

# International Rabbinic Fellowship

## Weekly Dvar Torah

Parshat Naso

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This week's Dvar Torah is provided by Rabbi Dr. Don Seeman, Emory University

Do we achieve our highest potential as human beings by learning from the wisdom of the ages or by suffering through the consequences of our own actions and potentially catastrophic mistakes? This is a basic question that is asked on some level by every parent or teacher. Good parents know that the calculus may be complex: they need to weigh the importance of the specific lesson and the severity of the consequences for making a mistake. Yet these are questions that also have strong generational overtones. Our current age has shown itself deeply impatient of any knowledge that was not hard won in the laboratory of personal experience: we tend to look on tradition more as a hindrance than as a help. So where does that leave the tradition we call Judaism?

We need to recognize that the profound tension between learning through personal experience and learning from the accumulated wisdom of others was known and reflected upon by some of our greatest teachers. In this week's *parashah* for example, we learn about the law the *sotah*, a woman suspected by her husband of adultery, who is subject to a humiliating public ordeal that is hoped to verify her innocence. The details of the *sotah* ritual need not detain us here but this section of the book of Numbers is juxtaposed with another that presents the rules pertaining to a *nazir*, who willingly vows to abstain from wine and grape products for a set period of time. Can we derive any meaning from the juxtaposition? Some of the early rabbis suggested that we can, and their view is cited by the great medieval commentator Rashi: juxtaposition teaches, according to Rashi, that the paradigmatic *nazir* is someone who has witnessed the downfall and humiliation of an accused *sotah* and responds by vowing to abstain from wine. The relationship between the two passages is thus causal as well as associative. Perhaps the *nazir* has reasoned that wine must have been involved somehow in any

situation where a man became so jealous that he is willing to put his wife through the ordeal, or perhaps he simply intuits that a situation of moral excess and suffering calls for extra moral and ascetic restraint by way of response. Most challengingly, perhaps he actually recognizes within himself the potential for such excess and chooses to preempt it by removing himself from normal but potentially addictive patterns of consumption. However you understand his action, the *nazir* on this reading responds to the suffering and depravity around him by hedging himself about with extra prohibitions not applicable to everyone—an ancient Jewish response to moral anxiety.

Rashi's *nazir* responds to the suffering he sees and witnesses around him: his ethics is ocular, in the sense that he *sees* the moral experience and suffering of other people as his starting point and moral ground. *Nazir* ethics are intermediate, in a sense, between the dominant biblical narrative in which the Jewish people are constantly going astray and being made to suffer and learn from their sins and the later rabbinic approach, according to which the rabbis hedge us about with extra prohibitions proactively, to keep us far from sin. The profound 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic leader Mordecai Joseph Leiner of Izbica notices that while *sotah* precedes *nazir* in the Bible, this order is reversed in the Talmudic tractates that bear their names. This observation by itself might not be very suggestive, but Rabbi Leiner uses it to build a comparative phenomenology of biblical and rabbinic religion. There is a verse in Proverbs that reads, "Listen, my son, to the ethics (*musar*) of your father, and do not abandon the teaching (Torah) of your mother." Like the stereotypical father who lets his child fall down and get up again while learning to walk, says Rabbi Leiner, biblical teaching is premised on learning through trial and error, sin and punishment: "I have set before you this day life and death, a blessing and a curse, therefore

choose life.” The very word *musar* is related phonetically to the word *yisurin* or suffering and affliction. We learn through pain, and he who spares the rod spoils the child. It is nearly impossible to miss this theme, which fundamentally shapes all biblical narrative. Yet the rabbis do not hesitate to formulate a rule, in *Pirkei Avot*, with a rule that is equally fundamental to all of later Judaism: “make a fence around the Torah.” The word Torah or teaching in its rabbinic mode is characterized by rules upon rules designed not just to prevent sin but to keep a person far from sin—like the stereotypical mother, says Rabbi Leiner, who does not want her child to skin his knee. For Rabbi Leiner, these are two fundamentally different and legitimate modes of divine governance and education; rabbinic law exists to protect us from the afflictions, *yissurin*, we would otherwise need to suffer in order to learn and internalize God’s teaching. If the law of the rabbis seems onerous, it can only be so in the way that a mother’s protective love can sometimes seem overbearing to a child who wants to explore and learn for themselves without protective constraint.

The dilemma for modern Jews, and it is a profound one, is that we inhabit an authoritative religious system that was designed to create a fence around the Torah to protect us from harm, yet we live in an age that is impatient and suspicious of all fences. We live in an age, wrote Rabbi Kalonymos Shapira in the introduction to his 1930’s book *Hovat ha-Talmidim*, in which even small children now consider themselves full grown before their time, and consider the very notion of authority inimical to their own wellbeing and growth. And this was written in Poland between the wars, not modern Boston or Tel-Aviv! Rabbi Shapira described this phenomenon, which was by no means limited to Jews, as an increase in *chutzpah*, but he also alluded to the teaching of our sages, that *chutzpah* will increase when redemption is near. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook made a similar point in his evaluation of the redemptive project represented in the 1920’s by secular Zionism.

We live in an age of return to Zion that many have

have associated with a return to biblical consciousness and the potential for prophetic awareness and moral teaching. But I would argue that this distinctively Jewish reality dovetails with a broader global movement today towards immediacy in religious experience and impatience with tradition and received institutions. Modernists want to learn from their own mistakes, when they acknowledge that they can make mistakes-- we want to learn from experience, or its linguistic relative, experiment. The distinctive pathos of Orthodox Jews is that we experience that pull along with our generation, but are also bound irrevocably to halakhic tradition with all of its fences and protections--we do not wish, nor are we able, to revoke these or to give up the Torah that our mothers bequeathed us. The goal of contemporary Orthodox Judaism, it seems to me, should be the renewed effort to put tradition and experience each in their appropriate place, and to recapture the spirit of immediacy that may be threatened by what Scholem once called the well-ordered house of halakhic Judaism. At the same time, we need to remember the *nazir*, whose response to a disordered world was to take additional fences upon himself in love. We need to find our own strictures that are appropriate to our spiritual needs and vulnerabilities and not content ourselves just with the quest for convenient leniencies, which also have their place. Striking the right balance is no simple matter, and may well be a project of more than just one or two generations. Our orienting principle should be fidelity to the whole length and breadth of our inherited tradition, alongside clear-eyed appreciation for the need to take some spiritual risks in a world that frequently outstrips inherited models. Zionism was and is such a risk, and so is our engagement with secular culture and learning, our desire to find more ways for contemporary men and women to find fulfillment in Torah. If we want to be religiously serious people we need both Torah and *musar*, both fences and the difficult freedom that comes from living with risk and learning from consequences.

Shabbat Shalom

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