

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Naso)

There is a story they tell about the Gadol Hador (one of the great rabbis of our generation) Rav Aharon Lichtenstein ztz"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Her Etzion, who passed away in April 2015.

Rav Aharon came to Israel in 1970 and although past conscription age, felt it incumbent upon himself to volunteer for service in the Israeli army. During his brief basic training, he was assigned to kitchen duty. One evening a student of Har Etzion who was serving in the same base, was giving his dishes to the duty soldier washing dishes and saw that it was his Rosh yeshiva, Rav Lichtenstein! Rav Aharon would not let the young student / soldier take his place, instead insisting on fulfilling his duty to sort and wash the dishes himself as it was his assigned duty! The story eventually became known to Rav Amital zatza"l, (Rav Aharon's co-Rosh yeshiva and a Colonel in the reserves himself) who promptly arranged for Rav Aharon to be transferred to different duties and responsible for giving lectures to soldiers instead.

I have often wondered why Rav Aharon initially insisted on fulfilling kitchen duties when it would have been an easy matter for him to arrange to be assigned duties more befitting a Rosh yeshiva of his stature allowing him to make a much greater contribution in keeping with his skills and talents.

This week, in the portion of *Naso*, we read of the Nazirite: The individual who for various reasons vows, for a period of thirty days, to abstain from wine and haircuts and not to defile himself by contact with death.

Interestingly, despite what would seem to be a holy decision to abstain from worldly pleasures in pursuit of a higher spiritual level, the Nazirite, as part of his concluding ceremony (before re-entering society and the world) brings a sin offering (a *Korban Chatat*). (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 6:13-14)

The Talmud (Rabbi Eliezer Ha'Kappar in Nedarim 10a) suggests that his 'sin' was his decision to deny himself the earthly pleasures of this world that G-d has declared as good. Apparently we are not meant to deny the world; we are meant to embrace it.

Yet, despite this Talmudic dictum, the **Ramban** (Nachmanides) suggests that his sin is actually the fact that he is now returning to the world of earthly pleasures; having achieved a higher level, he should desire to remain holier.

Even more puzzling is Maimonides (the **Rambam**) who on the one hand suggests (*Hilchot Nezirut* 10;14) that a person who dedicates himself as a Nazirite is 'wonderful and praiseworthy'. And yet, in *Hilchot Deot* (the Rambam's treatise on ethical excellence; see Deot 3:1) suggests that a person should not abstain from wine, and remove oneself from the world. Such a life of abstinence is viewed as a 'bad way to live'!

So which is it? Should we aspire to live above the physical necessities of the world and admire the ascetic? Or do we prefer a life which embraces the world of pleasure, viewing it as Hashem (G-d)'s bounty from which we are meant to partake?

It is interesting to note that in the same section of *Hilchot Deot* (1:4-5), the Rambam actually describes two personalities which may explain this apparent contradiction.

The **Chacham**, or wise man, is someone who succeeds in finding that ever elusive middle ground, the balance between extremes. This ideal persona is the person who knows when to give and when to hold back; when to speak and when to be silent; when to partake, and when to abstain. However, sometimes, perhaps concerned with whether he might not succeed in finding the ideal golden path, a person chooses the extreme. Determined to avoid anger and arrogance at all costs, he practices extreme humility or passivity, and will pursue ascetism rather than risk gluttony. Such a saintly person is called a **Chassid**. The Talmud describes such extremely pious individuals as **chassidim**, worthy of emulation.

Perhaps the Rambam then is referring to two different paths. On the one hand, the **Chasid**, focused on self-perfection as the highest ideal, and on the other hand, the **Chacham**, who views a balanced life as a way to be a partner in creating a better world.

Maimonides may be suggesting that a person cannot live both of these roles; we have to choose. The Ramban, in suggesting the Nazirite's sin is his willingness to re-enter the world of physical pleasure may be viewing the Nazirite as a person who has chosen the role of the Chassid, the extremely pious person. Even the Rambam agrees that such a person is praiseworthy; at the very least he is avoiding the pitfalls of the physical world. But the Talmud in Nedarim is suggesting that this is not the ideal. Such a person cannot also be a Chacham; he has chosen to perfect himself and that way of life does not allow for the balanced view of the Chacham. Such an extremist (albeit in piety) loses the ability to impact the world directly, rather living outside of it. His life is in the end more about himself, than about the world around him.

And thus Maimonides' point: that we are meant to live in the world, in order to influence and elevate it from within.

There are those who would suggest that we are better off leaving the world behind, and rising above it, perhaps sequestering ourselves in the halls of Talmudic study and refraining from engaging the physical mundane world. But the laws of the *Nazir* suggest that to be an inherently foreign idea. Judaism does not ask of us to abstain from the world, but rather to sanctify it even in the mundane every-day moment.

Thus, one of the greatest Rabbis of our generation could view it as a holy mission, to spend an evening washing an entire army base's dishes. How blessed were we who merited to learn from such a **Chacham**. *Yehi zichro baruch*. May his memory be for a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem,

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