

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

While Judaism does not encourage extremism of any kind, it nonetheless makes provisions for those who desire or feel that they must live outside or beyond society's conventional norms. Thus, the Torah channels this tendency, as it does with all human drives (and obsessions), into serving Hashem. The case in question is the *nazir* who has taken upon himself the added restrictions of abstaining from all wine and grape products – fruit products that otherwise have no Biblical or Rabbinic prohibitions placed on them. Furthermore, as a member of society in which almost all public and private celebrations include wine as a ritualistic beverage, the *nazir* defies convention, rejects the norm, and now must appear in public in an unfashionable manner, sporting his long hair – since a *nazir*, in addition to being prohibited in grape products, may not cut his hair. The *nazir* is not your usual extremist. His decision is well thought-out and, in his mind, quite rational. His rejection of convention is a plea for greater purity and stronger self-control. He has decided to ascend the ladder of spirituality and has chosen the *nazir* rite as the vehicle for his spiritual journey.

Despite the *nazir's* positive motivation, his extreme approach, while accepted, is treated with a degree of apprehension. Thus, the nazirite vow is typically limited to thirty days, and, once the vow has been successfully completed, the Torah insists the *nazir* now go to the other extreme by shaving off all the hair on his head. Last, the *nazir* must bring a *Korban chatas*, Sin-offering, to atone: for his leaving a high level of spirituality to return to the mundane world; for leaving the mundane world and having rejected Hashem's gift of wine. The bottom line is that the Torah prefers balanced living, a harmony between limitations and freedom. As the *Bostoner Rebbe, zl*, puts it (quoting from one *Chassidic* Master), "When Satan wants to seduce a man, he encourages him to become ultra *frum*, too pious. Satan is clever. He knows that the average person cannot handle extremes. To be overly pious demands a unique individual whose level of spiritual integrity is impeccable, and whose sincerity is without question. For the rest of us, however, the path of extremism can lead to spiritual and physical disaster.

When one goes to the extreme, he rejects choice – which is a major tenet of Jewish dogma. We are shown what is correct; we are guided along the correct path, but the choice which path to take is ultimately ours. The extremist places himself in an impossible box from which choice is not an option. This is either the work of Satan – or an indication of an emotional deficiency.

The pursuit of absolute control or to live a life devoid of choice, allowing the choices and decisions to be made by someone else, is the ultimate sign of weakness. The *Rebbe* writes about the cults that appeared in the sixties. It was a tumultuous era which claimed the spiritual lives of a number of our young people. Having lived through that era, I can say emphatically that those who had a solid *Yeshivah/Bais Yaakov* education, who hailed from homes where Torah was paramount and parents were stable, on the whole were not affected by the scourge of hedonism, idol worship, addiction and pure base living subservient to the directions of their guru or whatever other

dogmatic leader they served. Many of these unfortunates ended up on the doorstep of the *Bostoner Rebbe*, who embraced each one with his illuminating smile and warm and caring heart. While he succeeded with many, he sadly did not fare as well with far too many (even one is too much, but we have no idea of the stranglehold the cults had – and continue to have – on the unsuspecting and the anxious). He had two “failures” which he underscores for the lessons they impart. I take the liberty of redacting the stories for the same reason. Perhaps the next fellow in need might be reached. Parents and children are going through so much today. Every lesson can be helpful and, if it saves one *neshamah*, its value is beyond description.

Many students (secular) sought out their roots during the tumultuous sixties. Those who came with open minds to listen and learn – did well. They listened and learned – and many adopted the Torah-observant lifestyle. Those who did not, left with a deeper understanding and respect for the Torah Jew, which they applied to their lives. In some cases, it did not change the parents, but they were open-minded with regard to providing their children with a balanced Jewish education.

Those students who had fallen prey to the cults were, for the most part, messed-up almost beyond repair. Once young people accepted the abnormal lifestyle of the cultist as being normal, there was very little anyone could do. A person can be convinced to change if he realizes that something is missing in his life. If, however, he feels that he is normal and that we, those who want to help, are misguided, then we have a very difficult uphill battle to fight.

The Hare Krishna movement was a serious perversion of Hinduism. It made the rounds in the sixties and seventies and had a deleterious effect on many Jewish young people who hailed from secular backgrounds. The members of the movement shaved their heads and walked around in orange robes, chanting mantras and collecting money from passersby. They were probably living far from social norms, as was common in those days. The ride might have been exhilarating, since they did what they wanted and answered to no one but their cult leader. Generally, this was a one-way trip. Most did not survive to return to a normal life. Once they were in, they were smashed. The *Rebbe* was asked to reach out over *Shabbos* to a young relative of one of his *chassidim*. Perhaps the *Rebbe* could reach him.

The initial chat was harmless. The moment the *Rebbe* touched on the cult, the young man clammed up and refused to talk. This, regrettably, is how cultists are trained to respond – no response – period. The *Rebbe* attempted another approach. “Why not look at your own roots?” the *Rebbe* asked. “Why not discover what Judaism is all about, before you go searching in strange waters?”

It was Friday night. *Davening* went beautifully, as the fellow listened to the spirited *davening* highlighted by the melodious *Lecha Dodi*. During this entire time and all through the meal, the fellow kept mumbling to himself. The *Rebbe* asked the student who was sitting next to him what he was mumbling. Apparently, he was impressed with the *davening* and the warm surroundings at the meal. This frightened the cultist, so he began reciting his mantra over and over again, lest he fall

prey to the influence of Torah-true Judaism. At that point, no one could succeed in reaching him. That *Shabbos*, however, did actually leave an impression on him. Today, he is living a reasonably normal life – not observant, but at least normal.

The second case involved a young man who was searching for religion. He found it in Buddhism, and, after studying to become a Buddhist Monk, he married another Buddhist. His family frantically called the *Rebbe* to intervene – which he did. Once again, it was too little, too late. Indeed, the fellow said that, had he discovered Judaism earlier in life before he discovered the “beauty” of Buddhism, he might have decided to remain with Judaism. Now, however, it was impossible for him to explore Judaism since he was so satisfied, so happy. He really had no reason to switch. He was quite happy right where he was. Had we been the first responders when this young fellow was crying out, his search would have ended with Judaism. Sadly, we were too late.

What attracts unstable Jewish students to the cult? It was fellowship and acceptance that gained entrance for them. Then it was the strict discipline and demanding lifestyle that kept them there. Lost young people are not searching for more freedom. It is just the opposite. They want stronger discipline, greater order, more demanding authority; they want someone to control their emotions, to essentially control their lives. They are afraid of freedom. Their low self-esteem does not allow them to cope with the concept of freedom. They want to be controlled.

The Torah believes in choice – the right choice, but man’s choice no less. Hashem created man to be free: to make his own decisions – not to be controlled by others; to question and seek the answers that are available; not to be afraid of the truth, but to embrace it.