

After concluding the details of the selection of the Levites for service in the Tabernacle, Gd commanded Moses to tell the people to cast out from the camp כל צרוע וכל זב וכל טמא לנפש, all lepers, a person who has bloody discharge and those defiled by coming in contact with a corpse or other defiling object. The next section commands us about the process of returning stolen property and he associated oath and penalties. Rashi notes that this section is repeated for the additional aspects of restitution to the convert and subsequently the Priest if the convert is no longer alive. The following chapter describes the laws regarding detection and punishment of the Sotah. The details of the Nazir, the associated restrictions and process for terminating the Nezirut. This is followed by the commandment to Aaron and his children to bless the people. What is the connecting thread that unites these apparently disparate sections?

At this point, the vast majority of the people were cleansed, to the fullest degree possible, of the sin of the Golden Calf and were deemed worthy of entering the land. The people were poised to consecrate the Tabernacle after which they would be ready to begin their march into the Promised Land. They had to begin the purification process before entering the land. The sanctity and purity of the land of Israel demanded the ritually defiled be separated and cast out. We need not limit the afflictions and defilements to the physical leper and technically defiled. Defilement could be physical as well as metaphysical. Gd wanted the people to distance themselves from all individuals, ideas and actions deemed improper and in contradiction to the sanctity they were about to encounter upon entering the land. The number of people that fell into this category was presumably small.

The section regarding stealing from a convert seems out of place here. Perhaps it holds the key to understanding the sequence of commandments in this part of the Parsha. The prophet Ezekiel proclaimed Gd's anger towards the people for deserting Him. There are many places where he speaks against people and their sins. He consistently emphasizes the mistreatment of the converts, widows and orphans by the people. He chastised the people that sinned through blatant sexual deviance and promiscuity, defiling the wives of their friends and neighbors. The Talmud (Sotah 9b) quotes Ezekiel 23:48 as the source that all should witness the debasement of the Sotah as punishment for her behavior.

The same chapter decries both sexual immorality and idolatry. After all, what greater form of promiscuity, defilement and rejection can there be than the contempt the people showed toward Gd by their insane pursuit and worship of idols? How could one who witnessed the Exodus from Egypt, the receipt of the Torah at Sinai and ultimately their conquest of the land be so quick to undermine

that relationship and reject the One true Gd and worship idolatry? Ultimately, the destructive act of rejection demonstrated by the Sotah or a wife who actually sins against her husband and the Jewish People's rejection of Gd in favor of false gods is similar if not the same.

How could they come to this? Perhaps an answer can be found in the way they treated the converts among them. The Torah mentions in various places the importance of treating the convert, the widow and orphan appropriately. A society is judged by the way it treats its most vulnerable members. To inherit the land, the people needed to develop and practice compassion. Leprosy, bloody discharges and especially the spiritually defiled are symbolic of individuals who have become metaphysically and physically corrupted and defiled. Chazal associate haughtiness with the leper. The Torah requires the leper to remain outside of the camp and take stock of his actions to the point where he laments for himself, referring to himself as *טמא טמא*, defiled, defiled. For without his introspection, there can be no repentance and return to the fold and Gd. If the Jewish People abused converts and the downtrodden they would be no different than the nations that Gd cast out to make way for them. People who act in that way demonstrate that they are indeed *טמאי נפש*, spiritually unclean, and are to be cast out of the camp and ultimately the land. Such a people will eventually descend into sexual immorality and idolatry, destroying their family relationships and rejecting Gd. They will be forced to drink from the Sotah's cup and admit their sins. Just as the Sotah, their actions will result in a spiritual defilement that will distance them from Gd.

The Rabbis teach us that the juxtaposition of the laws of Sotah and Nazir informs us that one who witnesses the debasement of the Sotah should separate himself from drinking wine by accepting the vow of the Nazir. The term Nazir indicates a separation from evil to a higher spiritual plane and movement closer to Gd by rejecting the temptations and behavior of the surrounding society. Ezekiel (14:5) tells us that the people perverted the concept of Nazir into a society that lacked compassion, pursued sexual immorality and rejected Gd. They withdrew like a Nazir, but it was Gd they withdrew from. Not the terrible societal traits that the Nazir was to withdraw from to set an example for others to follow. The Nazir is supposed to stand in the breach of immorality, and attempt to seal it before it becomes all consuming. The Talmud (Nedarim 9b) tells of the High Priest Shimon HaTzaddik, who never consumed the meat of the Penitence sacrifice, *קרבן חטאת*, brought by a Nazir. Once he encountered a Nazir with beautiful flowing hair who came to complete his Nezirut with a *קרבן חטאת* and to burn his hair on the altar. Shimon HaTzaddik asked him, "my son, what brought you to burn such beautiful hair"? He explained that he saw his own reflection and was taken by the beauty of

his hair and immediately realized he was overcome with immoral thoughts. He immediately challenged and rejected them. Shimon HaTzaddik proclaimed may there be many more such Nazirites among the people that would act out of purity of heart and sincerity. Nezirut, separation, is intended to bring one closer to Gd. A Nezirut vow whose goal is to separate from Gd is perverse and is to be denounced and avoided.

The Priest is responsible to teach the people to behave appropriately towards their fellow man as well as towards Gd. When they fail, or worse, enable the people to act immorally, they defile their roles as teachers and responsibility to bless the people. Gd told Ezekiel that the Priests corrupted the Torah and together with their leaders facilitated the abuse of the converts and downtrodden among them. Gd lamented that there was no Priest or scholar to oppose these evil people, to prevent the impending destruction of the land and exile of the people. The Priests were supposed to facilitate the association of Gd's name with the people. Instead they were complicit in driving them apart and the ultimate exile of the people from the land.

פרשת נשא teaches us how to prepare to enter the land and to act once we inherit it. Unfortunately, the people defiled themselves by acting in opposition to the lessons of the Parsha, foreshadowing their exile from the land.

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