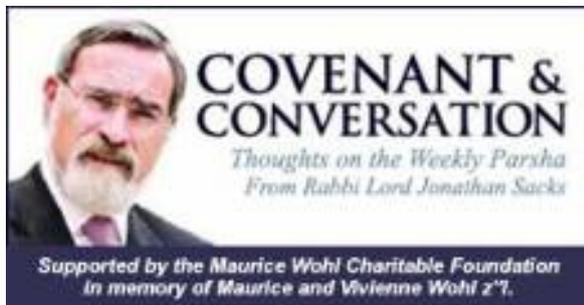


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On Leadership: The Politics of Envy

Few things in the Torah are more revolutionary than its conception of leadership.

Ancient societies were hierarchical. The masses were poor and prone to hunger and disease. They were usually illiterate. They were used by rulers as a means to wealth and power rather than people with individual rights – a concept born only in the seventeenth century. At times they formed a corvee, a vast conscripted labor force, often used to construct monumental buildings intended to glorify kings. At others they were dragooned into the army to further the ruler's imperial designs.

Rulers often had absolute power of life and death over their subjects. Not only were kings and pharaohs heads of state. They also held the

highest religious rank, as children of the gods or demigods themselves. Their power had nothing to do with the consent of the governed. It was seen as written into the fabric of the universe. Just as the sun ruled the sky and the lion ruled the animal realm so kings ruled their populations. That was how things were in nature, and nature itself was sacrosanct.

The Torah is a sustained polemic against this way of seeing things. Not just kings but all of us, regardless of colour, culture, creed or class, are in the image and likeness of God. In the Torah God summons his special people, Israel, to take the first steps to what might eventually become a truly egalitarian society – or to put it more precisely, a society in which dignity – *kavod* – does not depend on power or wealth or an accident of birth.

Hence the concept, which we will explore more fully in parshat Korach, of *leadership as service*. The highest title accorded to Moses in the Torah is that he was *eved haShem*, “a servant of God.” His highest praise is that he was “very humble, more so than anyone else on earth” (Num. 12: 3). To lead is to serve. Greatness is humility. As the book of Proverbs puts it, “A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour” (Prov. 29: 23).

The Torah points us in the direction of an ideal world, but it does not assume that we have reached it yet or are within striking distance. The people Moses led, like many of us today, were still prone to ambition, aspiration, vanity, and self-esteem. They still had the human desire for honour, status and respect. And Moses had to recognise that fact. It would be a major source of conflict in the months and years ahead. It is one of the primary themes of the

book of Bamidbar.

Of whom were the Israelites jealous? Most of them did not aspire to be Moses. He was, after all, the man who spoke to God and to whom God spoke. He performed miracles, brought plagues against the Egyptians, divided the Red Sea, and gave the people water from a rock and manna from heaven. Few would have had the hubris to believe they could do any of these things.

But they did have reason to resent the fact that religious leadership seemed to be confined to one tribe, Levi, and one family within that tribe, the Cohanim, male descendants of Aaron. Now that the tabernacle was to be consecrated and the people were about to begin the second half of their journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land, there was a real risk of envy and animosity.

That is a constant throughout history. We desire, said Shakespeare, “this man’s gift and that man’s scope.” Aeschylus said, “It is in the character of very few men to honor without envy a friend who has prospered.” Goethe warned that although “Hatred is active, and envy passive dislike; there is but one step from envy to hate.” Jews should know this in their very bones. We have often been envied, and all too frequently that envy has turned to hate with tragic consequences.

Leaders need to be aware of the perils of envy, especially within the people they lead. This is one of the unifying themes of the long and apparently disconnected parsha of Naso.

In it we see Moshe confronting three potential sources of envy. The first lay within the tribe of Levi. They had reason to resent the fact that

priesthood had gone to just one man and his descendants, Aaron, Moses’ brother.

The second had to do with individuals who were neither of the tribe of Levi nor of the family of Aaron but who felt that they had the right to be holy in the sense of having a special, intense relationship with God in the way that the Cohanim had.

The third had to do with the leadership of the other tribes who might have felt left out of the service of the Tabernacle. We see Moses dealing sequentially with all these potential dangers.

First he gives each Levitical clan a special role in carrying the vessels, furnishings and framework of the Tabernacle whenever the people journeyed from place to place. The most sacred objects were to be carried by the clan of Kohath. The Gershonites were to carry the cloths, coverings and drapes. The Merarites were to carry the planks, bars, posts and sockets that made up the Tabernacle’s framework. Each clan was, in other words, to have a special role in place in the solemn procession as the House of God was carried through the desert.

Next he deals with individuals who aspire to a higher level of holiness. This, it seems, is the underlying logic of the nazirite, the individual who vows to set himself apart for the Lord (Numbers 6:2). He was not to drink wine or any other grape product; he was not to have his hair cut; and he was not defile himself through contact with the dead. Becoming a Nazarite was, it seems, a way of temporarily assuming the kind of set-apartness associated with the priesthood, a voluntary extra degree of holiness.¹ Lastly, he turns to the leadership of the tribes. The highly repetitive chapter 7 of our parsha itemizes the offerings of each of the

tribes on the occasion of the dedication of the altar. Their offerings were identical, and the Torah could have abbreviated its account by describing the gifts brought by one tribe and stating that each of the other tribes did likewise. Yet the sheer repetition has the effect of emphasizing the fact that each tribe had its moment of glory. Each, by giving to the house of God, acquired its own share of honour.

These episodes are not the whole of Naso but enough of it to signal something that every leader and every group needs to take seriously. Even when people accept in principle the equal dignity of all, and even when they see leadership as service, the old dysfunctional passions die hard. People still resent the success of others. They still feel that honour has gone to others when it should have gone to them. Rabbi Elazar Ha-Kappar said: “Envy, lust and the pursuit of honour drive a person out of the world.”²

The fact that these are destructive emotions does not stop some people – perhaps most of us – feeling them from time to time, and nothing does more to put at risk the harmony of the group.

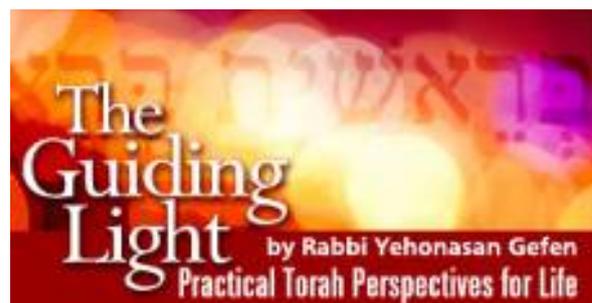
That is one reason why a leader must be humble. He or she should feel none of these things. But a leader must also be aware that not everyone is humble. Every Moses has a Korach, every Julius Caesar a Cassius, every Duncan a Macbeth, every Othello an Iago. In many groups there is a potential trouble-maker driven by a sense of injury to his self-esteem. These are often a leader’s deadliest enemies and they can do great damage to the group.

There is no way of eliminating the danger entirely, but Moses in this week’s parsha tells us

how to behave. Honour everyone equally. Pay special attention to potentially disaffected groups. Make each feel valued. Give everyone a moment in the limelight if only in a ceremonial way. Set a personal example of humility. Make it clear to all that leadership is service, not a form of status. Find ways in which those with a particular passion can express it, and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute.

There is no failsafe way to avoid the politics of envy but there are ways of minimizing it, and our parsha is an object lesson in how to do so.

1. See Maimonides, Hilkhos Shemittah ve-Yovel 13: 13.
2. Mishnah Avot 4: 21.



The Connection between Arrogance and Immorality

Bamidbar, 5:2: “Speak the Children of Israel, and you will say to them, ‘A man or a woman when he makes a vow to be a Nazir to Hashem.’”

Rashi, 5:2: Dh: “...why is the Portion of Nazir next to the portion of Sotah? To teach that whoever sees a Sotah in her disgrace, will separate himself from the wine, as it brings to immorality.”

The Torah Portion of Nasso outlines the Mitzva of Sotah and immediately follows with the Mitzva of Nazir, whereby a person refrains from

drinking wine, cutting his hair, and coming into contact with the dead. Rashi, citing the Gemara in Sotah¹, explains that the Sotah involved herself in immoral behavior and suffered the humiliating process of the Sotah as a consequence. Very often, the catalyst of such behavior is drinking too much wine, therefore, a person who sees what happens to the Sotah, may be motivated to want to avoid her mistakes, and therefore he or she becomes a Nazir who is forbidden to drink wine.

However, the Gemara in Nazir² brings a story that teaches a different reason for why a certain individual became a Nazir. Shimon haTzaddik (the righteous) said: “My entire life I never ate the guilt offering of an impure *Nazir* other than once (when he was convinced that this individual accepted upon himself the *Nezirut* laws strictly for the sake of Heaven). Once I saw a *Nazir* come from the South (to Jerusalem offer his sacrifice) and I saw that he was very handsome, and his hair was beautiful. I asked him, ‘My son, what prompted you to destroy this beautiful hair of yours’ (as is required in the ritual of bringing the *Nezirut* sacrifices at the completion of the period of *Nezirut*)? He told me, ‘I was a shepherd and I went to the well to draw water for my sheep. I saw my reflection in the water. I saw that my *yetser hara* (negative inclination) was getting a hold of me and was attempting to drive me from the world (because of arrogance). I said to my own *negative inclination*: ‘You wicked one, why do you get so excited about my beauty which is destined to one day turn into dust and worms. I swear that I will shave off my hair for the sake of Heaven.’ Shimon haTzaddik concluded: “I immediately arose and kissed him on his head and blessed him, “My son, may the

number of those who take *Nezirut* vows such as yours multiply in Israel. About people such as you it is written: ‘... a man or a woman who utters a *Nezirut* vow to dedicate himself to Hashem.’”³

In this story, what motivated the young man to become a Nazir? Feelings of arrogance that came about because of his beautiful hair. Because of these feelings, he became a Nazir in order to grow his hair and then cut it and offer the accompanying sacrifices. Yet, according to the Rabbinic teaching cited by Rashi, a person becomes a Nazir not because of arrogance, rather due to feelings of lust to engage in immoral behavior. How do we understand this incongruity?

The Chiddushei Lev⁴ notes a similar discrepancy with regard to the Mitzva of Sotah which can help us answer the question about the Nazir. Rashi⁵, citing the Midrash, writes that a person only gets involved in immorality because of a *ruach shtut* (a spirit of insanity). The commentaries write that this refers to a spirit of desire that leads a person astray. Yet, the Talmud suggests a different cause for immorality: “Rebbe Chiya Bar Abba says in the name of Rebbe Yochanan, ‘any man who has haughtiness will in the end stumble in forbidden relations with a married woman. Again, there seems to be a contradiction between the causes of immoral behavior that can lead to the tragic case of the Sotah – is it lust or arrogance?

The Chiddushei Lev answers that the direct cause of the sin of the Sotah is lust, but that the root cause of being lustful is arrogance. He explains that when he a person is arrogant, he believes that he is deserving of anything he wants, and therefore, he is willing to break

boundaries to get what he thinks he deserves. The Chiddushei Lev cites a Midrash⁶ in this vein that relates a story of a married man who wanted to act immorally with another woman, but his plans were foiled. His wife rebuked him that most men are happy if they are married, but he was greedy for more, and the cause of that greed his arrogance.

In the words of the Chiddushei Lev: "Since it is the way of a man to only lust after things that according to his opinion, he is deserving of and he can thereby attain them, if the man was not an arrogant person, then he would not desire to act immorally with the wife of another man, since he would feel that he is not deserving of more than he has, as is the case with most men who are satisfied with their wives and do not look for more."

It is possible to apply the same approach to the contradiction in Nazir. We asked that the Talmud in Sotah teaches that a person becomes a Nazir because of feelings of lust, whereas the Talmud in Nazir cited the instance of the young man who became a Nazir because of feelings of arrogance. In truth, both negative traits can cause a person to sin and therefore a person may be motivated to become a Nazir because of lustful feelings or arrogant feelings. However, based on the principle of the Chiddushei Lev, the underlying cause of his lust is in fact his arrogance, because that attitude leads him to believe that he has a right to all kinds of pleasures.

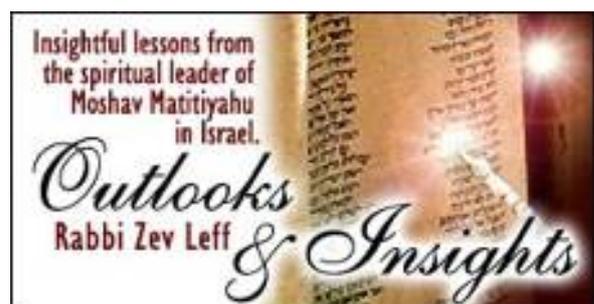
This idea can possibly help us understand why Shimon HaTzaddik suspected that every Nazir he knew was not acting for the sake of Heaven with the exception of this young man. Perhaps we can suggest that he was focusing on the trait

of arrogance which is the root cause of just, hence by striving purely to humble himself, he would thereby also control his lusts. However, most people become Nazirs because they are scared of the consequences of becoming too lustful, and while this is a commendable attitude, it does not address the underlying cause of the lustful feelings - arrogance.

Consequently, such a person may try to be a Nazir but may be swayed from acting totally for pure motives by his underlying feelings of arrogance.

We have learnt that sins involving immorality often have at their root feelings of arrogance, when a person has the attitude that he deserves every kind of pleasure. By focusing on humbly appreciating what he has, he can begin to address the root cause of immoral behavior.

1. Sotah, 2a.
2. Nazir, 4b.
3. Bamidbar, 6:2.
4. Chiddushei Lev, Nasso, pp.17-18.
5. Bamidbar, 5:12.
6. Bamidbar Rabbah, 9:3.



The Nazir: a Holy Sinner

"All the days of his abstinence, he is holy to God." (Numbers 6:8)
"The Kohen shall make one as a sin-offering and one as an elevation-offering, and he shall bring atonement on him for having

sinned against the person; and he shall sanctify his head on that day." (Numbers 6:11)

The *nazir* who vows not to drink wine is elevated to a level of holiness similar to that of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Like the Kohen Gadol, he is prohibited from defiling himself for the dead, even his closest relatives, and the Torah describes his hair, which he must let grow, as sanctified.

Yet this very same *nazir* must bring a *korban chatas* – a sin offering – at the termination of his vow. The Talmud explains that this sacrifice is to atone for the sin of denying himself the pleasure of wine. Thus the same vow which elevates him to a level of holiness also causes him to be adjudged a sinner. Why?

"All that the Holy One, Blessed is He, created in His world, He created solely for His glory." (Avot 6:11)

God created the world for man to utilize in His service, not to be retreated from. Every aspect of creation can and must be utilized to aid one in understanding and drawing closer to its Creator.

The Torah outlook on the physical world is diametrically opposed to the certain Christian viewpoints which teach that the material world is inherently evil. Any enjoyment of the pleasures of the physical world is permissible only as the lesser of two evils. The only sacrifice a non-Jew may bring is an *olah*, which is wholly consumed. The holiness [often] understood by the nations of the world is negation of the material world.

By contrast, the Jews' most exalted sacrifice is the *shelamim* (literally a perfect, harmonious

offering), where only a small portion of the offering is burnt on the altar. Most of the offering is eaten by the one who brought the sacrifice and the Kohen who offered it.

My Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, explained the verse, "*Be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy*" (Leviticus 19:2), to mean that just as God is intimately involved in every aspect of the physical world – since only His will at every moment allows anything to exist – so, too, must we have contact with the entire physical world. But our involvement must imitate God's: we must elevate and sanctify the physical, and not let the physical drag us into materialism devoid of spirituality.

In the World to Come, we will be taken to task for everything in this world we could have enjoyed and elevated but did not. Every year we make a blessing over the blooming fruit trees to remind ourselves that God created good and beneficial creations for man's enjoyment.

FRUIT OF THE VINE

The wine forbidden to the *nazir* can enhance our performance of various Mitzvot and occasions of joy by helping us give expression to our innermost sentiments. When detached, however, from Mitzvot and utilized as an end in itself, it degrades a person by robbing him of his most precious possession, his mind. Thus one who "sees a *sotah* (woman suspected of adultery) in her disgrace," i.e. brought to shame from an abuse of wine, and who recognizes a similar weakness in himself, should vow to abstain from wine for a period of time to control his weakness.

Recognizing one's weakness and choosing abstinence over abuse renders one holy. But lest

the *nazir* lose sight of the ideal, the Torah reminds him that he is nevertheless a sinner. He has not yet achieved the goal of life of elevating the entire physical world. Were he on the ideal level, he would not have to abstain from wine, but would instead utilize it for spiritual growth. Thus the same vow that renders him holy is also a compromise of the true ideal.

HAIR LESSONS

In this context, we can better understand the requirement that the *nazir* let his hair grow wild. The hair corresponds to the spiritual connections that link a person to his spiritual essence above. When the hair is in order, the physical and spiritual worlds mesh. Both the king and the Kohanim are required to cut their hair regularly as a sign of the orderly bond to the spiritual world that is necessary to properly fill their exalted positions of authority.

A *nazir* must let his hair grow wild to signify the short-circuit that necessitates his temperance. At the conclusion of his lesson in self-control, he shaves his hair to signify a new beginning, a total reorganization and rewiring of his physical-spiritual bonds. The hair is then burnt under the pot in which his *shelamim* offering is cooked to signify this new found harmony.

In this context the Torah states, "*and after* [this process] *the nazir can drink wine*" (Numbers 6:20). This verse is problematic, since after the process is finished he is no longer a *nazir*. The Torah is telling us that the purpose of his *nezirus* was not abstinence for its own sake, but rather as a lesson in how to properly drink wine after the period is over. Hence the goal of his *nezirus* is to drink wine as a *nazir*, as one sanctified and uplifted.



The Triple Pattern

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

One of the highlights of Parshat Naso is the Priestly Blessing. The text of this blessing, which the Kohanim bestow upon the Jewish people, concludes, "May God turn His face to you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26).

Our Sages speak very highly of the quality of peace. For example, we find the statement in the Midrash (Bamidbar Raba 11:7) in the name of R' Shimon bar Chalafta, "Great is peace, for there is no vessel that can receive blessing other than peace." The Midrash brings a proof to this idea from the verse (Psalms 29:11), "God will bless His nation with peace."

We can understand this idea more deeply by taking a closer look at the phrase, "His nation." The Jewish people are composed of three categories of people: Priests (Kohanim), Levites (Leviim), and Israelites (Yisraelim). The Hebrew acronym of the words "Kohanim," "Leviim," and "Yisraelim" spells the word *kli*, which means "vessel." Once we understand that the Jewish people themselves are a vessel, we can gain a more profound insight into the Midrash's statement. The vessel of the Jewish people can receive blessing only when there is peace!

We can offer four primary pieces of advice for

how to achieve peace with others:

1. Make sure that all our efforts are for God's sake. If we do everything for the honor of God, and not for the sake of boosting our own ego, we can view one another as part of the same team, pooling all of our different strengths and talents for a common goal.
2. Train ourselves to see only the good in others. Instead of being threatened or challenged by others' differences, view the differences as positive qualities.
3. The Peleh Yoetz suggests that we should focus on the reward we receive for making peace, as an incentive to pursue it. He gives a striking example. Imagine a person approaches you and asks you to make peace with someone you can't stand. Your initial reaction is to immediately turn down the offer. Then the person asks, "What if I give you \$50? Do you think you could try? How about \$100? Or \$1,000? If I give you \$100,000, could you do it? How about two million dollars?" There is a point at which every person would give in and decide it was worth the effort to make peace. According to the Peleh Yoetz, the reward we get in the World to Come for making peace far outweighs any financial bonus this world can offer. This knowledge should be an incentive to us to make peace.
4. Making peace sometimes requires us to compromise or to give in. We can do this only if we cultivate our humility and learn to be satisfied with the minimum.

THREE LEVITE FAMILIES

Although these four points are important, we can also suggest another approach in understanding God's expectation of us when it comes to peace. The beginning of this week's Torah portion focuses on the tribe of Levi, which is composed of three main families: Kehat, Gershon, and Merari. Based on the Shem MiShmuel and the Netivot Shalom, we can understand these three families as representing three spiritual levels.

The family of **Kehat** represents the highest, most righteous level. Their role is to carry the Holy Ark (Rashi on Numbers 4:4) - the highest component of the Tabernacle. The importance of this task underscores their lofty spiritual level.

The family of **Gershon** represents the middle level. They carry the curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:25). One side of the curtain is close to the intense sanctity of the Holy of Holies, while the other side is not. We could suggest that this curtain hints to the spiritual level of an average person, who fluctuates between moments of intense devotion and moments of feeling less connected to the Divine.

The family of **Merari** represents the lowest level. They carry the beams and pillars of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:31), the weight of which can be burdensome. This physical weight represents the heaviness of the lowest spiritual level.

The tribe of Levi is charged with teaching the Jewish people how to attach themselves to the Divine (see Rambam, "Shmita V'Yovel," 13:12-13). The three main families in this tribe show us that we are required to serve God not only when we are on a spiritual high, like the most

righteous people, and not only when we feel average, but even when we feel the lowest and furthest away from God. Regardless of the emotional state in which we find ourselves, we must commit ourselves to doing God's will with a positive attitude.

This idea will offer us a new perspective on God's expectation of peace. In addition to being at peace with others, we must learn to be at peace with ourselves - whatever level we are functioning on. When we are frustrated with ourselves, it is much more likely that we will lash out at others. Being at peace with ourselves, however, usually leads to our being at peace with others. If we can learn from the tribe of Levi how to maintain our inner equilibrium, we have a much better chance at establishing peace with others as well.

May we be blessed to cultivate within ourselves the four primary qualities that lead to peace: acting only for God's sake; seeing the good in others; focusing on the rewards earned through this behavior; and being humble and satisfied with the minimum, which will enable us to compromise. Most important, may we learn to be at peace with ourselves. May we recognize the worth of our service, even at its lowest point, and realize that, even then, we have the potential to function at the highest level.

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