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Leah *bas* Shlomoh *a”h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

## ***Nezirus* – Southern Style**

## **PARSHAS NASSO 5778**

One of the topics featured in this week’s *parshah* is that of *nezirus*, the body of law that pertains to the *nazir* – the individual who has taken the *nazarite* vow. This vow obligates him, among other things, to refrain from cutting his hair for the duration of his *nezirus* period. With the culmination of this period, he is obligated to shave off his head of hair.

### **The Purest Nazir**

Now, the Gemara (*Nedarim 9b*) relates a most poignant narrative concerning a particular *nazir* whose purity of motive greatly impressed the great sage Shimon Hatzaddik.

Shimon Hatzaddik said: ...One time a certain man arrived who was a *nazirite* from the South. I saw in him that he had fair eyes and a pleasant appearance, with his locks arranged in curls. I said to him: “My son, what behooves you to eliminate such beautiful hair?” He said to me: “I was a shepherd for my father in my town. I (once) went to draw water from the spring where I beheld my reflection. My (evil) inclination suddenly surged upon me, seeking to drive me from the world; I said to him: ‘Wicked one! Why are you prideful in a world that is not yours, regarding one who in the future will be reduced to worms and maggots? I swear that I shall shave you off for the sake of Heaven!’” Immediately, I stood and kissed him on his head. I said to him: “My son – Let there be many more in Yisrael who take the *nazirite* vow like you!”

There are any number of points in this classic narrative that bear further scrutiny and elaboration. One matter that the commentators ponder is the emphasis on the *nazir’s* origin. What is the true significance, exactly, of the fact that this *nazir* hailed “*min ha’darom* – from the south”? For that matter, what location is being referred to here – the “south” of what?

The author of the classic responsa volume *She’eilos U’Teshuvos Binyamin Ze’ev* (§ 267) understands the reference to be the south of Eretz Yisrael. From the context of the Talmudic account cited above, it is clear that Shimon Hatzaddik’s encounter with the “*nazir* from the south” took place in the Temple area (as the discussion there features the *nazir’s* sacrificial offering). Thus, the mention of the *nazir’s* origination from the south of the land serves to highlight his sincerity; the emphasis is placed on the fact that he had undertaken a long journey for the purpose of fulfilling his *nazarite* obligations.

On the other hand, the *Iyun Ya’akov* – while no doubt acknowledging this *nazir’s* purity of intent – places the “south” at a much closer location. This he bases on the description of the chambers located in the Temple courtyard, as recorded in the Mishnah (*Middos 2:5*):

אַרְבַּע לְשָׁכוֹת הָיוּ בְּאַרְבַּע מְקַצְעוֹתֶיהָ, שֶׁל אַרְבָּעִים אַרְבָּעִים אַמָּה... וּמָה הָיוּ מְשֻׁמְשׁוֹת, דְּרוֹמִית מִזְרְחִית הִיא הַיְתָה לְשֵׁבֶת הַנְּזִירִים שֶׁשָּׂם הַנְּזִירִין מִבְּשָׁלְיוֹ אֶת שְׁלֵמִיהֶן, וּמִגְלַחֲתָן אֶת שַׁעֲרָן...

“There were four chambers situated in its four corners, each consisting of (an area of) forty cubits... And what function did they serve? The **southeastern** one was the “*Nazirites’ Chamber*,” as it was there that the *nazarites* (completing the term of their vow) would cook their peace-offering and have their hair shaven off...”

This, explains the *Iyun Ya’akov*, is what had originally piqued Shimon Hatzaddik’s interest.

This *nazir* had first appeared before him sporting a glorious head of hair; now, as he emerged from the **Southern** chamber with it all removed, the sage was moved to ask what had led him to eliminate such a magnificent mane. As impressed as he had been by his striking appearance, he was that much more inspired by the valor of his sacrifice.

### A Wise Decision

The Maharsha, however, takes a different tack entirely. Rather than a reference to a specific location, he understands the mention of “south” as reflecting a particular attribute. The quality of wisdom is associated with a southerly direction, as Chazal state: “*Harotzeh sheyachkim yadrim* – One who desires to become wise should face southward when praying” (*Bava Basra 25b*). As the Gemara proceeds to explain, the Menorah – which was the Temple vessel embodying Torah wisdom – was located on the southern wall of the Sanctuary.

Returning to the narrative of the *nazir*, the Maharsha understands that the Gemara sought to underscore the qualitative assets the *nazir* possessed. We have already seen how it highlighted the splendor of his physical appearance. By referring to the “south,” the Gemara was further alluding to his status as a wise and accomplished individual. The point of all of these complimentary descriptions, as we shall see, was to accentuate the true nobility of his character.

In recounting his decision to take the vow, the *nazir* further added the fact that “*Pachaz ali yitzri* – my evil inclination surged upon me.” To what exactly was he referring? Into which sin did the *yetzer* hope to entrap him?

And so, in elucidating this incident, the Maharsha explains that the struggle in which the *nazir* was involved related to the mitzvah of *kibbud av* – honoring one’s father. Thus, he mentioned that he was tending the sheep of his father, obviously undertaken at the latter’s request. And it was precisely his qualities of excellence that made the matter all the more challenging. The *yetzer* put such thoughts in his mind: “Here you are, a most handsome and wise individual. How can you lower yourself to engage in such an undignified occupation as shepherding?” It is for this reason, as well, that the *nazir* characterized the advent of such prideful feelings as an attempt to “drive me from the world.” For the Torah mentions long life as the reward for honoring parents: כָּבֵד אֶת־אָבִיךָ וְאֶת־אִמֶּךָ לְמַעַן יַאֲרְכּוּךָ יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל הַיְצִדָּמָה אֲשֶׁר־ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ – “Honor your father and your mother so that your days shall be lengthened upon the land that Hashem your

G-d is giving to you” (*Shemos 20:12*). The *yetzer*’s enticement to ignore his father’s needs was thus, in effect, an attempt to shorten his life.

Interestingly enough, concludes the Maharsha, it was precisely the issue of long, luxuriant hair that caused another prominent figure to perpetrate one of the most egregious instances of disrespecting his father. David Hamelech’s son, Avshalom, revolted against his father in his usurpation of his throne. And just as it caused his spiritual downfall, it also brought about his exit from the world; as Chazal remark: “Avshalom took pride in his hair; therefore, in the end, he was hung by his hair” (*Sotah 9b; cf. Shmuel II 18:9*).

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