



Parashat Nasso: The Art Of Living Life

Dear Friends,

Parashat Nasso is the longest in the Torah, and it is full of insights and guidelines for life. One of the less talked about topics it dwells on is the issue of nazirites, in which a man or a woman chose to abstain from all forms of material indulgence and devote their lives entirely to contemplating the Divine.

Nazarite asceticism is a vow of abstinence from a number of things: any kind of liquor - even fresh grapes or raisins, cutting one's hair, and being in the presence of a dead person - even a close family member. (A Cohen is allowed to attend his parents' funeral. Not so a nazirite!)

“The LORD spoke to Moses, saying... 'If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the LORD, 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. Throughout his term as nazirite, he may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds or skin. Throughout the term of his vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch his head... he shall not go in where there is a dead person. Even if his father or mother, or his brother or sister should die, he must not defile himself for them, since hair set apart for his God is upon his head: throughout his term as nazirite he is consecrated to the LORD.’” (Bamidbar 6:1-8)

Some of us may feel that being a nazirite is difficult, that abstaining from worldly delights is possible only for the very spiritual and strong. But is this so? Perhaps the opposite is true!

This parasha, along with a few others, give the impression that the Torah does not like asceticism at all, neither does it like vows. These two things, which may seem the highest expression of spiritual life, are perceived in the Torah as inferior and as a sign of human weakness.

This may be one of the greatest differences between Judaism and Christianity, a religion in which vows and asceticism are considered the height of spirituality.

If or when a nazirite breaks his vow - intentionally or not - he must undergo a rite releasing him from his vow. This ceremony involves sacrificing a **guilt** offering, and the hair he has grown is burned on the fire of the altar.

One may think that the guilt offering is for the sin of having broken his vow. Not so! The opposite is more likely: the nazirite, having returned to sanity, must bring a guilt offering to repent for the temporary insanity which seized him; for the asceticism which he took upon himself; for distancing himself from life!

Living life fully, with all of its complexity, is much more challenging than abstaining from it:

1. Close, intimate relationships are wonderful, but they are also the most challenging thing in our lives. They require exposure, compromise, listening, even when what is being said, whispered, or hurled is aimed at hurting us.
2. Accepting the burden of family involves a renunciation of complete freedom and of the pursuit of our own desires at any given moment.
3. The daily struggle with the temptations of life - the decisions we make at every moment of the day between what to indulge and what to let go; the feeling of failure and guilt when we don't meet our own expectations - all of these are difficult and exhausting.

This week a friend told me about his ongoing battle with obesity. Unlike liquor or drugs - he explained - food is not something one can withdraw from altogether, because we have to eat. Deciding what to eat and what to forgo, abstaining from delicious delicacies, considering numerous times a day whether to satisfy the feelings of hunger or listen to them and yet ignore them - all of these constitute a cruel struggle he faces every hour of the day. He will continue to struggle with this for the rest of his life!

Isn't it easier to just give it all up - to distance oneself from the turmoil of life, find a safe place in which to hide from the noise, from the never-ending demands imposed on us by our family and surroundings, and from all the temptations and pain?

Don't you feel like avoiding life's challenges sometimes? Tell me you don't dream of retiring from it all once in a while!

It seems that the Torah is asking that we avoid avoidance...demanding that we not pass life by but rather live it and let both the pain and the pleasure flow throughout our body.

Indeed, one of the biggest temptations we all have is to avoid pain. I know two main ways to do this: the first is to distance oneself from everything that can cause pain, which is what asceticism does, and the second - the opposite - is to deaden the pain through obsessive eating or sexuality, and excessive use of various chemicals and alcohol.

The Torah hints - and sometimes demands - that we live creation to the fullest! This may be the point of life - to live. L'Chayim, we call out at every festive gathering.

There is an error, common to believer and atheists alike: that salvation will come from outside of oneself! Most people of faith imagine God as a power that is "out there", outside of

the world, outside of the currents of life, outside of pain and disease. That power, they hope, “watches over us from above.” Atheists, too, believe that relief from the burdens of life, perhaps even happiness, exists “somewhere out there”: the dream vacation abroad, the grass on the other side, that career, the other woman or man, the house across the street. The illusions that God and happiness are “somewhere” else “out there” are identical, but one person uses the term God and the other uses a different name (love, satisfaction, financial security, etc.).

Human beings, as opposed to animals, have no sense of boundaries. We are never satisfied, and that too is part of the difficulty we are dealing with here. On the one hand, we say live life to the fullest, and on the other... when is enough enough? When should one stop eating, drinking, being sexual, even living? And are these boundaries contrary to the mitzvah of living life to the **fullest**?

Boundaries are a necessary part of the game of life. Boundaries create reality. Without them reality would not exist! Every “thing” in reality has a beginning, a middle, and an end - is surrounded by a boundary. Without it it could not exist.

People who take a vow to be nazirites are often in conflict with the boundaries in their life. And because boundaries challenge them, they go to the other extreme - they impose upon themselves abstention from everything, i.e. a radical and artificial boundary to save them from themselves. But this extreme boundary says “no” to reality and to life.

As Shakespeare wrote, life is the complex art of being or not being: without clear boundaries there is nothing - everything becomes one indistinguishable mess. Too many boundaries stifle the flow of creativity and kill life.

So how does one live life, and to the fullest?

The invitation this week, as we begin the long journey in the great wilderness of life, is to find God **WITHIN** life, to know Him or Her with every step we take on this dry and wondrous land. For those who prefer using other vocabulary for the Divine, the invitation is to seek pleasure and happiness **in** the here and now, not in the “there” and “the future.”

It is very hard! And it isn't instantaneous. This is perhaps the art of life. And our parasha indicates that any other option is a sin.

Tomorrow night and Sunday we will be celebrating Shavu'ot - the giving of the Torah of life to the Jewish people. You are invited to the many activities taking place at Veahavta: a Tikkun Leil Shavu'ot about “Who Moved My Cheese?” - growing from the changes life imposes upon us, and a festive (and tasty) reading of the Book of Ruth on Sunday afternoon at the Meitals'. All activities are open to the public and are free of charge. See the weekly email that Dannii sent for all of the details.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach - a chag of milk and honey, and the bee sting too (to quote Naomi Shemer's famous song, Al Hadvash Ve'al Ha'oketz).

Elisha