

Parashat Naso

Why Are the Laws of the Nazir and the Sota Juxtaposed?

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. INTRODUCTION

In response to the question in the title above, the Gemara (Sota 2a) answers: "To teach you that anyone who sees the sota (suspected adultress) in her disgrace will vow to abstain from wine [as does the nazir]." This conveys an educational message as to the serious damage that can result from excessive consumption of alcohol. Indeed, the connection between wine and prohibited sexual relationships appears many times in Tanakh – from the somewhat opaque story of Noach's inebriation, via Lot and his daughters, up to warnings by the prophets about wine, such as "Prostitution and wine and new wine take away the heart" (Hoshea 4:11) [1]. However, the literal text seems to indicate another reason for the juxtaposition of the two subjects.

B. "HE SHALL GROW THE HAIR OF HIS HEAD WILD"

First we must ask, why are the parashot of the nazir and the sota placed together with issues pertaining to the consecration of the Leviim? Chapters 3-4 discuss the selection of the Leviim and their functions, chapters 7-8 deal with the dedication of the Mishkan and the sanctification of the Kohanim and Leviim for their service. Why, in the middle of this process, do the sota (chapter 5) and nazir (chapter 6) suddenly appear?

It seems that the Torah seeks to emphasize that, although the Leviim were chosen because of their inherent qualities, it is still possible for any man or woman in Israel to reach an elevated level of sanctity. We may point to several parallels between the nazir and the Kohanim:

1. Concerning the Kohanim we are told, "They shall be holy to their God" (Vayikra 21:6), and concerning the nazir – "He is holy to God" (6:8).
2. During his service the Kohen is commanded, "You shall not drink wine or strong drink" (Vayikra 10:9), just as the nazir is commanded, "He shall abstain from wine and strong drink" (6:3).

3. Both the Kohen and the nazir are forbidden from becoming ritually impure through contact with a corpse.

However, this last point of comparison raises a difficulty. The sanctity of the kohanim, resulting in special mitzvot that they must observe, arises from their service in the Temple, as explained in parashat Emor:

They shall be holy to their God and they shall not defile the name of their God, for the offerings to God by fire – the bread of their God – they offer up, and they shall be holy... and you shall sanctify him for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you... (Vayikra 21:6-8)

Clearly, this sanctity cannot be attributed to a nazir, since he does not perform service in the Temple.

Thus, it would seem that the sanctity of the nazir resembles more closely the sanctity of the Kohen Gadol. In contrast to the regular kohanim, whose sanctity is dependent upon and arises from their service in the Temple, the sanctity of the Kohen Gadol arises from the very fact that he is anointed with the anointing oil:

The one who is Kohen Gadol from among his brethren, who shall have the anointing oil poured over his head and who is consecrated to wear the holy garments... He shall not go in to any dead body, nor shall he render himself impure for his father or for his mother... He shall not desecrate the Temple of his God, for the crown ("nezer") of the anointing oil of his God is upon him; I am God. (ibid. 10-12) [2]

It should be noted that aside from the "crown" (nezer) mentioned here – the oil with which the Kohen Gadol is anointed once in his life – there is also another "nezer" that is placed upon the Kohen Gadol's head throughout his life – the "tzitz." The Torah commands the two types of "nezer" in juxtaposition:

You shall place the turban upon his head and you shall place the holy NEZER upon the turban. And you shall take the ANOINTING OIL and pour it over his head, and anoint him. (Shemot 29:6-7)

It is the crown of oil and the crown of the "tzitz," more than anything else, that express the unique sanctity of the Kohen Gadol.

All of this is very similar to what we are told concerning the nazir:

He shall not be rendered impure for his father or his mother or his brother or his sister, if they should die, for the crown ("nezer") of God is upon his head. All the days that he is a nazir he is holy to God. (Bamidbar 6:6-7)

What is the "nezer" that is referred to here? From the verses it would appear that it is the nazir's long hair that represents his crown: "All the days of his nazir vow, no razor shall pass over his head; until the days of his being a nazir to God are fulfilled he shall be holy, he shall grow his hair wild (long)" (ibid. 5). Both the nazir and the Kohen Gadol are forbidden to render themselves ritually impure through contact with a corpse – even for the purposes of tending to their own close relatives – for God's CROWN (nezer) is upon their heads. A person who undertakes the obligations of a nazir can sanctify himself through growing his hair long, and this sanctity obligates him to avoid ritual impurity and to abstain from wine.

However, there is a clear difference between the sanctity of the Kohen Gadol and that of the nazir. While the natural sanctity of the Kohen Gadol obligates him to refrain from growing his hair (Vayikra 21:10), the nazir – whose (temporary) sanctity is based on choice - is commanded precisely the opposite: "He shall grow his hair long" (6:5). The sanctity of the Kohen Gadol is not connected to his hair. On the contrary – it is possible that the prohibition against growing his hair, even during a period of mourning, is aimed at preventing any effacement of the tzitz, or of the impression left by his anointment with oil, both of which symbolize his sanctity. The sanctity of the nazir, in contrast, finds expression in God's crown that is upon his head – i.e. his hair, and the moment that his period of being a nazir is over, he must shave his head [3]. Indeed, the most famous of all nezirim – Shimshon - testifies as follows:

No razor has touched my head, for I am a nazir to God from my mother's womb. If my hair was to be shaven then I would lose my strength and become weak, and I would be like any other person. (Shoftim 16:17)

In light of the above, we can understand the single prohibition addressed to kohanim that does not apply to the nazir – that of marrying a widow, divorcee, etc. This prohibition pertains, by definition, to an extended period, and hence it does not apply to a nazir, whose period of special sanctity is only temporary.

The juxtaposition of the parasha of the nazir to that of the sanctification of the Kohanim and Leviim therefore comes to teach us that although the tribe of Levi has a special quality of sanctity from birth, a regular Israelite can achieve the highest level of sanctity, through becoming a nazir. This sanctity will, admittedly, be of temporary duration, but it is truly an elevated level, matching that of the Kohen Gadol.

Let us now clarify the significance of the juxtaposition of parashat sota to this broad context.

C. "AND HE SHALL LOOSEN WOMAN'S HAIR"

The connection between the parasha of the nazir and that of the sota is clear.

1. Both open with a similar introduction: "And God spoke to Moshe saying, Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: A man whose wife has gone astray..." (5:11-12); "And God spoke to Moshe saying, Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: A man or woman who makes a special vow of a nazir..." (6:1-2) [4].
2. Both also conclude with the same formulation: "This is the teaching of jealousy, when a woman strays..." (5:29); "This is the teaching of the nazir, who vows..." (6:21).
3. In both instances, the kohen plays a central role, inter alia fulfilling the mitzva of the wave offering: "And he shall wave the mincha offering before God" (5:25); "And the Kohen shall wave them for a wave offering before God" (6:20).

However, this similarity only serves to sharpen the very acute difference between the nazir and the sota. We discussed the sanctity of the Kohanim, addressed in Vayikra 21. This chapter follows immediately after chapter 20, which lists the forbidden sexual relationships. There, too, there is an inverse connection between the two juxtaposed chapters, for they present the two extremes: chapter 21 describes the loftiest levels of human sanctity, while the prohibitions of "arayot" represent the greatest possible affront to sanctity. The essence of the Torah's teaching in this sphere is the obligation of Am Yisrael to be holy. The parasha of "arayot" begins with the warning, "You shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am the Lord your God" (Vayikra 20:7). The first on the list of prohibited relations, following mention of one who curses his father or mother, is: "If a man commits adultery with a married woman, he commits adultery with his neighbor's wife – the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely die" (ibid. 8). At the end of the list, the Torah stresses once again, "You shall be holy to Me, for I, God, am holy, and I have distinguished you from the nations to be Mine" (verse 26) [5].

It is difficult, then, to ignore the connection between chapters 20-21 in Vayikra and chapters 5-6 in Bamidbar. In Bamidbar, too, we find that the chapter expressing the most severe affront to sanctity appears first: adultery between a married woman and another man. The affront to sanctity is expressed, inter alia, in the fact that the punishment of the sota comes about through "holy waters" (5:17). This is measure for measure: the holy waters harm a person who caused harm to the sanctity of Am

Yisrael. But immediately thereafter we find chapter 6, expressing the other side: man's ability to achieve exceptionally elevated levels of sanctity.

This contrast between the nazir and the sota is given a prominent place in the parasha. While the nazir is obligated to let his hair grow long and wild (gadal pera' se'ar rosho), when it comes to the sota it is specifically the Kohen who is commanded, "He shall loosen the woman's hair" (para' rosh ha-isha). The nazir grows his hair long of his own accord, and this symbolizes his special status; the sota has her hair loosened by the Kohen, expressing degradation and disgrace.

Indeed, the Tanakh relates to hair in two ways. On the one hand, we know of some biblical figures whose special character was symbolized by their hair – including the prophet Shemuel who, like a nazir, was "devoted to God for all the days of his life, and a razor shall not touch his head" (Shemuel I 1:11); likewise the prophet Eliyahu, who was called a "hairy man" (Melakhim II 1:8). Avshalom, son of David, was not a positive character in terms of morality, but his special beauty also stood out in his hair (Shemuel II 14:25-26 – "No one was as beautiful as Avshalom in all of Israel; of great praise – from his feet to his head there was no blemish in him. And when he shaved his head – it was after a long time that he shaved, for it was heavy upon him and so he shaved – he weighed the hair of his head: two hundred shekalim of the king's weights.")

On the other hand, letting hair grow long and wild expresses degradation or mourning. An example of this is to be found concerning the metzora – "His hair shall grow long and he shall cover his upper lip, and he shall call out, 'Impure, impure!'" (Vayikra 13:45). Likewise a mourner – as we learn from the prohibition to the Kohen Gadol: "He shall not grow his hair."

Thus we learn that the sanctity of kohanim is natural, stemming from birth, and they must not grow their hair long. The status of Bnei Yisrael, on the other hand, is determined in accordance with their actions. If they so wish, they may attain the pinnacle of sanctity, which is expressed externally through growing their hair long; an affront to sanctity, on the other hand, leads to loosening ("making wild") of the hair by others.

NOTES:

[1] In a different midrash, less well known, we find a different explanation for the connection between these two parashiot, which is very interesting in its own right (Shemot Rabba, parasha 16:2):

We find two parashiot that are juxtaposed – the nazir and the sota.

The nazir vows not to drink wine. The Holy One says to him: "You have vowed not to drink wine in order to distance yourself from sin? Then do not say, 'I shall eat grapes and I shall be guiltless.'" The Holy One tells him, "Since you have vowed concerning wine, I shall teach you how not to sin before Me." He told Moshe, "Teach Israel the laws of the nazir..."

Likewise a woman is called a vine... The Holy One said: "Do not say, 'Since it is forbidden for me to have relations with this woman, I shall merely grasp her – and then I shall be guiltless, or I shall merely embrace her – and I shall be guiltless, I shall kiss her and I shall be guiltless.'" The Holy One said: "If a nazir vows not to drink wine, it is likewise forbidden for him to eat fresh or dry grapes, or to drink grape juice, or anything else that is produced from the vine. Likewise, if a woman is not your wife, it is forbidden to have any physical contact with her at all..." Therefore the Holy One placed the parasha of nazir adjacent to that of sota, for they resemble one another."

For additional explanations, see Bamidbar Rabba parasha 1-4.

[2] It is possible that this difference between the Kohen Gadol and the rest of the kohanim also pertains to the question of whether the other kohanim are also anointed with oil. The answer seems to involve a contradiction between two different sources. In parashat Tzav, the consecration of the kohanim for their service during the seven days of "milu'im" is described; there, the Torah mentions the anointment of Aharon as part of the process of his consecration, while Moshe merely dresses Aharon's sons in the priestly garments: "And he poured from the anointing oil upon Aharon's head and he anointed him to sanctify him. And Moshe brought close the sons of Aharon and he dressed them in coats..." (Vayikra 8:12-13). This description corresponds to the command mentioned in Sefer Shemot 29:7-8 as part of the set of commands concerning the seven days of milu'im in that chapter.

However, in other places in Sefer Shemot it appears that Aharon's sons, too, are meant to be anointed. An example is the description of the commands in chapter 40 (13-15): "You shall dress Aharon in the holy garments and anoint him and sanctify him, that he may minister to Me. And you shall bring close his sons and dress them in coats. And you shall anoint them as you anointed their father" (see also 30:8).

The Ramban explains the contradiction between these sources in his commentary on Vayikra 8:12, where he writes that anointment with oil is actually mentioned only in relation to Aharon, while the anointment mentioned in connection with his sons refers

to a different action performed with the anointing oil, and which appears in parashat Tzav: "Moshe took from the anointing oil and from the blood that was upon the altar, and he sprinkled it upon Aharon and upon his clothes and upon his sons and upon the clothes of his sons with him, and he sanctified Aharon and his clothes, and his sons and the clothes of his sons with him" (8:30). Aharon's sons, then, were not anointed with oil upon their heads; they only had anointing oil and blood from the altar sprinkled upon their bodies and upon their clothes.

This explanation sits well with the idea that the sanctity of the kohanim arises from their offering of the sacrifices upon the altar, and it is therefore expressed specifically in the oil mixed with blood from the altar. The sanctity of the Kohen Gadol, on the other hand, arises from the very fact that he is anointed with the oil, not necessarily with any connection to the service in the Temple.

[3] This difference pertains to the controversial halakhic question, found in the Mishna in Nazir (7:1):

A Kohen Gadol and a nazir do not render themselves ritually impure for their relatives, but they may become impure for a "met mitzva" (a person who has died and who has no one else to tend to burial arrangements).

Suppose that [the Kohen Gadol and a nazir] were walking on the road and they an unidentified corpse. Rabbi Eliezer says, "Let the Kohen Gadol defile himself, but not the nazir," but the Sages say: "Let the nazir defile himself, but not the Kohen Gadol."

Rabbi Eliezer said to them: "Let the Kohen defile himself, for he does not bring a [guilt] offering for becoming impure, rather than the nazir – for he is obligated to bring a [guilt] offering."

They answered him: "Let the nazir defile himself, FOR HIS SANCTITY IS NOT AN ETERNAL SANCTITY, rather than the Kohen Gadol – whose sanctity is an eternal sanctity."

This reasoning of the Sages is brought at greater length in Massekhet Semachot (4:17)

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The Sages teach: Rather let a nazir defile himself, even if a hundred offerings would be required, but let the Kohen Gadol not be defiled – for he is sanctified from the womb, while the sanctity of the nazir is not from the womb. The sanctity of the Kohen Gadol lasts his whole life, while that of the nazir is temporary.

In the view of the Sages – and thus the halakha is decided – the elevated status of the Kohen Gadol, whose sanctity is forever, even from before his birth, gives him priority over the nazir. In a case where no other alternatives exist and one of the two must become impure (for a 'met mitzva'), it is preferable that the nazir do so, for his sanctity in any case is only temporary.

[4] It is interesting that there is only one other place in the Torah where this formulation appears: in the parasha of "arakhin" (estimated monetary value of a person for sacrificial purposes): "And God spoke to Moshe saying, Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: If a person makes a special vow to give the estimated value of a person to God..." (Vayikra 27:1). This introduction is particularly reminiscent of the parasha of the nazir (in both cases the Torah mentions a "special" vow – "ki yafli...").

Like the situation of the nazir, here too the Torah contrasts the possibility of a person creating sanctity on his own with a sanctity that is not dependent on man. But while in the parasha of nazir the sanctity of this individual is contrasted with that of the Kohanim, in the parasha of "estimated values," at the end of Sefer Vayikra, it stands in contrast to the sanctity of the mitzvot – a contrast that finds extreme expression in the parashat of Behar and in the rebuke at the beginning of parashat Bechukotai. Concerning this point, see the article by Z. Weitman, "Shemitta and the Temple," Megadim 3, Sivan 5747, pp. 9-20.

[5] This is in contrast to chapter 18 of Vayikra, where the emphasis lies on forbidden relationships as causing impurity, rather than on them injuring sanctity. This point also explains the differences between the lists of forbidden relationships in these two sources, but the scope of this shiur does not allow for a full discussion of this subject.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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