

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 deals with a number of issues, including the halachot of the Sotah and the Nazir.

The case of the Sotah is as follows. A married woman was behaving in a too-friendly manner with another man, and her husband was concerned. He warned her not to seclude herself with that man, but she does. The husband has no idea if the woman was actually unfaithful because there were no witnesses. The only way that the husband can be appeased and the relationship restored, is if Hashem Himself would testify that the wife was faithful. And in His kindness, that is what Hashem does. The Torah prescribes a whole procedure to be performed in the Bet Hamikdash, including dissolving a passage of the Torah which includes Hashem's Name into water (which is ordinarily strictly forbidden). The woman is given the waters to drink. If she is guilty, she is punished with a miraculous, gruesome 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 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 following 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 Gemara 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.

Rashi¹ asks: Why does the passage of the Nazir immediately follow the passage of the Sotah? The commentaries on Rashi² 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 specifically juxtapose these two passages?

Rashi then explains³ 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 pointed out that this doesn't seem to make sense. One who witnessed the Sotah process and saw the guilty Sotah dying a

¹ Rashi's commentary to Bamidbar 6:2.

² Minchat Yehuda, Sifsei Chachamim and Gur Aryeh (by the Maharal of Prague).

³ Based on the Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 10:2-4.

miraculous and 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 be more careful?

The Torah is teaching us a powerful lesson here. One who is exposed to negative behaviour is always 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 act that way'. The viewer becomes desensitised and the behaviour enters into the realm of possibility.⁴ The Torah recognises the insidiousness of this process. That is 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,⁵ he rules that if one lives in a place where the norms of behaviour are evil, they should move to a different place. And if he cannot find such a place, and cannot avoid mixing with the locals, then he 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 other inappropriate influences 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. But 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 gratuitous violence is detrimental, yet it is difficult to avoid such exposures altogether. The Rambam's advice may not be practical for all of us! It can often be difficult to remove ourselves totally from negative influences. 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 when we can't avoid such situations? Perhaps one effective way to minimise being influenced is to focus on, and strengthen, our power of influence instead. We can encourage our children and ourselves to be proud of who we are and proud of our values. Instead of being influenced, we can focus on being the ones who influence, 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. If we are forced to interact with people who drag us down, try to focus on dragging them up instead!

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ This is similar to the 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.

⁵ Chapter 6, Halacha 1.