

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?

Naso – The very expensive hotel

Let's take a look at a young Jewish corporate lawyer from Australia working on a huge deal. We'll call him Ari.¹

Ari was working on a very complex leveraged cross-border lease. He had to fly to New York with his legal partner for an intensive week to close the deal. He flew business class of course so that he could be refreshed and ready to hit the ground running. He was put up in a very comfortable suite in a five-star hotel, but he didn't get to see much of it because he spent most of the time in the office. Ari was responsible for making sure that every piece of paper was signed, stamped, lodged and filed as required. And there were close to 2,000 pieces of paper! It was a crazy week, they worked almost around the clock from Monday morning until very late on Thursday night to get the deal done. There were a number of challenges that Ari had to deal with, including keeping kosher and keeping Shabbat and staying focused on his work with very little sleep. But there was one challenge that Ari did not have to worry about at all – paying the bills. The business class flight, the hotel, the meals. Whenever Ari was hungry or thirsty he could order whatever he felt like. It was all on the tab of the client. The client was making a lot of money out of this deal, and it was in the client's interest that Ari was fresh and working at his peak capacity (well, as fresh as can be expected on three hours sleep per night!)

This week's Parsha of Naso teaches us about the mitzva of becoming a Nazir. One who takes a vow to become a Nazir must stay away from wine and other grape products and refrain from cutting his hair or becoming impure from a corpse. In this way, he guards himself from sin and he is considered to resemble the Kohen Gadol!² The pasuk states “All the days of his status as a Nazir he is holy to Hashem”. When he completes his Nazirite period he must bring a number of korbanot to revert to his usual status.³ One of those korbanot is a sin offering. A question arises - why would a Nazir bring a sin offering? This question prompted a debate that started in the Gemara⁴ and continues through the ages. Some say that the life of a Nazir is the ideal, and he brings a sin offering to atone for him ceasing to be a Nazir and returning to his usual status. Others say that the state of being a Nazir, although laudable and often appropriate, contains within it an aspect of sin. The Nazir denies himself wine and for this reason he is called a sinner.

So what is a Nazir? A sinner or a saint? Rav Dessler⁵ points out that we see this same apparent inconsistency in other places as well. On the one hand, we are told “Rather than praying that Torah should enter his mind, one should pray that tasty delicacies should not enter his body”.⁶ But on the other hand, we are taught that we will face judgement for everything that we see but do not taste”.⁷ On the one hand, we read that Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi on his deathbed said “Master of the Universe, it is revealed and known before You, that I toiled with my ten fingers in Torah, but I did not benefit from worldly pleasures even according to the toil of my little finger.”⁸ But on the other hand, we are told “Whoever undertakes a

¹ This anecdote is based on a real incident.

² Bamidbar Rabba 10:11.

³ In the absence of the Bet Hamikdash it is not possible to bring the requisite korbanot. Therefore, one who decides to become a Nazir these days would need to remain as a Nazir for the rest of their life, or until the Bet Hamikdash is rebuilt.

⁴ Gemara, Ta'anit 11a.

⁵ “Strive for Truth, Part 6”, Feldheim Publishers, p59.

⁶ Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Rabba, 26.

⁷ Talmud Yerushalmi, end of Kiddushin.

⁸ Ketubot 104a.

voluntary fast is called a sinner". So which is it? Is it good to enjoy the pleasures of this world or is it better to abstain?

Rav Dessler explains that there are two levels. If a person feels that he is being overcome by physical desires, it is appropriate to abstain, so as to control his yetzer hara. However, the higher level is the person who has control over his physical desires. He *should* taste the pleasures of this world so that he can say a bracha with deep gratitude. The Kuzari⁹ writes that the higher a person's level, the more pleasure that they receive from eating. Such a person receives spiritual pleasure when he eats as he recognises and appreciates that the food is a gift from Hashem.

However, Rav Dessler also qualifies that it is not advisable to have too much of a good time in this world. He quotes Rav Simcha Zissel Broide¹⁰ that this world is "a very expensive hotel". Sometimes, one needs to pay for what one enjoys in this world with very precious currency – the currency of the World to Come! So in effect, we may be trading our eternal reward for some temporary pleasure.

This leaves us in a bit of a quandary. We all want to have some pleasure in this world, but we don't want to use up our eternal reward in the World to Come. So what do we do? Rav Simcha Zissel brings a brilliant solution from his teacher, Rav Yisrael Salanter. He recommends that we make ourselves essential to the community and thereby not have to pay our expenses out of our own pocket. If someone works for the community, it is appropriate for the community to pay his expenses.

Rav Dessler adds that a person may not be worthy with his own merits to achieve Heavenly aid. But if important work needs to be done for the community, and he devotes his energies to that task, he will often find that he receives the resources (including physical comforts) that he needs to do the job. And these benefits are not charged against his "spiritual account" in the World to Come. Rather, they are fringe benefits that go with the job, since they enable him to perform the job for others, for Hashem's other children. It is interesting that three of our greatest historical teachers who devoted their lives to disseminating Torah, were each blessed with enormous wealth – Moshe Rabbeinu who gave us the Written Torah, R' Yehuda HaNasi who gave us the Mishnah and Rav Ashi who gave us the Talmud Bavli.

This is similar to the idea in the Gemara¹¹ that teaches us that our annual salary is fixed every year on Rosh Hashana, but this excludes money that we spend on Shabbat, Yom Tov and Talmud Torah. Anything we spend on those areas will be reimbursed, and we do not even need to keep our receipts!¹² The Ritva¹³ adds that all money that we spend on mitzvot is included in this guarantee. The more we are required to spend on these holy matters, the more we are reimbursed.

So we see that there is a choice. If we want to enjoy some physical comforts in life without having to pay the bill – we can get a job at a big corporate law firm like Ari did, or we can devote ourselves to helping others and taking care of the needs of the community, and thereby enjoy the special privileges and fringe benefits of working for the Creator of the Universe.

Let's try something this week:

1. Look for opportunities to "work for the community" – Is there a job that needs to be done? Are there people who need help?
2. Try to hold back slightly from satisfying all of your physical desires all of the time. One powerful exercise is to try to deny yourself something very small each day.
3. When you do enjoy something delicious, try to recognise and appreciate that the food is a gift from Hashem and thereby elevate the physical enjoyment into something spiritual.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁹ III, 15-17.

¹⁰ The Alter of Kelm, one of the foremost students of Yisrael Salanter and one of the early leaders of the Musar movement.

¹¹ Baitza Daf 16a.

¹² Within limits of course. One should not act irresponsibly. However, one should feel entirely comfortable spending a bit more than they normally would in these areas. We are guaranteed Divine reimbursement. (In case of any doubt as to what is appropriate, one should check with their local Orthodox Rabbi.)

¹³ Quoted in the Shita Mekubetzet on Baita Daf 16.