

A man or woman who shall dissociate himself by taking a Nazarite vow of abstinence. (6:2)

Why does the Torah juxtapose the incident/*parshah* of the *nazir* upon the incident/*parshah* of the *sotah*, wayward wife? One who sees a *sotah* in her degradation should prohibit wine to himself by taking a Nazarite vow (*Rashi*). The *sotah* had opted to follow her sensual passion, allowing her pursuit of pleasure to take precedence over her commitment to G-d. One who falls under the grasp of wine can, likewise, fall victim to temptation. A *nazir* is prohibited to drink wine.

A well-known story tells about a dedicated Jew who refused to eat the non-kosher food that was standard fare in the Nazi extermination camps. Nothing enraged the Nazi fiends more than a Jew who still believed in Hashem and observed His *mitzvos*. How could anyone still believe in a benevolent G-d after that which all these wretched Jews had experienced? It was not enough for the Nazi to murder Jews – he had to break them emotionally, as well as spiritually. One day, a Nazi grabbed ahold of the Jew and told him in no uncertain terms, “If you refuse to eat the meat, I will kill you!”

The man staunchly refused. The Nazi began to beat him mercilessly, until a puddle of blood surrounded his body. He gave him up for dead. The man, however, was very much alive, and his friends came to assist him and take him back to the barracks. How surprised they were to notice that when the Nazi had returned to see if the Jew had eaten the meat, he had beaten the wrong man. Indeed, the man that he had beaten almost dead was an avowed atheist who thrived on eating non-kosher meat and had done so throughout his life! Why did he suddenly risk his life for kosher food?

The man explained that when he was beaten for refusing to eat *treif* meat, it suddenly became clear to him that eating non-kosher food was wrong. Thus, he bravely refused. When a person is up against the wall – when he stands between a rock and a hard place – his depth of understanding achieves greater acuity and his level of commitment can soar from uncommitted to simple, to *tzaddik*, righteous, status in minutes. The Jew who has lived a life of religious abandon, to whom *mitzvos* had meant nothing, was transformed into a believer when he saw how much the Nazi hated *mitzvos*. Furthermore, crisis catalyzes unparalleled achievement. Perhaps the most precious *mitzvos* in history were: the *matzos* baked in the Nazi bunkers; the *Chanukah* candles lit in the camps; the kosher scraps of food from the garbage; the *Tefillin* smuggled in to the camps and worn at the risk of one’s life. Simple Jews became *kedoshim* and reached unbelievable heights.

This is a great story which presents a powerful lesson, but I have always been troubled by it. What really made the atheist change his stripes? Was it the beating he received for refusing to eat *treif*? This was a man who did not believe in Hashem, an individual to whom sin and punishment were shams. If one does not believe in G-d, sin and punishment are not realities to which one ascribes.

What suddenly made the man wake up from his self-imposed slumber?

The atheist never thought much of Hashem's *mitzvos* – neither positive nor prohibitive. True, they cause reward and punishment, but he never had really observed the reward, and punishment did not impress him because he felt he could get around it. It was not until he saw how much the Nazi hated the *mitzvah*, and to what extent he was prepared to punish someone who adhered to it, that he deduced its sublime nature.

This explanation gives us a window of understanding to explain the juxtaposition of the *nazir* upon the incident of the *sotah*, wayward wife. *Chazal* teach that one who observes the *sotah* in her degradation should separate himself from wine, because wine causes inebriation which, when a person's defenses are down, can be the catalyst for prohibited/illicit relationships. One would think that when a person sees a woman's stomach explode as punishment for her moral debasement, the scenario would be a sufficient deterrent from sin; sadly, it is not enough. Punishment in its own right is something we convince ourselves is circumventable. This is especially true when we would like to believe that the prohibited activity is not really that egregious. Punishment has another purpose: it defines the activity. When one realizes that what he/she is about to do carries with it an enormous, bitter punishment, then the realization dawns on him that this activity is of a seriously evil nature.

A person can go throughout life having convinced himself that Divine guidance does not exist, Divine punishment is not real – everything is by chance – until one day he sees how a vicious murderer is prepared to destroy him with his bare hands just for adhering to a *mitzvah*. He now realizes the significance of the *mitzvah* and that the world is not ownerless. There is a G-d of Creation Who is also the G-d of History. The life he has lived until now has been a self-induced sham. It is sad when we require a lesson from the outside world in order to realize how fortunate we are to have the verities of the Torah and the guidance of Hashem to steer us free of life's obstacles.

Let us take this a step further. When redeeming a *bechor*, first-born son, the father gives the *Kohen* five *shekalim*. Likewise, we find the value of five *shekalim* required to redeem the overage of 273 firstborn *bechorim* that were replaced by the *Leviim*, following the sin of the Golden Calf in which the *bechorim* sinned, resulting in the forfeiture of their serving in the *Mishkan*. (There were 273 more *bechorim* than *Leviim*. Thus, these 273 *bechorim* had to be redeemed. The price set for their redemption was five *shekalim*.) How was the "five *shekalim*" amount derived? It certainly was not an arbitrary number. *Rashi* illuminates us with an intriguing commentary: "This was the price for the sale of Yosef (when his brothers sold him to the Yishmaelim/Midyanim), twenty pieces of silver which equals five silver *shekalim*." What is the connection between the sale of Yosef and the redemption of the *bechorim*?

Reb Yitzchak (Irving) Bunim, zl, offers an insightful and practical explanation. The firstborn who were to serve Hashem in the *Mishkan* were designated to be His holy servants. They erred with the

Golden Calf. As a result, it was necessary to replace them through a process of redemption (because they were *kadosh*, sanctified, to Hashem). When we redeem an *eved* Hashem, a servant of Hashem, the Torah instructs us not to sell him short. He should not be worth less to you than that which the pagan traders who purchased Yosef were willing to pay for a Jewish servant. Hashem says: “Pay for a servant of Mine at least what those heathens paid for a Jewish lad.” We apply the gentile evaluation of a Jew as the baseline for redemption. (Obviously, there is much more to this number, but, according to *Rashi/Chazal*, it was determined in accordance with the sale of Yosef – who was Rachel *Imeinu’s* *bechor*.)

Reb Bunim continues with a fascinating lesson (which coincides with our earlier thesis). It was calculated in the past (fifty years ago, numbers have certainly changed since then) that, on an average, it cost almost \$1200 to give an American pupil an education in the public school system. Thus, city, state and federal government bore the responsibility of approximately \$10,000 to put a student through elementary school. We can tag on another \$6,000 for high school. A minimum of \$16,000 just to prepare an American student for college. At that time, public college tuition was about \$15,000 for an education leading to a bachelor’s degree. In summation: the government is prepared to spend \$31,000 to educate a Jewish boy in their system. (Today the cost is far more.) Now, how much is it worth to us *Yidden* to develop a Jewish boy into a *ben Torah*? Hashem tells us in no uncertain terms: “Do not sell My servant short. Do not pay less for My Jewish child than what the others are prepared to pay for him!” In other words, support for Torah institutions is not arbitrary. The secular world has set a premium which they are willing to spend on our children. Can we ignore our sacred obligation to counteract what the world is willing to spend to draw our children towards a secular lifestyle?

Reb Bunim relates that he shared with *Horav Aharon Kotler, zl*, the report of a conference of missionaries who posited that it cost them upwards of \$50,000 to convert one Jew to their “true faith.” This is what they were willing to spend to kidnap a Jewish soul. How much is it worth to destroy a Jewish life; or better said: How much is it worth to us to save a Jewish soul—at least \$50,000 (fifty years ago).

When *Rav Aharon* heard this, he moaned, “Oy! A *Yiddishe neshamah*, soul.” He was actually in pain to hear the extent to which the heathens were prepared to go to destroy a *Yiddishe neshamah*. He understood that the Jewish *neshamah* was up against a formidable enemy.