

A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a nazirite vow of abstinence for the sake of Hashem. (6:2)

A Nazir seeks to dissociate himself from an environment which he feels is filled with temptation. It does not mean that he is weak. On the contrary, he is realistic, understanding that society presents blandishments that are not conducive to spiritual growth. The laws of nazir are juxtaposed upon the laws of sotah, the wayward wife. Chazal derive from here that one who observes a sotah in her degradation should prohibit himself from wine by taking a nazirite vow. The profligate behavior of the sotah is reflective of a woman who has allowed her sensual passions to partner with her heart to overpower her mind. The pursuit of pleasure is a powerful challenge to the intellect. Temptation rages within a person when he is exposed to it. Obviously, the best way to triumph over temptation is to avoid it. This is what the nazir is doing. Understanding that wine loosens the discipline of the mind, he is determined to refrain from imbibing alcohol.

Is wine that harmful for a person? Borei Pri HaGafen seems to be a popular blessing, both when we welcome the Shabbos Queen and when we bid “her” farewell. Blessing the fruit of the vine is a common accepted blessing. Wine gladdens the heart, and, according to our sages, Ein simchah ela b'bassar v'yayin, “There is no joy unless it is associated with meat and wine.” Apparently, wine is not that detrimental. Why, then, is it demonized as the beverage that brought down the sotah, and, hence, should be off-limits to the nazir?

The Chozeh, zl, m'Lublin, gives a practical explanation, which illuminates how we should view ourselves. An adam ra – one who is evil in the sense that he has issues, tendencies and weaknesses that need to be addressed – should refrain from drinking wine. For him, wine is bad. For the individual who is a strong, decent, balanced Jew, wine is good. It is as simple as that. The wine is not bad; the person is bad. How does one know if he is bad? That, the Chozeh explains, is easy to determine. If he happens to see an evil occurrence or something that bespeaks evil, it is an indication that he has issues. Hashem shows evil people evil occurrences. He does not show them to those who are righteous. As part of Hashem's messaging system, one sees what one is.

Horav David Forkosh, zl, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, was wont to say, “One who has a negative outlook on life and people, one who sees the negative aspects of others (without taking the time – or making the effort – to look at the other side of the story), will invariably see and note the degradation of the sotah.” In other words, one sees the sotah's act of debasement because this is what he is looking for! Such a person should dissociate himself from wine. Such a person will end up doing evil, because that is all that he sees. Wine in the hands of such a negative person will not produce any good.

The cup is either half full or half empty. It all depends on a person's outlook. A positive aspect is often concealed beneath layers of negativity. A reason might exist for the person's degradation that we tend to overlook, because we have been “turned off” by the negative; thus, we are

prevented from seeing the entire picture.

Lo hibit aven b'Yaakov v'lo raah amal b'Yisrael, Hashem Elokav imo u'seeuas Melech bo, "He perceived no iniquity in Yaakov, and saw no perversity in Yisrael, Hashem his G-d is with him, and the friendship of the King is in him" (Bamidbar 23;21). This pasuk is interpreted by the Kabbalists (cited by Horav Reuven Karlinstein, zl) to teach that one who sees no iniquity in his fellow Jew and likewise sees no perversity – because he seeks to find an avenue of positive outlook to justify their actions – is beloved by Hashem. He is worthy of the friendship of the King. Hashem does not look for our iniquity. On the contrary, He looks for every way to purify our actions. It is all in one's perspective. The individual who views the actions of others through a lens of positivity sees only good, unlike his counterpart who looks to uncover dirt. One cannot expect Hashem to judge him judiciously, if he is unable to give his fellow Jew the benefit of the doubt.

A classic story made famous by Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, is well-worth repeating, because of the unique lesson to be derived from it. It sadly defines the foibles of the human condition, and especially of those who fall prey to their natural inclination to see things from a one-sided perspective.

The incident took place during World War I, when the residents of Yerushalayim were suffering through a terrible famine. There was no money, and people were literally starving to death. In Yerushalayim lived a respectable Jew who earned his livelihood from Bris Milah. He was an expert mohel, circumciser, who, due to his exceptional skill, was able to eke out a meager living to support his family. He saved his money, spending only what he needed for basic necessities. He placed the few large coins that he had in safe-keeping on top of a cabinet in his house. One day, his seven-year-old son noticed a gold Napoleon coin on top of the cabinet and decided to go to the grocery store to purchase some nosh, candy.

When the boy's father returned home, he noticed that the Napoleon was gone. He immediately asked who had taken the coin. His young son, thinking that nothing was wrong, replied that he had helped himself to the coin in order to purchase some candy at the grocery store. When his father asked to see the change, the boy said there had been none. It did not take long for the father to put two and two together, and he immediately suspected the grocer of cheating his young son out of his rightful change. The father took his son by the hand, and together they proceeded to the grocery store to confront the owner. Understandably, the father walked into the store accusing the grocer of cheating. The grocer was indignant. "How dare you suspect me of stealing?" he declared. "Your son came in with a rusty penny (small coin), and I very nicely gave him probably more candy than it was worth." The conversation soon became quite heated. There is nothing like a loss of money to transform the most respectful person immediately into a ruthless, uncaring and uncouth individual. The mohel demanded that the two litigants proceed to bais din, rabbinical court, to resolve their disagreement.

Bais Din rendered their decision: the grocer must take an oath that he had never received a gold

Napoleon from the mohel's son. The grocer was willing to make the oath. The mohel, however, was not prepared to have another Jew make an oath when he clearly believed the man was lying. As a result of the respectable mohel's religious commitment, the grocer was unable to clear his name with an oath. Thus, from that day onward, the grocer was a victim of the suspicions of the members of the community. These were observant Jews who, out of a sense of self-righteous indignation, literally made life miserable for the grocer and his family. It never entered anyone's mind that he "might" be telling the truth. He was persecuted, victimized and humiliated – all in the name of religious outrage (if I come across as sarcastic – it is because I am). Heaven forbid, should he have been given the benefit of the doubt. He had lived in the community all of his life, and his veracity had never been questioned. Suddenly, almost overnight, he became a ganov, thief.

A number of years later, the respectable mohel received an anonymous letter from a young member of the Yerushalayim community. Apparently, years earlier, he and his family had been suffering from the pangs of hunger. Nary a morsel of food was in the house. His children were ill, unable to continue living on practically no food. It was a question of pikuach nefesh, a matter of life or death. Suddenly, as he trudged along dejectedly on the streets of Yerushalayim, he observed a young Yerushalmi walking along the street carrying a gold Napoleon in his hands! That gold coin could sustain his family for a few months! His parents were obviously wealthy, otherwise who would entrust their young son with a gold coin? He "borrowed" the gold coin from the boy and replaced it with a rusty copper coin. His intentions were "noble." He would certainly return the money one day when he was able to earn a living. He (felt that he) had no recourse, other than "exchanging" coins with the boy. After all, the world would not come to an end if the boy lost his gold coin. His confession and justification for his sinful behavior were too little too late. The grocer's life had been destroyed. In fact, he had already passed on to his rightful reward in the World to Come.

Now, for the lesson: a holy tzaddik who was privy to the entire sequence of events commented, "All three players in the scenario – the mohel, grocer and young man – have passed from this world; all have stood before the Heavenly Tribunal and, quite possibly, each was vindicated for his actions. The mohel who persecuted the grocer was not guilty. Indeed, he refused to have the grocer take an oath. The grocer suffered so terribly that he certainly went immediately to Gan Eden. Even the young man who caused the debacle was not really at fault. He saw his children starving before his very eyes. What should he have done when he saw easy money that could alleviate his pain? Everyone had an excuse – right or wrong – it was an excuse. Who went to Gehinnom for this incident? The rest of the community: the spectators, who had no reason whatsoever to take sides and mix in. Furthermore, what right did they have to judge the grocer negatively?"

There is so much to learn from this incident. Sadly, it happens all of the time. Someone errs, and everyone begins to take sides. The guilty party eventually resolves his issue, but the people who for no reason have mixed in – they are still not speaking to one another. Why? Because they

“thought” they were acting l’shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, really played them.