**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NASO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Naso addresses the case of somebody who falsely denied stealing on oath, and then seeks to atone for his sin. The individual in this case is required to repay what he stole along with a fine, and must also bring an atonement sacrifice. This law was already presented earlier, at the end of Parashat Vayikra (5:20-26). Rashi (5:6) cites the *Sifrei* as explaining that this law was repeated here to teach that if the victim was a convert who had no halakhic relatives, and the convert died before the thief decided to repent, the money and fine are given to a *kohen*.

Before establishing the specific requirements that apply in such a case, the Torah also requires the thief to confess – “*ve-hitvadu et chatatam asher asu*” – “they shall confess the sin which they committed” (5:7). The Rambam, in the opening passage of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, famously cites this verse as the source for the Torah obligation of repentance – to verbally acknowledge one’s wrongdoing.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Shavuot 1:5) draws a curious association between this verse and one of the more famous chapters of Tehillim. Citing Reish Lakish, the Yerushalmi comments that when Moshe heard this command, that a sinner must verbally confess his misdeed, Moshe responded by reciting “*Mizmor le-toda*,” the 100th chapter of Tehillim, which was composed to be recited when offering a thanksgiving offering. This chapter of Tehillim, according to the Yerushalmi, is somehow associated with the process of *teshuva*.The connection between the two is indicated by the resemblance between the word “*hitvadu*” (“they shall confess”) and “*toda*” (“thanksgiving”).

What might be the meaning of this connection drawn by the Yerushalmi between the obligation to repent for wrongdoing, and the thanksgiving offering?

Rav Yehuda Shaviv, in his work *Heid Chozer*, suggests that the Yerushalmi conveys the counterintuitive – but vitally important – message that the process of repentance must be accompanied by feelings of joy and gratitude. We might have assumed that those who repent must feel only distressed and anguished, pained by remorse and shame. But while certainly we are to experience these uncomfortable feelings after acknowledging our wrongdoing, at the same time, we are to rejoice and celebrate our opportunity to change and grow. Repentance should be exciting and gratifying, despite the difficult emotions involved. And so the Yerushalmi associates the *mitzva* of confession with the joyful Psalm of *Mizmor Le-toda*, which famously instructs, “*Ivdu et Hashem be-simcha*” – “serve the Lord with joy.” The process of repentance must be joyful. Our emotions when we recognize our mistakes and resolve to change should resemble our emotions when celebrating a festive occasion – because personal growth is, indeed, a joyous occasion, a great privilege to celebrate, and a source of great personal satisfaction.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Naso discusses the laws relevant to a *nazir* – an individual who takes the nazirite vow, which requires him to refrain from wine, haircutting, and direct contact with a human corpse. Included in this section is the procedure to be followed when a *nazir* accidentally becomes *tamei* (impure) due to contact with a corpse – the example given in the Torah is where a person suddenly dies near the *nazir*. After the seven days of purification, the Torah instructs, the *nazir* must offer a series of special sacrifices on the eighth day, and then “*ve-kidash et rosho bayom ha-hu*” (literally, “he shall consecrate his head on that day” – 6:11). Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, explains this to mean that the *nazir* begins his term of *nezirut* anew, committing to observe the number of days to which he had originally committed, as the days he had observed before becoming *tamei* are retroactively rendered invalid. The implication of the verse is that the new term of *nezirut* begins on the eighth day after the *nazir* became *tamei* – the day he offers his sacrifices – and this is, indeed, the view of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi, cited in the Gemara (Nazir 18a-b). Rabbi Yossi ben Rabbi Yehuda disagrees, however, and interprets the verse to mean that the new count begins the previous day.

Rav Yisrael Alter of Ger, the *Beit Yisrael*, found significance in the fact that the Torah instructs the *nazir* in this situation to begin the process of *nezirut* anew. The *nazir* likely feels dismayed and frustrated by his failure. He had taken this step in the hope of rising to a higher level, but his efforts failed. The Torah’s response to the downtrodden *nazir* is “*ve-kidash et rosho*” – that he must start his pursuit of sanctity again. All his failure means is that he needs to try again. He should not feel discouraged; he should simply start again.

The *Beit Yisrael* viewed this command to the *nazir* as symbolic of the need for us all to overcome the natural tendency to feel discouraged after failing. The proper response is to simply start again. Just as the *nazir* is instructed to renew his term of *nezirut*, his pursuit of a higher spiritual level, even after his failure, rather than fall into paralyzing despair, so are we urged to renew our efforts to achieve excellence even if our efforts until now have produced disappointing results. This disappointment should lead not to despair, but to our persisting in the struggle and pursuit of the higher levels for which we must continually strive.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Naso presents the laws relevant to a *nazir*, including the special sacrifices that a *nazir* must bring if he accidentally comes in contact with a human corpse, and thus inadvertently violates his nazirite vow. After the weeklong purification period, the *nazir* must bring a series of special sacrifices, and then begin his term of *nazirut* anew. The sacrifices the *nazir* brings are two birds, which are offered as an *ola* and *chatat*, and a sheep as an *asham* offering (6:10-12).

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, finds it significant that the *nazir*’s *asham* sacrifice is a sheep. Almost all other *asham* sacrifices, including that which is offered to atone for theft (Vayikra 5:24) and that which atones for prohibited benefit from sacred property (Vayikra 5:15), is a ram. The only other instance where a sheep is offered as an *asham* is when a *metzora* is cured of his infection and brings sacrifices as part of his purification (Vayikra 14:12). Rav Hirsch explains that the *metzora*, who was stricken with his condition for inappropriate social behavior, brings as an atonement sacrifice a sheep, the symbol of simplicity and humble partnership in a “flock” in perfect harmony. As the *metzora* prepares to resume communal life after his period of seclusion which he endured as punishment for his improper social conduct, he must, in Rav Hirsch’s words, “be taught to rank himself as *keves* [sheep] – as a ‘simple member of God’s flock,’ as a simple social member of the whole community ‘grazing’ under the guidance of their Shepherd, and giving up all selfishness and with selfless devotion to the purposes indicated by God…”

This symbolism of the sheep *asham*, Rav Hirsch explains, is applicable to the *nazir*, as well. Rav Hirsch writes that the nazirite vow “would appear in itself as an unsociable arrogance, placing himself apart in the midst of the community.” Choosing to exclude oneself from festive celebrations (where wine is served) and from funerals, and to look unkempt, is socially inappropriate, and bespeaks an attitude of condescension towards one’s peers. The nazirite vow is nevertheless acceptable, and even admirable, when it is sincerely undertaken with the aim of self-improvement. As Rav Hirsch writes, “…the purpose of spiritually and morally ennobling himself removes the reprehensible semblance [of the nazirite vow].” Therefore, in a situation where a period of *nezirut* was discounted due to the *nazir*’s impurity, even due to circumstances entirely beyond his control, he must atone for his antisocial behavior. As the period which he had observed was retroactively invalidated, it had not achieved its intended goal, and, as such, the *nazir*’s period of withdrawal from social life and nonconformity with social norms has lost its justification. He must therefore bring a sheep as an *asham* sacrifice, just like a *metzora*, to atone for what has now been determined to be indefensible social conduct.

Tuesday

Parashat Naso presents the laws of the nazirite vow, which imposes three restrictions upon one who chooses to take the vow – he is forbidden from drinking wine, cutting his hair, and coming in contact with a human corpse. It is commonly assumed that the purpose of this vow is to help propel a person to a higher stature. This is indicated by a number of Talmudic passages, including the Gemara’s famous remark in the beginning of Masekhet Sota (2a), “Whoever sees a *sota* in her disgrace should abstain from wine.” The purpose – or at least one of the purposes – of the nazirite vow is to erect a safeguard to protect oneself against unrestrained conduct.

However, while this explains the prohibition against drinking wine, and perhaps the prohibition against haircutting, which protects against a preoccupation with vanity, the question remains as to how the restriction against contact with a human corpse contributes to this effort. We might have assumed that to the contrary, seeing a deceased person reminds one of his mortality, that he will ultimately need to stand in judgment for how he lived his life, which could help motivate him to raise his standards. Why, then, does the nazirite vow require one to specifically stay away from the dead?

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* (6:6) suggests that indeed, this restriction does not contribute to the *nazir*’s pursuit of a higher level of sanctity. However, it serves to dispel the misconception that some people might have upon seeing the *nazir*’s elevated stature that he has been dealing with spirits, communicating with the souls of the departed. By specifically avoiding all contact with human corpses, the *nazir* ensures that he cannot be accused of attaining his new lofty level by engaging in forms of witchcraft that involve dead bodies.

How might we explain this comment of the *Ba’al Ha-turim*? Why would people have thought to attribute the *nazir*’s newfound spirituality to his involvement with the dead?

One of the definitions given by the Gemara for the halakhic term “*shoteh*” (mentally disturbed individual) is “*lan be-veit ha-kevarot*” – one who sleeps in graveyards (Chagiga 3b). Preoccupation with the dead was associated with insanity, with unusual and strange behavior. If so, then perhaps the *Ba’al Ha-turim*’s remark can be understood to mean that people might regard the *nazir*, who undertakes voluntary measures of ascetism, as mentally unstable. When a person suddenly raises his religious standards, and becomes more devoted to spirituality, he can easily be written off as a fool, as suffering some degree of mental dysfunction. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* thus perhaps explained the command forbidding a *nazir* from coming in contact with the dead as warning against giving the mistaken impression of insanity. When we strive for religious excellence, we must seek to ensure that we do not come across as silly or foolish. We must avoid giving the impression of being strange and mentally unstable. Even as we, like the *nazir*, observe religious practices which make us different, we must appear intelligent and rational. While there will always be those criticizing and ridiculing our religious devotion, nevertheless, we must conduct ourselves in a normal, intelligent, and socially acceptable manner, so as not to allow our pursuit of piety to be interpreted as a sign of madness.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Naso (5:5-10) addresses the case of an individual who commits an offense, repents, and is then required to bring a special sacrifice and make a restitution payment. The text is ambiguous, but *Chazal*, as Rashi cites, explained that the Torah refers here to a thief who falsely denied his crime on oath, and then repents. He is required to bring an atonement offering and to pay the victim what he stole plus a penalty. The Torah here also addresses the possibility that “*ein la-ish go’el*” – the victim may have died in the interim without leaving any inheritors to whom the thief can return what he owes. *Chazal* explain that such a case is possible only in the case of *gezel ha-ger* – where one stole from a *ger* (convert) who did not beget any children after his or her conversion, and died before receiving the stolen property. All people are, necessarily, related to somebody to whom the payment may be made – except this *ger*, since a convert is not halakhically considered related to any of his or her family members upon converting. Therefore, if the convert did not beget children after converting, and then died, he or she has no inheritors. In such a case, the Torah requires the thief to make the restitution payment to a *kohen*.

Rav Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izhbitz, in his *Mei Ha-shilo’ach*, makes an insightful observation about this command. The case of *gezel ha-ger* is a situation where a sin has been committed and there does not appear to be any possibility of expiation. This is an extraordinary case where there is nobody with whom the thief can make amends in an effort to erase his wrongdoing and earn full atonement – seemingly placing the thief in a hopeless condition of lifelong guilt. The Torah added a special section not only to teach the law that the money in this case is given to a *kohen*, but also to instruct that even when repentance and forgiveness do not seem possible, they are. The *Mei Ha-shilo’ach* thus viewed this section as especially meaningful and instructive, revealing to us that we can always repent, earn atonement, and make a fresh start. Even when one feels that the damage caused by his wrongdoing is irreparable – as in the case of *gezel ha-ger* – he is reassured that atonement is within reach. The process might be long and difficult, but he is able to correct his wrongdoing.

This insight of the Rebbe of Izhbitz lends greater significance to the famous position of the Rambam, in the beginning of *Hilkhot Teshuva*, that it is in the context of *gezel ha-ger* that the Torah introduces the *mitzva* of repentance. The Torah here commands the thief to confess his wrongdoing (“*Ve-hitvadu et chatatam asher asu*” – 5:7), and the Rambam points to this command as the Biblical source of the obligation to repent after committing a transgression. In light of the Rambam’s comments, the *Mei Ha-shilo’ach*’s observation becomes especially meaningful. The Torah specifically introduces the *mitzva* of *teshuva* in the context of a situation where atonement seems unattainable – to assure us that even in such a case, one is capable of repenting and earning forgiveness. The *mitzva* of *teshuva* empowers us with the confidence that we can change ourselves and, albeit to a lesser degree, we can change the negative reality we’ve created through our mistakes – even when this seems impossible.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Naso (5:11-31) discusses the procedure to be followed in the case of a *sota* – a woman suspected by her husband of infidelity. If the husband had warned the wife not to seclude with the suspected adulterer, and she was seen violating this warning, she is considered a *sota*, and marital relations are forbidden with her husband until she undergoes the process described by the Torah. The woman is brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and made to drink special water which would determine her guilt or innocence. The water would kill the woman if she was guilty of an adulterous act, and if she survived, the husband would be assured that his wife did not commit adultery, and they may resume marital life.

The Mishna in Masekhet Sota (7a) describes how, before the ritual, the woman would be brought before the judges of the *Sanhedrin*, who would try to persuade her to confess if she was guilty, in order to avoid the deadly consequences of proceeding with the *sota* ritual. The judges would tell her that factors such as wine, frivolity and negative peer influence can often lead a person to sin. The Mishna adds that the judges also told the woman “things that she is not worthy of hearing” – which Rashi explains as referring to stories of righteous figures in Tanakh who committed grave sins and repented. The woman was told all this so that she would be encouraged to confess and repent.

Rav Henoch Lebowitz, in *Chiddushei Ha-leiv*, notes the significance of the fact that the judges would try to persuade the woman to confess specifically by downplaying the severity of her alleged sin. Intuitively, we might have assumed that if they wanted the woman to regret her actions and repent, they should emphasize the gravity of her offense, for which she must feel and express guilt. But the judges did just the opposite, showing that they understood the temptations and lures that can lead one to wrongful conduct, and assuring the woman that even great people have made similar mistakes. The reason, Rav Lebowitz explains, is because the more the gravity of a person’s sin is emphasized, the more shame the violator feels – making it more difficult to confess and accept responsibility. If we want to encourage a wrongdoer to admit his or her wrongdoing and resolve to improve, we need to lessen the shame by showing sensitivity and understanding to the numerous factors that often lead to improper conduct.

Rav Lebowitz applies this principle to education, and to the proper approach to discipline and responding to misbehavior. Parents and educators instinctively feel the need to magnify as much as possible the severity of the misdeed, to impress upon the child how wrong the act is, so that it would not be repeated. The judges’ words to the *sota*, however, perhaps show us that the more effective response is to do just the opposite, to express to the child an understanding of what led him or her to commit the wrongful act – of course, without justifying the action. Rather than overwhelming the child with feelings of shame and guilt that discourage him or her from making an effort to improve, we should instead encourage the child by noting that mistakes are understandable, and that the child is still capable of achieving greatness. Downplaying the wrongfulness of the action, though counterintuitive, has the effect of conveying the message that the child acted incorrectly but is still an inherently good person with a great deal of potential and promise, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive change.

Friday

One of the subjects discussed in Parashat Naso (5:11-31) is the law of the *sota* – a woman whose husband suspects her of infidelity, and who violated his warning not to be secluded with the suspected violator. As the first Mishna of Masekhet Sota teaches, once the woman is seen going into a secluded room together with the man named by the husband, marital relations between the wife and her husband are forbidden, even though there are no witnesses to an illicit relationship. The Gemara (Sota 3a) states that in such a case, “*raglayim la-davar*” – there are compelling grounds for suspecting the woman of having an adulterous affair, given that the husband had suspected the wife of involvement in a forbidden relationship, and after he warned her she was seen secluding herself with the named man. Given the likelihood of an adulterous act having been committed, the husband and wife may not engage in intimacy, since an unfaithful wife may never again have intimate relations with her husband. The wife must then go to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* where she drinks the special water, which determines her status. If the water does not cause her to die, then she may be presumed innocent of adultery, whereupon she and her husband may resume normal marital relations.

The Mishna later in Masekhet Sota (22b) cites the view of Rebbi (Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi) that “*zekhut tola*” – it could happen that the woman’s punishment is delayed due to some merit. Meaning, even if the woman was guilty, the water would not necessarily kill her right after drinking, in the merit of good deeds which she had performed, and she would remain alive. Rabbi Shimon disagreed, and maintained that a woman’s merits would not save her from the immediate effects of the water if she had committed adultery.

The question naturally arises, according to the view of Rebbi, why are the husband and wife permitted to resume marital relations if the wife survives the *sota* ordeal? If, as Rebbi maintained, the wife’s survival does not necessarily prove her innocence, as the effects of the water may have been delayed due to her merit, then why does intimacy become permissible after she drinks?

Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk, in his *Or Samei’ach* (*Hilkhot Issurei Bi’a* 18:10) and in his *Meshekh Chokhma* (Bamidbar 5:20), explains, very simply, that once the wife drinks the water and survives, it can no longer be said that “*raglayim la-davar*” – that there are compelling grounds for suspicion. In a sense, her survival after drinking the water offsets the incriminating evidence on the basis of which relations with her husband became forbidden. Since marital relations were forbidden only because of “*raglayim la-davar*,” as there was no testimony of an adulterous relationship, she becomes permitted after drinking the water, despite the possibility that she was spared because of some merit. This possibility is remote, and therefore her survival gives us less reason to suspect her guilt, such that she and her husband may resume intimate relations.

A different explanation is offered by Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*. He explains that a woman is forbidden to have relations with her husband after committing adultery as a punishment for her infidelity. It is not the act itself that makes relations with her husband forbidden, but rather her guilt. Indeed, marital relations do not become forbidden after a married woman is raped, seemingly proving that the prohibition should be viewed as a punishment, and not as the halakhic consequence of an extramarital sexual encounter. If so, Rav Ginsburg suggests, then it should not surprise us that marital relations become permissible after a *sota* drinks the water, despite the possibility that she is guilty but survived the ordeal due to some merit. Quite simply, the same merit that spared her the deadly effects of the water also spares her the prohibition against relations with her husband, and therefore she and her husband may resume marital relations notwithstanding the possibility that she had in fact betrayed her husband.

Rav Ginsburg notes, however, that according to this theory, we must seemingly conclude that the concept of “*zekhut tola*” does not apply if the husband is a *kohen*. A *kohen* and his wife are forbidden to engage in relations if the wife slept with another man even if the encounter was nonconsensual. Necessarily, then, in the case of a *kohen*’s wife,this prohibition is not a punishment for the wife, but rather a natural consequence of her defilement. As such, in the case of a *sota* whose husband is a *kohen*, if she had committed adultery, she could not be allowed to resume marital relations on the basis of some merit. Seemingly, then, we must conclude that the notion of “*zekhut tola*” does not apply in the case of a *kohen*’s wife, as she cannot be spared the deadly effects of the water in the merit of prior good deeds, for otherwise, she could not be allowed to resume intimacy with her husband after drinking the water.

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