

Fast of the First Born – 14 Nissan 5783

Source Sheet by Howard Freidin

Welcome to Tractate Nazir, which describes the practices of naziriteship, a kind of pseudo-priesthood that a person could enter, ideally for the purposes of experiencing heightened holiness. People who take this vow are required to abstain from three things for a set — or, in some cases, indefinite — period of time: (1) ingesting intoxicants and all grape derivatives, (2) cutting their hair, and (3) contracting corpse impurity. The nazir has always been a complicated figure. The two most famous nazirites in the Bible were Samson and Samuel, both of whom were born to barren mothers and had the role thrust upon them for life. Both received extraordinary gifts as a result of their naziriteship, though neither their special holiness nor their extraordinary talents inoculated them from tragedy or sin.

Tractate Nazir is located in the order of Nashim (family law), after tractate Nedarim (vows) and before tractate Sota (a woman whose husband suspects that she is unfaithful, and warns her not to seclude herself with a specific man).

A nazirite vow is a special form of a vow that one accepts upon himself. It obligates him in the rules and regulations established for a nazirite in the Torah. As with other types of vows, one might take a nazirite vow for a variety of reasons, e.g., to be absolved of a sin or to express gratitude to God for His kindness. Alternatively, one might take a nazirite vow in order to merit divine favor as one makes a request of God, or one might take the vow out of anger or spite. At its best, when accepted with pure intentions, naziriteship is considered a way to achieve holiness, as the Torah states: “All the days of his naziriteship he is holy to the Lord” (Numbers 6:8).

The main halakhot of a nazirite are stated explicitly in the Torah. A nazirite is prohibited from cutting his hair, eating or drinking anything originating from a grapevine, and becoming ritually impure through contact with a corpse. When he completes the term of his naziriteship, he brings a sheep as a burnt-offering, a ewe as a sin-offering, and a ram as a peace-offering, along with unleavened loaves and unleavened wafers. Afterward, he is released from the restrictions of naziriteship.

Tractate Nazir has nine chapters that deal with

- the language of nazirite vows,
- the level of intent that is required to accept naziriteship upon oneself,
- how impurity negates naziriteship,
- the dissolution of a nazirite vow,
- statements that constitute nazirite vows or that declare items consecrated, when the statements were made mistakenly, conditionally, or due to uncertainty,
- the different prohibitions incumbent upon a nazirite, primarily the prohibitions against drinking wine and becoming impure from a corpse,
- the halakhot of ritual impurity imparted by a corpse, as pertains to a nazirite,
- individuals whose status as a nazirite is uncertain, and
- who can become a nazirite.

MISHNA (Chapter 1, page 2a): One becomes a nazirite by taking a nazirite vow, in which he simply declares himself a nazirite, as detailed in the Torah (Numbers 6:1–21).

Additionally, **all substitutes** for the language **of nazirite vows are like nazirite vows** and are binding. Furthermore, intimations of nazirite vows, i.e., incomplete statements that are understood from context to be meant as nazirite vows, are considered binding nazirite vows. Consequently, **one who says: I will be**, without further clarification, **is a nazirite**, as this is his implied intention. **Or**, if he said: **I will be beautiful**, he is **a nazirite**. If one says: **I am hereby like this, I am hereby a hair curler, I am hereby growing my hair**; or: **It is incumbent upon me to grow long hair, he is a nazirite**. If one says: An obligation **is hereby** incumbent **upon me** with regard to **birds**, **Rabbi Meir says: He is a nazirite. And the Sages say: He is not a nazirite.**

MISHNA (Chapter 1, page 3b): If one said: **I am hereby a nazirite** and therefore will refrain **from grape seeds, or: I am hereby a nazirite and therefore will refrain from grape skins, or: From shaving, or: From impurity, he is a nazirite. And all details of naziriteship** are incumbent **upon him**. Not only does the prohibition he mentioned take effect, he is bound by all of the strictures of naziriteship.

MISHNA (Chapter 1, page 4a): If one said: **I am hereby like Samson, like the son of Manoah, like the husband of Delilah, like the one who tore off the doors of Gaza, like the one whose eyes were gouged out by the Philistines, he is a nazirite like Samson**, whose *halakhot* are explained in the next mishna (see Judges, chapters 13–16).

MISHNA (Chapter 1, page 4a): What is the difference between a permanent nazirite and a nazirite like Samson, both of whom remain nazirites forever? In the case of a permanent nazirite, if his hair grows too heavy for him, he lightens it by cutting some hair with a razor, and he then brings three animals as a sin-offering, a burnt-offering, and a peace-offering, like one who completes his term of naziriteship. And if he becomes ritually impure, he brings the offering for impurity brought by a regular nazirite who became impure.

By contrast, in the case of a nazirite like Samson, if his hair grows heavy he may not lighten it, since he is entirely prohibited from cutting his hair. And if he becomes impure, he does not bring an offering for impurity.

MISHNAH (Chapter 1, page 5a): In the case of unspecified naziriteship, where one does not state how long he wishes to be a nazirite, the term lasts for thirty days.

MISHNA (Chapter 2, page 10a): If one said: This cow said: I am hereby a nazirite if I stand up; or if he said: This door says: I am hereby a nazirite if I am opened, Beit Shammai say he is a nazirite, and Beit Hillel say he is not a nazirite. Rabbi Yehuda said: Even when Beit Shammai say that the vow is effective, they say so only with regard to one who said: This cow is hereby forbidden to me as an offering if it stands up. In that case it is as if he took a vow that the cow is forbidden. However, Beit Shammai concede that although the vow takes effect, it is not a vow of naziriteship.

MISHNA (Chapter 5, page 31b): With regard to one who took a vow of naziriteship, who then regretted his vow and stopped observing the prohibition against drinking wine, and later requested of a halakhic authority to dissolve his vow, and the authority ruled that he is bound by his vow, finding no reason to dissolve it, he counts the term of naziriteship from the time that he vowed, including the days when he acted as though the vow were dissolved. In a case where he requested of a halakhic authority to dissolve his vow and the authority dissolved it, if he had an animal separated as a nazirite offering it shall go out and graze among the flock.

MISHNA (Chapter 5, page 32b): If there were people walking along the way, and one other person was approaching them, and one of those walking said: I am hereby a nazirite if this person approaching us is so-and-so. And another one of them said: I am hereby a nazirite if this is not so-and-so, while a third member of the group said: I am hereby a nazirite if one of you two is a nazirite, and a fourth said: I am hereby a nazirite if neither of you is a nazirite, and another added: I am hereby a nazirite if both of you are nazirites. Finally, the last person said: I am hereby a nazirite if all you who spoke before me are nazirites.

Beit Shammai say that they are all nazirites, as by saying: I am hereby a nazirite, they have accepted naziriteship upon themselves even if their statements turn out to be incorrect. Beit Shammai maintain that a vow of naziriteship taken in error is considered a valid vow of naziriteship. And Beit Hillel say: Only he whose statement was not fulfilled is a nazirite. And Rabbi Tarfon says: Not a single one of them is a nazirite, including those whose statements were correct. Rabbi Tarfon maintains that a vow of naziriteship must be pronounced in an explicit manner, without any hint of uncertainty. In this case, none of them knew for sure the identity of the person coming toward them, and therefore they could not be certain they were nazirites at the time of their vows.

If the person approaching them turned back so that his identity was never discovered, not one of them is a nazirite. The matter was never clarified, and the *halakha* is lenient in cases of uncertain naziriteship. Rabbi Shimon says that the *halakha* is stringent with regard to an uncertainty of this kind, and therefore they should proceed as follows in order to avoid any uncertainty: Each of those who took a vow should say: If it was in accordance with my statement, I am hereby an obligatory nazirite, as my condition was fulfilled, and if not, I am hereby a voluntary nazirite, and in this manner they are all nazirites either way.

MISHNA (Chapter 6, page 42a): A nazirite who was drinking wine all day is liable to receive only one set of lashes. If people said to him during the course of the day: Do not drink, do not drink, and nevertheless he continues to drink, he is liable for each and every time he was warned. If a nazirite kept shaving all day, he is liable to receive only one set of lashes. If they said to him: Do not shave, do not shave, and he shaves, he is liable for each and every time he was warned. If he became ritually impure from a corpse many times all day, he is liable to receive only one set of lashes. If they said to him: Do not become impure, do not become impure, and he continues to become impure, he is liable for each and every time he was warned.

MISHNA (Chapter 6, page 47a): A High Priest and a nazirite may not become ritually impure even to bury their deceased relatives. However, they become impure to bury a corpse with no one to bury it [*met mitzva*]. If one of them comes across the corpse of a Jew, and there is nobody else available to bury it, he must bury the body. If a High Priest and a nazirite **were walking along the way and they found a *met mitzva***, and one of them can tend to the burial by himself, **Rabbi Eliezer says: Let the High Priest become impure, and do not let the nazirite become impure. And the Rabbis say: Let the nazirite become impure, and do not let even a common priest become impure.**

Rabbi Eliezer said to the Rabbis: It is preferable to **let the priest become impure, as he does not bring an offering for his impurity, and do not let the nazirite become impure, as he brings an offering for his impurity.** The Rabbis **said to him:** On the contrary, **let the nazirite become impure, as his sanctity is not permanent, and do not let a priest become impure, as his sanctity is permanent.**

GEMARA: (Chapter 8, page 58b) § Rav said: A person who is not a nazirite **may lighten** his burden by removing **all** the hair of **his body with a razor.** One who feels he has too much hair may shave all of it off with a razor, apart from his beard and the corners of his head. The Gemara **raises an objection** against this from a *baraita*: A man **who removes** the hair **of the armpit or the pubic hair is flogged** for transgressing the prohibition: “A man shall not put on a woman’s garment” (Deuteronomy 22:5), as this behavior is the manner of women.

MISHNA (Chapter 9, page 61a): Gentiles do not have naziriteship, i.e., the *halakhot* of naziriteship do not apply to gentiles. They are not subject to the prohibitions of a nazirite, nor does one accept their offerings at the end of naziriteship. However, **women and Canaanite slaves do have naziriteship.** The mishna adds: There is a greater **stringency in** the case of **women than in** the case of **slaves, as** a master **may force his slave** to drink wine, shave his hair, or become ritually impure from a corpse, despite the slave’s vow of naziriteship, **but** a husband **cannot force his wife** to transgress her naziriteship.

MISHNA (Chapter 9, page 62b): The previous mishna taught that the naziriteship of women includes a stringency that does not apply to slaves. This mishna adds: There is a greater **stringency in the case of slaves than in the case of women, as a man can nullify the vows of his wife but he cannot nullify the vows of his slave**, despite the fact that he can prevent him from fulfilling them in practice. Similarly, if **he nullified the naziriteship of his wife it is permanently nullified**, and it remains nullified even if she is later divorced or widowed. Conversely, if **he nullified the naziriteship of his slave** by forcing him to violate the terms of his vow of naziriteship, when the slave is **emancipated he completes his naziriteship**.

MISHNA (Chapter 9, page 62b): In a case where a slave took a vow of naziriteship but was prevented by his master from fulfilling the terms of his vow, the Sages engaged in a dispute what the *halakha* would be if he permanently **left his master's presence**, i.e., he ran away without being emancipated. **Rabbi Meir says: He may not drink wine.** Since the slave is free in practice, his vow goes into effect. **And Rabbi Yosei says: He may drink wine**, as he is not emancipated.

MISHNA (Chapter 9, page 66a): The tractate concludes with an aggadic statement about nazirites. **Samuel the prophet was a nazirite, in accordance with the statement of Rabbi Nehorai, as it was stated** that when Hannah, his mother, prayed for a son, she vowed: **“And no *mora* shall come upon his head”** (I Samuel 1:11). How is it derived that *mora* is an expression of naziriteship? **It is stated with regard to Samson: “And no razor [*mora*] shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a nazirite to God”** (Judges 13:5), **and it is stated: “And no *mora*,” with regard to Samuel. Just as the term “*mora*” that is stated with regard to Samson means that he was a nazirite, so too the term “*mora*” that is stated with regard to Samuel indicates that he was a nazirite.**

Rabbi Yosei said: But doesn't the word “*mora*” mean nothing other than the fear of flesh and blood? The word should be read as though it were written with an *alef*, and not a *heh*, so that it means fear. **Rabbi Nehorai said to him: But isn't it already stated: “And Samuel said: How can I go; if Saul hears it he will kill me”** (I Samuel 16:2). This verse indicates **that there was fear of flesh and blood upon Samuel**. Consequently, the term *mora* must be understood in accordance with its plain meaning of a razor. If so, Samuel was indeed a nazirite.

GEMARA (Chapter 9, pages 66a and b): Rav said to his son Ḥiyya: Seize the opportunity and quickly recite a blessing over the cup of blessing for the Grace after Meals. And similarly, Rav Huna said to his son, Rabba: Seize the opportunity and recite a blessing.

The Gemara asks: **Is this to say that one who recites a blessing is preferable to one who answers amen? But isn't it taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Yosei says: The one who answers amen is greater than the one who recites the blessing? And Rabbi Nehorai said to him: By Heavens, it is so. Know that this is true, as the military assistants [*gulyarim*] descend to the battlefield and initiate the war and the mighty follow them and prevail.** The amen that follows a blessing is compared to the mighty who join the war after the assistants, illustrating that answering amen is more significant than reciting the initial blessing.

The Gemara responds: This is a dispute between *tanna'im*, as it is taught in a *baraita*: **Both the one who recites a blessing and the one who answers amen are included among those who “stand up and bless” (Nehemiah 9:5), but one hurries to first reward the one who recites the blessing.** This *baraita* apparently holds that reciting the blessing is greater than answering amen.

Rabbi Elazar said that Rabbi Ḥanina said: Torah scholars increase peace in the world, as it is stated: “And all your children [*banayikh*] shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children” (Isaiah 54:13). The Sages interpreted this verse homiletically: Do not read it as: “Your children [*banayikh*],” but as: Your builders [*bonayikh*]. Torah scholars are those who build peace for their generation.

הַדָּרוֹן עֲלֵיךָ הַגּוֹיִם אֵין לָהֶם נְזִירוֹת וְסִלְיָא לָהּ מִסְכַּת נְזִיר

