

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Naso
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Naso – What can we learn from juxtaposed passages

This week we read Parashat Naso which covers a number of topics, including the halachot of the Sotah and the Nazir.

The case of the Sotah is as follows. A married woman behaves in a too-friendly manner with another man, and her husband is concerned. He warns her not to seclude herself with that man, but she does. The husband has no idea if the woman was actually unfaithful because there are no witnesses. The only way the husband can be appeased and the relationship restored is if Hashem Himself testifies that the wife was faithful. And in His kindness, that is what Hashem does. The Torah prescribes a procedure to be performed in the Bet Hamikdash, including dissolving a passage of the Torah, which includes Hashem's Name, into water. This is ordinarily strictly forbidden. The woman is given the waters to drink. If she is guilty, she is punished with a gruesome, unnatural death. If she is innocent, she survives the ordeal and is blessed with children. Thus, the wife's guilt or innocence can be objectively and conclusively proven. Hashem allows His Holy name to be erased in order to bring peace between husband and wife. The Ramban notes that this is the only mitzva where we actually rely on a miracle to be performed.

The very next passage in our Parasha deals with the Nazir. This is a person who takes a vow to temporarily act in a holy manner and abstain from wine, and comply with certain other restrictions. The pasuk states: “All the days of his status as a nazir he is holy to Hashem”. At the end of the Nazirite period, the Nazir brings a number of offerings including a sin offering. (There is an interesting discussion in the Gemara¹ and amongst the Rishonim as to whether the Nazir's 'sin' is that he is ceasing his elevated status and returning to ordinary life, or whether the 'sin' is that he denied himself certain pleasures in the first place.)

Rashi² asks: Why does the passage of the Nazir immediately follow the passage of the Sotah? The commentaries on Rashi³ strengthen the question. Since Chapter 30 of the book of Bamidbar deals with the laws of other vows, we would expect the laws of the Nazirite vow to appear there rather than here. Additionally, the passage of Sotah deals with inappropriate behaviour, whereas the Nazirite has elevated himself to a higher level of sanctity. So why does the Torah place this passage here? What is the purpose, and what can we learn from this?

Rashi then explains⁴ that this juxtaposition is to teach us that one who sees a Sotah in her disgrace should take upon himself a Nazirite vow and abstain from wine, because too much wine can lead to adultery. Many commentators have questioned this explanation. One who witnessed a Sotah process where the guilty Sotah died a gruesome death, would surely have their fear of heaven strengthened and be deterred from even being tempted from such behaviour! So why is it specifically people who witness the Sotah procedure who need to take on extra holiness?

¹ Taanit Daf 11a.

² Rashi's commentary to Bamidbar 6:2.

³ Minchat Yehuda, Sifsei Chachamim and Gur Aryeh (by the Maharal of Prague).

⁴ Based on the Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 10:2-4.

The Torah is teaching us a powerful lesson here. One who is exposed to negative behaviour is at risk of being influenced. Even if they know intellectually that the behaviour is wrong, the behaviour becomes less shocking to them simply because they now know that 'other people can act that way'. The viewer becomes slightly more desensitised, and the behaviour enters into the realm of possibility.⁵ The Torah recognises the insidiousness of this effect. That is one explanation why the Torah juxtaposes the passage of Sotah with the passage of Nazir.

The Rambam was keenly aware of the dangers of being exposed to negative influences. In Hilchot Deot,⁶ he rules that if one lives in a place where the norms of behaviour are evil, one should move to a different place. And if he cannot find such a place, and cannot avoid mixing with the locals, then one should rather go out and live in the desert where he can avoid the negative influences.

There is no question that we and our children are becoming more exposed to violence and lack of modesty through various media. What effect does this have on us and on the developing brains of children? There are many studies which strongly suggest a correlation between such exposure and negative short-term and long-term effects, including anti-social behaviour and mental health problems.⁷ As we saw above, the Torah already knew about this problem of exposure and desensitisation long before these psychological studies were conducted.

Most of us know instinctively that exposure to violence and immodesty is detrimental, yet it is difficult to avoid such exposures or other negative influences altogether. The Rambam's advice may not be practical for all of us! It can be very difficult to remove ourselves totally from the negative influences that surround us. We live in society and we go to work and school and mingle with people, some of whom are not the best influence. What can we do to help ourselves and our children other than moving to the desert?

These days, after the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash, we don't currently have the institution of Nazir.⁸ However, we can still learn from this juxtaposition in our Parasha and accept upon ourselves an extra act of holiness in order to strengthen ourselves spiritually. For instance, we could refrain from an unnecessary pleasure in our lives or take on something more spiritual.

Perhaps another effective way to minimise being negatively influenced is to focus on, and strengthen, our power of influence. We can encourage our children and ourselves to be proud of who we are and proud of our values. Then, we can actively try to influence others positively, and try to bring others up to our level!

Let's try something this week:

1. Notice any negative exposures and be aware of their powerful influence on us and our children.
2. Take on an act of holiness such as reducing screen time, installing a filter, checking hechshers more carefully, vetting our children's books and computer games.
3. If we are forced to interact with people who drag us down, try to drag them up instead!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ This is one underlying reason why Amalek are singled out as one of the greatest enemies of the Jewish people. After all of the wondrous miracles connected with Yetziyat Mitzrayim, Bnei Yisrael were untouchable. Amalek were the first nation to attack Bnei Yisrael. Even though they suffered a resounding defeat, they demonstrated to the other nations that Bnei Yisrael were in fact not untouchable. The idea of attacking Beni Yisrael, which was considered impossible by the other nations, thus entered the realm of possibility.

⁶ Chapter 6, Halacha 1.

⁷ See for example Chapter 6 of "To Kindle A Soul" by Lawrence Kelemen.

⁸ In theory, it is possible to take a vow to become a Nazir even these days. However, in the absence of the Bet Hamikdash, there is no mechanism to end the vow and thus one who took such a vow would remain a Nazir for life. There was a well-known nazir in recent times, Rav David Cohen (1887-1972), known as "Rav Ha-Nazir," the Nazirite Rabbi). He was a disciple of Rav Kook and he took a Nazirite vow at the outbreak of World War I.