

Naso

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

One of the stranger laws of the Torah is that of the Nazir. A person could decide to be stricter than the law required and take on extra burdens, like Samson who let his hair grow and never had it cut (until he fell for the wrong woman).

The most common act of self-denial was to give up alcohol (you couldn't go against the Torah in your vow, so giving up sex, supposing you were married, was not an option and your wife could sue for divorce if you did). The reasons for self-denial could vary but it was a personal decision. You could decide in advance how long you wanted this period of abstinence to last and then you had to stick to it because it was a very serious religious obligation.

Nowadays we do not take too much notice about the vows we make. "If I pass this exam, I promise to a) be nice to my parents, b) give up smoking, c) eat kosher." Or, "If this deal comes through I'll give 10% to charity." And even if we do begin to keep the vow, we rarely keep it up. Almost no one takes commitments seriously any more.

After the Nazir finished his (or her) period of denial, he had to bring a Sin Offering to the Temple. Why a Sin Offering? After all, he has just come through a period of being better and holier than the Torah requires—he should be rewarded not punished. But the Talmud says that it is not automatically a good thing for a person to deny himself a pleasure that is allowed in the Torah. It is hard enough keeping those basic rules we have been given without trying to be over-strict.

I've always been amazed by this. Most people think that being more religious is automatically better. But the Torah seems to indicate that it is a rather risky business to be too pious. Besides, the pleasures of life are there for us to enjoy (obviously, with moderation). The message is that life should be enjoyed and the truly religious person should take pleasure from life rather than being somber, self-denying, and negative.