

# Nazirite

Immediately after the Sotah, comes the law of the Nazirite. The Nazirite is someone who chooses to be extra religious and take upon himself a solemn vow to do something more than is commanded. The Torah gives as an example, letting one's hair grow long and not drinking wine or spirits. We all do this sort of thing. 'If I pass this exam I will take out the garbage every day' or 'If this deal comes off I will give 10% of the profit to charity' or 'If I get better I promise to be more careful.' But we usually never do or forget to do what we promise ourselves. In those days, one's word was one's bond. A vow was a vow. It was a commitment to God. One had to take it very seriously like Samson not cutting his hair!

After the period the Nazirite designates for his special sanctity, he has to atone. What for? For becoming more religious for a while? Surely this should be grounds for celebration and reward rather than penalization and sin. Some say it is because having elevated himself, he must now atone for returning to a lower level of sanctity. Others say that it is like the woman who gives birth and must bring a sin offering. Her atonement might be because she has survived a difficult ordeal during which she might have sad things she otherwise would not have said and might now have regretted.

But there is another reason that I prefer. He is penalized for thinking that being extra religious or pious is necessarily better. Sometimes doing the basic things well is better than trying to do too much or be super-religious. In addition, people often think they are better people for being stricter. They become arrogant. They claim the higher ground.

The Torah is conveying a message that God is satisfied if we stick to the basic rules. There is a natural tendency under certain circumstances, say of fear or loss, to want to do more. But this is not necessary or even praiseworthy. It is a concession to human nature that we really ought to fight back against rather than embrace. And it is linked to the Torah insisting that we should neither detract nor add to the commandments God has given us. As the Talmud says, "Are you not satisfied with what God has commanded that you want to add more?"