctuary dedication ceremony.

OUR TARGUM

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Moses takes a census of the Gershonite clans. Recording those between the ages of thirty and fifty, he notes a total of 2,630. They are responsible for carrying the sanctuary coverings, hangings, cords, accessories, and the altar. Ithamar, Aaron's son, is to supervise their work.

Moses also counts Merarite clan members between the ages of thirty and fifty. Their duties, like those of the Gershonites, have to do with moving the sanctuary. Under the direction of Ithamar, they are to carry the planks, bars, posts, sockets, pegs, and cords. The Merarites total 3,200.

Moses also records the number of Kohathites, whose work is connected with transporting parts of the sanctuary. Their total is 2,750, bringing the number of Levites caring for the sanctuary to 8,580.

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The people are told that anyone who has an oozing open sore or who may have touched a corpse is to be removed from the Israelite camp.

·3·

Moses instructs the people that, if one person wrongs another, confession and restitution are required. If one steals property, its worth plus 20 percent is to be restored to the owner. If the owner has died, restitution is to be made to the sanctuary priest along with a ram offering of repentance. Such offerings belong to the priests.

·4·

Moses informs the people that, when a husband is jealous and suspects his wife of unfaithfulness, but there is no witness to prove his accusation, she is to be brought before the sanctuary priest. He will uncover her head and ask her to place her hands upon the altar of the meal offering. He is then to prepare a mixture of water, earth, and ashes from the meal offering. This mixture, known as the "water of bitterness," is meant to induce a trance.

The priest will then say to her: "If no man has had intercourse with you and you have not been unfaithful to your husband, be immune from this water of bitterness. If you have been unfaithful, then may God curse you with sagging thighs and belly."

After the priest writes the curse, the woman will drink the water of bitterness. If she falls into a trance, she is guilty; if she does not, she is innocent.

·5·

Moses reminds the people that those who vow to be nazirites are not to cut their hair or drink wine or any other intoxicants. Nor are they to have contact with a corpse. Contact with a corpse annuls the nazirite vow. The vow may, however, be resumed by shaving the head on the seventh day and by bringing offerings of turtledoves, pigeons, and a lamb to the sanctuary priest.

The nazirite term concludes with a sacrifice of a male lamb in its first year, a ewe lamb in its first year, a ram, a basket of unleavened cakes with oil mixed in, and unleavened wafers spread with oil, along with meal and libation offerings. The nazirite delivers these offerings, shaves his or her hair, and places the offerings upon the altar. The priest then places the shoulder of the ram and one unleavened cake and wafer into the hands of the nazirite. He waves them before the altar, accepting them as a donation. Upon conclusion of this ritual, a person is considered a former nazirite and may drink wine.

·6·

Moses gives Aaron and his sons the formula for blessing the people: May *Adonai* bless and guard you. May *Adonai* deal kindly and graciously with you. May *Adonai* bestow favor upon you and grant you peace.

·7·

On the day after the sanctuary is completed, Moses consecrates it and all its furnishings. During each of the subsequent twelve days, the tribal chieftains bring a special offering to the Levites for use in the sanctuary.

·8·

After the sanctuary dedication, whenever Moses wishes to speak with God, he enters and listens to the voice reaching him from above the ark cover between the two lionlike cherubim.

THEMES

Parashat Naso contains two important themes:

1. Eliminating suspicion and restoring trust.
2. Abstention as a way to holiness.

PEREK ALEF: *The Case of Suspected Adultery: Can We Move from Suspicion to Trust?*

The Book of Proverbs contains a number of valuable insights into human behavior. About "patience" and "jealousy" it teaches: "Patience results in much understanding; impatience results in foolishness. A calm disposition assures physical health, but jealousy rots the bones." (14:29–30) By drawing a parallel between impatience and jealousy, Jewish tradition provides a context in which to understand the case of a *sotah,* a wife suspected by her husband of adultery.

What does the Torah tell us?

Two situations are described. The first is the case of a wife who has had sexual relations with another man and keeps the matter a secret from her husband. The husband suspects her, but he has no witness. His jealousy grows against her. What shall he do? The second situation is of the wife who has not had sexual relations with another man. Her husband, however, suspects her. Though he has no witness, he is wild with jealousy. How is she to be protected from the "foolishness" of her husband?

Within ancient society, such cases were handled through "tests" or "ordeals." For example, the Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi* (about 1750 B.C.E.) states that a wife suspected by her husband of infidelity is to prove her innocence by throwing herself into a river. If she survives, she is innocent; if she drowns, she was guilty. Other cultures also record harsh measures for suspected wives. They could be thrown out of the house

by their husbands, divorced, publicly humiliated, beaten, or killed. Some societies used trials by fire or, as in the Torah, the drinking of a ritual mixture prepared by priests.

Clearly, women suffered at the hands of jealous husbands, and their treatment was often cruel. There was, however, no similar "trial" for husbands who might be suspected, justly or unjustly, by their wives of infidelity. Such "equal" justice did not exist in ancient times. However, the Torah does offer a significant advancement in the protection of women. So do its interpreters.

In *Sotah,* an entire section of the Talmud dealing with the subject of a "suspected adulteress," rabbinic authorities carefully prescribe a process that a jealous husband must follow. If he suspects his wife of having an affair with a specific man, the husband must warn her in the presence of two witnesses about meeting secretly with him. Then, only if he has two witnesses who testify that she secretly spent time enough to have sexual relations with the man, can her husband request that she be forced by the court to drink the "water of bitterness." The case may not be heard by a local court, but it must be taken to the Supreme Court, or Sanhedrin, in Jerusalem. Only the Supreme Court has the power to order a wife to drink the "water of bitterness." However, if the man has been unfaithful to the woman, either before or after their marriage, or if she is disabled, he has no right to bring such charges against her. (*Mishnah Sotah* 1:1–4)

So many conditions (e.g., the warning about a specific man; the presence of two witnesses to testify to the time spent secretly with that specific man; the husband's record of fidelity; the necessity to hear the case before the Supreme Court in Jerusalem) were spelled out that women were protected from the fury of jealous husbands who might treat them unjustly. Even a woman under suspicion could not legally be thrown out of her home, divorced, or physically harmed. Rabbinic law assured her right to a fair inquiry and trial.

Protecting women

In ancient times, the life of a wife suspected of being unfaithful could be terminated abruptly without investigation. Judaism, however, required that a very thorough investigation be made before any action could be taken. This requirement was intended to safeguard the woman's good name and to protect her from merciless prosecution. (Sefer ha-Hinuch, Mitzvot *365–367)*

By the time the Temple is destroyed and the Supreme Court, or Sanhedrin, ceases to function in 70 C.E., the use of the ordeal of the "water of bitterness" for the *sotah* is no longer practiced. For many commentators, however, other questions about the treatment of the suspected adulteress remain. Why would a wife, or for that matter a husband, become unfaithful? How should jealousy, envy, anger, and abuse be handled by courts of law? What is so unique about the relationship of husband and wife that the matter of suspected adultery requires not only an elaborate ceremony of proof but also attention from a Supreme Court in Jerusalem?

In exploring these questions, the rabbinic commentators speculate on what might cause a wife to seek a sexual relationship with a man other than her husband. Quoting the wisdom of Proverbs: "A person who commits adultery is devoid of sense; only a self-destructive person does such a thing," the rabbis draw a parallel between "insanity" and "infidelity." In another discussion they boldly declare that "every moral lapse is also a mental one." In other words, no person sins without losing a grasp on reality. Harmful decisions are made by those who fail to understand the consequences of their actions.

Specifically, the rabbis suggest that there is no difference between a man using a woman as a prostitute or a woman having an extramarital affair. Both, say the rabbis, "have lost their reason." They are choosing a course of action without rationally calculating the dreadful consequences for themselves and their loved ones. Neither men nor women indulge in sexual relationships outside of marriage unless "a spirit of folly possesses them." (*Sotah* 3a; *Numbers Rabbah* 9:6)

By placing the behavior of a husband or wife who commits adultery or may be suspected of marital infidelity into the category of "folly" or

"loss of reason," the rabbis seek to expose the *cause* of the trouble. For them the issue is not simply the adultery but the factors precipitating it. What could lead a person to seek love and sex outside of marriage? Could it be loneliness, constant arguments, serious differences of interest, abuse, insensitivity, or mental instability? Understanding causes introduces the possibility of curing the problems. It opens opportunities for seeking reconciliation between husband and wife.

Rabbi Meir and his wife, Beruriah, known as a woman of great wisdom, serve as a model of mutual respect and caring. Rabbi Meir makes several psychological observations about human behavior and marriage. Teaching students during the second century C.E., he observes that there are three kinds of personalities: the type of person who sees a fly fall into his cup, flicks it out, and drinks the contents of the cup (such a man may see his wife gossiping with neighbors and relatives, male and female, and, because he trusts her, leaves her alone); the type of person who sees a fly fluttering over his cup and immediately throws away the contents of the cup without tasting them (such impulsive behavior is evil; it is typical of a person who will suddenly decide, without cause, to divorce his wife); and the third type of person who finds a dead fly in his cup, takes it, sucks it, and then drinks the contents of the cup. Such a crude person, observes Rabbi Meir, will, without protest or warning, allow his wife to become intimate with her servants, go out into the marketplace dressed immodestly, and wash herself where men bathe. In his lack of caring or genuine commitment to her, he will callously use her and then find a reason to discard her.

On the treatment of wives

A husband should advise his wife to be modest; he should be flexible, not domineering; he should never resort to force or terror; he should not promote domestic strife by constantly arguing and criticizing; he should not speak out of jealousy but out of commitment and love; he should be easygoing, always honoring his wife above himself. In this way he will never drive her away or into immorality. (Based on Numbers Rabbah *9:2; also Y. Nachshoni,* Studies in the Weekly Parashah, Bemidbar, *Mesorah Publications Ltd., Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 945–948)*

Rabbi Meir's point is that temperament and neglect can drive a wedge between husband and wife. If a husband observes his wife entering into inappropriate relationships or a wife feels abandoned or compromised by her husband's relationships with other women, such misunderstandings require open and immediate discussion between husband and wife. Their feelings must be expressed. Unless they care enough about each other to articulate what bothers them and what they deem acceptable behavior, suspicions will eventually drive husband and wife to acts of immorality. Rabbi Meir uses the example of the *sotah* as an opportunity to explore and explain the challenges facing the fragile relationship of marriage. (*Numbers Rabbah* 9:12)

Peli

While modern commentator Pinchas Peli does not disagree with Rabbi Meir's psychological observations or with the causes of stress between husband and wife, he does offer a different view about the strange ceremony of the "water of bitterness." He speculates that "it is possible that Torah devised the best way under the circumstances to save this marriage by removing the mutual psychological distrust" between husband and wife. That is to say that "the *sotah* ceremony is an extreme remedial measure for a troubled marriage. . . . Jealousy, overpossessiveness, and similar emotions can be destructive and explosive in any husband-wife relationship. The *sotah* ritual brings to us one painful remedy." (*Jerusalem Post* May 28, 1988, p. 22)

Peli's point is that sometimes bitterness, suspicion, anger, and pain nearly destroy a marriage. In such situations one needs to drink the "water of bitterness" to restore trust, mutual respect,

and understanding. Radical "medicine" is the only cure. In ancient times that meant the wife's submission to the ritual for a suspected adulteress. In our own time it can mean that both husband and wife seek counseling and learn how to drain the bitterness of misunderstanding from their relationship, restoring their love and trust for each other.

The issues raised in the case of the *sotah* in ancient times are significant today, not only for husbands and wives, but for all relationships based on mutual commitment. Friendships, business partnerships, and family ties are also ruined by suspicion, selfishness, and misunderstanding. How do we repair and strengthen such relationships? Ironically, those who neglect faltering relationships may find themselves drinking a home-cooked brew of the "water of bitterness."

PEREK BET: *The Case of the Nazirite: Can Abstention Guarantee Holiness?*

The Torah assigns several different categories of responsibility for the people of Israel: chieftains of tribes, priests, carriers of the ancient *mishkan,* or "sanctuary." All these jobs are designated by God and passed on from generation to generation. By contrast, the Torah informs us that any person, male or female, can freely choose to become a nazirite.

Becoming a nazirite entails a commitment of service for a minimum of thirty days. One is prohibited from cutting one's hair, drinking or eating grapes, raisins, vinegar, grape husks, or grape kernels. Like a priest, a nazirite is forbidden contact with a dead body. According to the Torah, "throughout one's term as a nazirite one is consecrated to God." (Numbers 6:8)

Commentators disagree on the role and institution of the nazirite in Jewish tradition. Nine chapters and sixty sections of the *Mishnah* and one hundred and thirty pages of *Gemara* in the Talmud present varying and often contradictory views on the subject. Even now, interpreters of Torah both praise and condemn the *Torat Nazir,* or the "Nazirite's Code of Behavior," while few Jews actually practice it.

Rashi

On the basis of *Targum Yonatan,* Rashi explains that the word *nazir,* or "nazirite," comes from the root meaning "to separate oneself" and refers to those students of Torah who "keep themselves separate from the ways of the common people." Extending Rashi's view, David Kimchi praises the nazirites for providing "a way for young people to distance themselves from worldly pleasures and passions." Others approve of the practice, especially of abstaining from wine, because it allows one "to serve God with a clear mind." (See Rashi, Kimchi, and *Tze'enah u-Re'enah* on Numbers 6:1ff.)

In his eleventh-century book of philosophy and ethics, *Hovot ha-Levavot,* "Duties of the Heart," Bachya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda praises nazirite practice and discipline. He argues that God places human beings on earth to test their souls and to make them as pure as angels. They battle for such purity against all physical needs, temptations, and desires. Often worldly pleasures appear harmless, but frequently they lead to excesses that overwhelm our powers of reason and seduce us into habits of self-destruction.

Nazirites, explains Bachya, are "physicians for the souls of human beings." Serving as models of abstention, they teach moderation. "All people," Bachya continues, "should work only enough to support themselves and to avoid being a burden on others; they should limit their conversation and restrain their envious eyes and ears. They should control hunger, should be satisfied with a single meal each day, viewing it as necessary medicine, and should fast one day during each week." The commitment of the nazirite leads people to appreciate this modest way of life.

Bachya's championing of the nazirite and the life of abstention is supported by commentator Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in his popular seven-

teenth-century textbook, *Mesillat Yesharim,* "Pathway of the Righteous." "True abstinence," explains Luzzatto, "means making use of only those things that some natural demand has rendered indispensable." For example, we need to nurture our body with a minimum of liquid each day. One should drink only the minimum required. Such control is not for the average person, however, but rather it is the gift of a disciplined spiritual minority capable of seeking holiness before God.

Luzzatto describes the ideal behavior of such a minority. This minority holds itself aloof from society, does not look beyond its own needs, ignores and disdains all pleasures of life. Seeking solitude and saintliness, it chooses to do more than the laws of Torah require. Luzzatto concludes that the nazirites are revered teachers and sources of inspiration because of their exemplary behavior.

Other commentators disagree, finding the nazirites' life of abstention nothing less than "sinful." Rabbi Eleazar Ha-Kappar, who lived during the second century and was a good friend of Rabbi Judah who composed the *Mishnah,* held that, by abstaining from wine and denying themselves the enjoyments of life, nazirites neglected the commandments of Torah and were "sinners." This, Rabbi Eleazar points out, explains why, at the conclusion of their nazirite vow, they must bring a sin offering to the sanctuary. Having deliberately abstained from the potential joys that God prepares for all human beings, they must seek forgiveness. This, remarks Rabbi Eleazar, is why God demands such an offering. (*Ta'anit* 11a)

Demonstrating strong disapproval of nazirite vows, which are meant to deny the pleasures of life, rabbinic authorities living in the Land of Israel during the second and third centuries argue that such vows are self-destructive. They are compared to "taking a sword into your own hand and thrusting it into your heart." Rabbi Yitzhak teaches that, if you are present at the time another person is considering such a vow, you must shock him to his senses by asking: "Are not all the restrictions and laws of Torah enough for you? Why do you insist on restraining yourself from that which the Torah permits you to enjoy?" Others claim that, when each human being comes before God on the Day of Judgment, God will ask, "Why did you deny yourself pleasure from all that your eyes beheld?" (Jerusalem Talmud, *Nedarim* 9:1; 30:3)

Judaism on asceticism

Not a single one of the 613 positive and negative commandments of the Torah defining the orthodox [traditional] norm of Jewish life as developed by the rabbis enjoins any form of asceticism or mortification. . . . There is but one public fast day—the Day of Atonement—a solemn day of searching one's soul. . . . It is to be noted that the nazirites were not pledged to celibacy. The renunciation of a normal sex life was never regarded as a virtue in Judaism. (Abba Hillel Silver, Where Judaism Differed, *Macmillan, New York, 1956, pp. 195, 198–199)*

Rambam (Maimonides)

Philosopher and commentator Moses Maimonides also opposes the choice of abstinence and self-denial. "The Torah," he writes, "advocates no mortification of the body. Its intention was that a person should follow nature, taking the middle road. One should eat in moderation and live uprightly and faithfully within the society of others not in the deserts and mountains. One should not afflict the body by wearing wool and hair. Because the Torah forbids such abstention from the joys of life," concludes Maimonides, "it warns us with the example of the nazirite."

In his classic discussion of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah,* Maimonides, on the subject of the nazirite, warns against the self-righteous tendency of concluding that all forms of bodily pleasure lead to sin and, therefore, should be avoided. He counsels that if people foolishly decide, because passion, envy, and pride are evil, to separate themselves from others and abstain

from eating meat, drinking wine, marrying, living in comfortable homes, or wearing fine clothing, they should be told that they are choosing "an evil path." Our tradition, argues Maimonides, "forbids us from denying to ourselves any of the joys permitted by Torah." (*Shemonah Perakim and Mishneh Torah, Deot* 3:1)

The chasidic teachers frowned upon the nazirite practice of self-denial or abstinence. Human beings, they taught, were born to enjoy life, to breath in the sweet fragrances of flowers, taste crisp, delicious delicacies, wonder at the magic of majestic mountains and green forests, and fulfill the powerful surge of sexual desires in the mysterious realm of love. For the Chasidim, enjoying life was a way of praising God. Rabbi Pinchas Shapiro of Koretz holds that "joy atones for sins because it is the gift of God." Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov comments that "joy is better than tears . . . for it breaks through all the gates of heaven."

Rabbi Baruch of Medzibozh, grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidism, captures Jewish tradition's enthusiasm for all the delights of life and its disdain for withdrawal or self-denial when he comments that "one should take into one's heart three things: the love of God, the love of Israel, and the love of Torah. One does not need to engage in ascetic practices. It is sufficient for the average person to understand that in all things, physical and material, there is holiness." (*Sefer ha-Hasidut,* p. 60a)

Modern commentator Simeon Federbush is critical of the nazirites, not simply for their rejection of "worldly privileges and possessions," but also for their "antisocial attitude toward the community." Federbush condemns the practice of nazirites because it "separates one from the benefits of life" and removes one from "striving for the perfection of the human race." He argues that "any chain is only as strong as its weakest link. If one denies oneself to provide for one's own wants, who will take care of the needs of others? . . . Those who are occupied with ascetic indulgence will have no concern for the needs of their neighbors." (*Ethics and Law in Israel,* p. 166, quoted in B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah,* Sinai Publishing, Tel Aviv, 1956, p. 213)

Learning to limit one's appetites

Sforno points out that the self-denial of the nazirite is limited. "One is told to refrain from drinking wine only; one is not allowed to cause pain and suffering to oneself by other restrictions or self-affliction. The Torah aims at decreasing desires, not eliminating them entirely." In learning to limit one's appetites, one becomes "holy to God." (Y. Nachshoni, Studies in the Weekly Parashah, Bemidbar, *p. 956)*

Aharon Halevi, the author of *Sefer ha-Hinuch,* approaches the case of the nazirite from a positive but guarded perspective. Human beings, he explains, are born with great spiritual and intellectual potentials that are placed within frail bodies full of passions and drives. The challenge of each person is to control the demands and temptations of the body and to rise toward holiness. By abstaining from wine and not cutting their hair, nazirites overcome vanity and begin a climb toward holiness. They work at ruling their inclination for self-indulgence and seek to place themselves in a position where they can pay scrupulous attention to what the Torah and God demand. However, says Halevi, nazirites must be warned against going too far and dangerously tipping the delicate balance toward the soul at the expense of the body. Like Maimonides, Halevi emphasizes moderation, yet he praises nazirites for their choice to seek the will of God. (*Mitzvot* 368–377)

Ibn Ezra

Ibn Ezra seizes the notion of "overcoming vanity" through abstinence and claims that na-

zirites symbolize by their self-denial the important virtues of self-control and discipline. He points out that the word *nazir* is actually associated with the Hebrew word for "crown" and stands for those who, like powerful monarchs, rule their dangerous passions and destructive temptations by constantly curbing them. While ibn Ezra may not have understood the power of addiction to smoking, drinking, and drugs, it is clear that he sees in the vow and discipline of the nazirite a means of achieving "control" over such deadly influences.

Sixteenth-century interpreter and philosopher Moses Isserles takes ibn Ezra's explanation to a logical conclusion. Also citing Maimonides' ideal of "the middle road," or moderation in all human choices, Isserles points out that nazirites are to be praised for realizing that they "have a weakness for worldly pleasures" and difficulty "diverting their evil inclinations from extremes to the middle way." By taking on the nazirite vow, such people push themselves to excessive self-denial and then "find the way back to the ideal of moderation." In other words, nazirites realize their impulse for indulgence and choose to overcome it by training themselves in self-denial. Eventually they master their inclinations and achieve the satisfaction that comes from living a life of moderation.

Jewish tradition remains deeply divided over whether to praise or condemn the nazirites' abstention from wine and the cutting of hair and their refusal to touch a dead body. On the face of it, the nazirite vow and practice seem remote from any modern application. Yet debating whether to praise or criticize the nazirite tradition may miss the essential meaning of the nazirite commitment and behavior.

Perhaps, for moderns, the real lesson to be drawn from the example of the nazirite deals with the challenge of introducing the discipline of "yes, I will" or "no, I will not" into our lifestyles. Temptations of alcohol, drugs, smoking, overworking, and overeating are everywhere. Reviewing the Torah's description of the nazirite vows and practice may offer a powerful symbolic message. For example, the decision to abstain from wine may signal the dangers of addiction and the necessity of cultivating a clear mind. The command against cutting hair may teach that egocentric concern for how one looks and for fashion and exterior style do not replace inner substance and quality of character. The nazirite's prohibition against touching a dead body may imply not a rejection of the inevitability of death but an acceptance that the most holy or pure occupation is to work for every cause that preserves and promotes life.

Unraveling the meaning of the nazirite's vow raises serious questions, not only on abstinence and the enjoyment of life's gifts, but also on fundamental considerations for controlling our needs and shaping our desires to benefit ourselves and our community and to serve God.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. How does Jewish tradition "protect" wives from the jealous abuse of husbands? What other safeguards can you add? What about the rights of husbands?

2. Is it responsible to "excuse" immoral behavior by citing "mental instability" as its cause? How can individuals and the justice system function "fairly" if the system takes into consideration "mental" causes for antisocial behavior?

3. Does the nazirite, who abstains from wine, the cutting of hair, and the touching of a corpse, achieve a greater sense of holiness? What does Jewish tradition teach about achieving a "spiritual" nearness to God? What divides Jewish commentators on this issue? What standards of behavior can one choose today to achieve Maimonides' ethical life of the "middle of the road," or moderation?

4. Rabbi Judah taught that, "in the spring when we see the beautiful trees swaying in the breeze, we should stop to recite a prayer. We

should say, 'Be praised, O God, for creating a world where nothing is lacking, a world filled with beauty to delight the human heart.' " (*Eruvin* 43b) Do you agree that a positive acknowledgment of the gifts of life is superior to abstinence and self-denial as a means of encouraging people to appreciate human existence and avoid self-destructive habits?