

I have been struggling this week, to figure out what Torah has to say to me in this moment. Only a few days ago, we celebrated the receiving of Torah on Shavuot, and I learned so many beautiful teachings at our Tikkun Leyl Shavuot. One of the pillars of my personal faith, whatever else I might doubt, is that Torah always has something relevant to teach us.

But I have also been painfully aware of the ways in which attachment to the promises of Torah, and a general sense of religious exceptionalism on the part of a large faction of Israeli Jews, have exacerbated the violence that overtook Israel, the West Bank and Gaza these past two weeks. When I heard, for example, from Israelis on the ground, about busloads of Jewish Israelis coming to Israel's mixed cities to participate in riots targeting Israeli Arabs, when I read about the graffiti of "*mavet l'Aravim*" spray painted in Arab neighborhoods, there was a part of me that wanted to recoil and say, "not my Torah." "Not my Jewish people." It is related, I assume, to the impulse that led many progressive Americans to use the slogan "not my president" during the previous administration.

But I never liked the slogan "not my president," because I understand that in a democracy, our leaders implicate us all. And I cannot say, "not my Torah," and God forbid I should ever say, "not my Jewish people." Though it may be easier, by far, to feel kinship with the innocent Israeli children, shuddering in a bomb shelter, or innocent Gazan children killed or made homeless, I must own my kinship to the Israelis who roamed the streets, seeking innocents to assault (even if they do not feel much kinship to me). They are part of my Jewish people, and they are invoking my Torah, which I love so much, even though I condemn the violence.

So, I have been considering all week the *nazir*, referred to in English as the "Nazirite."

Described in this week's Torah portion, Naso, a *Nazir* is a person who takes a vow to abstain from certain activities that are otherwise permitted by Torah: during the duration of the vow, they do not drink wine or even consume any grape product (such as raisins or vinegar), they do not cut their hair, and they do not enter a cemetery or come into any contact with a dead body. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Z"l wrote, "Becoming a Nazirite was, it seems, a way of temporarily assuming the kind of set-apartness associated with the priesthood, a voluntary extra degree of holiness."

Our sages of blessed memory were a little uncomfortable with the nazir. They note that once the term of the vow is completed, the *nazir* always has to bring a *chatat*, a sin offering. At multiple places in the Talmud<sup>1</sup>, this comment appears: "R. Elazar HaKafar son of Rabbi said: What does the verse, And he will atone for him insofar as he sinned against the soul (BeMidbar 6:11), come to teach? Against which soul did he sin? Only in that he deprived himself. . ." The rabbinic opinion is that that it is sinful to *become* a nazir – that, in fact, disavowing completely that which is permitted (grape products), is a form a transgression. If we seek holiness by trying to set ourselves apart beyond what tradition requires, we transgress.

Dena Weiss of Hadar teaches, "[The *nazir*] decides that because wine can be an enabler of bad decisions, alcohol and wine have to be cut out entirely, "from the skins to the pits." This is a sin against the self, not only—or even 6 primarily—because wine is pleasurable, but because when you cut yourself off from what is permissible, it makes it harder to resist what is truly forbidden. If everything is prohibited without exception and without regard for what is reasonable, then people will need to sin in order to survive. If what is permitted becomes forbidden, then what needs to be forbidden may end up becoming permitted."

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<sup>1</sup> Bava Kamma 91b, Nedarim 10a, Nazir 19a and 22a, and more. . .

Dena Weiss says that the *nazir* errs in attempting to opt out the slippery slope of messy human behaviors altogether. Taken with Rabbi Sacks' understanding of the *nazir* as a character who is seeking a higher level of holiness than that which has been assigned to them, we see a certain exceptionalism at play: whether for the sake of resisting temptation, or for the sake of spiritual elevation, the *nazirim* set themselves apart, and to do so is sinful. They do the Jewish people no good by performing gratuitous purity.

So how is the caution against the *nazir* in Torah a caution to me in this moment?

One of the ideological innovations of Reconstructionist Judaism for the hundred years of its existence is the rejection of the notion of Jews as “the Chosen People.” This is reflected in our unique liturgy – our versions of *Aleinu*, *Kiddush* and *Torah blessings* remove all references to God *choosing* Israel over other peoples. I haven't ever particularly felt that strongly about the language; personally I am comfortable with the idea that the Israelite people are chosen for Torah just as other people are chosen for other experiences of Divine revelation. But I appreciate Reconstructionism's commitment to dismantling a sense of moral hierarchy between Jews and the rest of the world.

But it's easier intended than fulfilled: How many of us have ever thought, regarding some awful behavior, “*Jews* don't do that!” How many of us have assumed that because we have suffered so much *Jews must* have higher moral sensibility? And how many, when we hear of Jews or the Jewish state committing violence, feel that we must either justify it as legitimate and utterly necessary OR loudly perform a ritual of purity - “*those* Jews are not representing Judaism!” We psychologically continue to enact an idea of Jewish exceptionalism that does not make room for the trauma, the greed, the violence that we would do better to admit exists even within our own community.

In this moment, just as the *nazir's* gratuitous purity does the Jewish people no good, it does the Jewish people and the world no good to pretend that the violence and the trauma in Israel are not part of us. The trauma is our trauma. The violence is our violence. *We are* implicated. Whether it comes easy to you to defend Israel or you resent hearing about it in the news, as Jews in America, we are connected to Israel. To refuse that connection when we feel distaste or horror at what happens there is to perform gratuitous purity, and it does no one any good.

So, two days into the ceasefire, as Israelis warily leave bomb shelters, as Gazans urgently seek shelter, I encourage those of us who only engage with Israel at crisis times to make a commitment to continuing to engage now. Israeli society is not a monolith; Palestinian society is not a monolith, and even now, there are many amazing organizations on the ground their striving to build society together. One of my personal favorites is EcoPeace Middle East, whose founder, Gidon Bromberg, spoke here a year and a half ago, but please share other recommendations in the chat.

Let us remember that Torah itself is ever-evolving, a living document compiled of the conversation of all Jews throughout the ages, as long as we continue to opt in. So let us continue to transmit and receive Torah, with all its joy and pain.