

Dear Chavraya,

Last Shabbos afternoon, while sitting by the pond, a young woman approached Mieke and I. A doctor from India, in Boston for a course, she asked if we were Jewish. Responding to my quizzical “yes,” she said that she had never met a Jew before, but was fascinated with Judaism from reading and wondered if we could tell her about Judaism. Inviting her to sit down with us, I thought of the great Hillel being asked by the Roman to teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. We begin to speak about Shabbos, a time of renewal through which to step back into the world refreshed, striving then to infuse the world with some measure of Shabbat shalom.

Drawing on a central facet of Jewish life by which to convey something of the essence of Judaism, I hadn’t thought to draw on this week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Naso*, though I might well have, as offering such essential teaching. As a path in the world, Judaism is precisely that, a way of engagement with life, not of separation from life. It is almost axiomatic that Judaism encourages us to enjoy the material and physical pleasures of life, while also inculcating a responsibility as God’s partners to do our part in healing the world through the pursuit of justice and peace. Warning against both hedonism and asceticism, the Jewish way guides us toward full engagement with the world.

In *Parashat Naso* we encounter the *Nazirite* vow, by which any woman or man can enter into a state of “spiritual retreat,” as it were, for a specified period of time by vowing to abstain from wine and all else that is derived from grapes; by refraining from cutting her or his hair, allowing it to grow wild; and by avoiding all contact with a dead body, even if it means separation from one’s closest loved ones upon their death. There is inherent tension in the Torah’s presentation of the *Nazirite* vow. Available to everyone, but required of no one, the vow appears to be a way of accommodating spiritual retreat, while warning against such seeking as a long-term path. Upon completing the time of the vow, the *Nazir/Nazirite*, referring to one who is dedicated or consecrated, is to bring a sin offering. The obvious question is why the sin offering from one who has sought a path of holiness.

There is, of course, more than one opinion. Nachmanides, the Ramban, sees the sin offering as a consequence of having left a life of such restraint in the service of God to reenter the world of desire and temptation. The three areas of abstinence required of the *Nazir* indeed come to represent a symbolic abstinence from all physical and material pleasure. Expressing the more normative Jewish view, Maimonides, the Rambam, regards the sin offering as a consequence of having taken the vow in the first place. Writing on matters of physical and spiritual health, Maimonides, a physician, emphasizes that the Torah does not command abstinence, but desires that a person follow “the natural human way,” meaning that one should enjoy life’s pleasures, but according to “the middle way,” the way of moderation. He writes: *one should eat that which one is permitted to eat - in moderation, one should drink that which one is permitted to drink - in moderation, one should have licit sex – in moderation. And one should build up the world through righteousness and justice, and not dwell in caves and mountains.... We are warned about this through the nazir, who atones with a sin offering.*

Writing in our own time, well aware of the challenges to living a life of holiness, the Slonimer Rebbe teaches concerning the *Nazir*: *one should engage in all material matters and raise everything up for the sake of God. In a most powerful statement, the Slonimer says: the way of separation from matters of this world is the easier way, but the higher way is to raise up all matters of this world to the Holy One, for this is the essential way that is desired.*

Looking back to a park bench by Jamaica Pond..., two essential teachings come together. Shabbos offers a moment of pause for renewal and inspiration, to then engage the world and its needs more fully. And in the sacred framework of Shabbos, God's gifts of the physical are received as blessings, renewal of body and soul -- a way in the world, a path of wholeness.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor