



Sustainable Self-Control • Parshat Naso

The nazirite is one of the most morally ambiguous figures described in the Torah. Commentaries debate whether the nazirite's self-imposed denial of wine, avoidance of death-contamination, and growing of his or her hair is laudable or deplorable. The Talmud relates one version of this ambivalence. Simon the Righteous would not partake in the guilt-offering of any ritually impure nazirite, as he was suspicious of their motivations. Apparently, many impulsively committed to this semi-ascetic practice and later regretted their decisions, calling into question the legitimacy of their subsequent sacrifices. There was however, one exception to his policy.

Once a particularly handsome nazirite with stunningly long curly locks came to offer his sacrifices. Simon inquired as to what inspired this young man to become a nazirite and, thereby, cut off his beautiful hair. One day, amidst shepherding his flock, he approached a spring to draw water. "I looked at my reflection," he reports to Simon, "and my inclination quickly overcame me and sought to expel me from the world." He censored himself. "Empty one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? Your end is to be worms and maggots! I vow that I shall shave you for Heaven." Simon was impressed with this nazirite's tale and confidently partook of his sacrifice.

The story is strongly reminiscent of the Greek myth of the handsome Narcissus, who upon seeing his reflection in a pool of water, became infatuated with self-love. Unable to tear himself away from his self-centered gaze he died of thirst at the edge

of water. This legend paved the way for the more modern usage of the self-absorbed narcissistic personality.

"Narcissists are a puzzle," write psychologists Simine Vazire and David Funder in a 2006 article in *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. They undermine themselves by bragging, which prevents them from obtaining the status they crave. The key to the enigma of this self-defeating behavior, Vazire and Funder conclude is impulsivity. Lack of self-control contributes to consistent self-sabotaging decision-making.

Impulsivity and self-control may be the interpretive keys to help unlock the nazirite puzzle, as well. Simon the Righteous was bothered by the fact that many nazirites chose their ascetic path primarily on impulse. They may have sinned or witnessed someone else sin, so they immediately acted on the emotional moment, dedicating themselves to quasi-abstinence. This impetuous self-control strategy often failed, later leading the nazirite to regret his or her decision. More problematic, as Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz writes, many took the vow in desperation or anger. This was not a sustainable model for spiritual growth.

In contrast, the nazirite shepherd of our story demonstrates sincere and strategic self-control, serving as a model for sustained strength of character. First, he understood the self-destructive consequences of self-absorption. Second, he externalized the inclination, branding it as counter to his goals and not allowing it to usurp his agency.

Third, he evoked strong imagery of worms and maggots that engendered disgust. By focusing on the temporal, vulnerable, and mortal elements of the body, he was able to defuse his bodily desires.

Finally, he transcended his physical self by dedicating his beloved hair to God. At first glance, his decision was not intuitive. If his hair was indeed so beautiful, he should have cut it off immediately. By dedicating it to God, he prolonged his association with physical beauty for at least thirty more days. Perhaps Simeon the Righteous

saw this shepherd's well-thought-out and deliberate mastery of self-control. The shepherd deliberately delayed, dedicating his hair to a higher cause.

This shepherd nazirite provides us with several potent and powerful strategies when confronting spiritual challenges. Instead of impetuously grasping at an unsustainable quick fix, we should create long-term, self-transcendent goals, that help infuse a strong sense of purpose and commitment to God and a life rich in meaning.

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Character Challenge: Identify a spiritual struggle for self-control and create a thirty-day plan for incremental improvement. If beneficial, enlist the help of a mentor for guidance and encouragement.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "The danger of Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram and the rest is that they can seem at times to substitute for the real interactions essential to the human condition. Character is trivialized into personality, 'likes' take the place of genuine respect, and presentation of self takes the place of engagement with others. This can often seem more like narcissism than genuine personal growth" (*Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, p. 59).