

SPEECH ON MESECHES NAZIR

This is one of the 63 books of the Talmud. It is entitled "Nazir". It contains discussions among rabbis who lived between the years 0 and 500, in their own words, about what the laws of a nazir (i.e., nazirite) should be.

The nazirite laws discussed in this book of the Talmud are based on a chapter of the Torah that describes the procedure for being a nazir.

That chapter of the Torah states:

When a man or woman vows to be a nazir for specified time period, during that specified period time that person has 3 prohibitions:

- 1) against consuming beer and wine and grape products
- 2) against having a hair cut
- 3) against becoming tuma through contact with a corpse.

On the day that the specified period of time has expired, the nazir should bring 3 sheep. A priest sacrifices the 3 sheep. The nazir shaves his head and throws the cut hair on the fire under one of the sacrifices. Then the nazir's prohibitions end. If, during the nazirite period, the nazir accidentally contacts a corpse, then he must undergo a purification ritual and then start the nazirite period all over again.

That is what the Torah states about the nazirite procedure. And the rabbis in this book of the Talmud discuss and debate each step of that procedure.

Nazirut starts by a person vowing to be a nazir – preferably by the reciting phrase "behold I am now a nazir". The rabbis debate what other phraseologies can be recited to make the nazirite vow.

How long does the nazirite period last? Whatever the person stipulated when taking the vow. The period can be as short as 30 days according to some rabbis, and as short as 29 days according to others. There is no maximum for the nazirite time period – it can last the rest of the person's life.

The rabbis debate whether the nazirut period ends at the **start** of or at the **end** of the last day of the nazirut period.

The rabbis debate whether you can make your nazirite vow contingent on something being **currently** true (e.g., I **am** a nazir **if** that person in the far distance is my brother) or **coming** true (e.g., I **will be** a nazir **when** sitting cow will stand up).

The rabbis agree that if you make your vow to be a nazir contingent on something **seemingly-impossible** occurring, and that seemingly-impossible thing actually occurs, the vow is **not** valid. Similarly, if you make your nazirite vow contingent that some particular thing **will occur**, not realizing that that particular thing **has already occurred**, the vow is **not** valid.

In a case where I heard my friend vow to be a nazir, and I said "me too", and then my friend gets a rabbi to annul his vow, the rabbis debate about whether I am stuck being a nazir after my friend no longer is. In a case in which I vow to be a nazir (which prohibits me from standing on a grave) **WHILE** I am standing on a grave, the rabbis argue whether the vow is valid.

If a woman vows to become a nazir, her husband can annul her vow. The rabbis debate whether annulment of the wife's nazirut (1) deactivates the nazirut from **this moment one**, or (2) annuls the nazirut **retroactively** as though it never occurred.

The rabbis ask why the nazir, at the end of the nazirut period, gives a sin sacrifice. They ask what sin did the nazir do? One rabbi suggests that the nazir sinned by voluntarily depriving himself of the simple pleasure like wine.

A father may designate his child to be a nazir as long as the child (1) is NOT an adult and (2) does NOT object and (3) is NOT too young to be a nazir. The rabbis argue how young is too young to be a nazir, with one rabbi asserting no child is too young to be designated (by its father) to be a nazir.

Jewish law allows a nazir to trim his/her hair periodically, and the rabbis argue how often the nazir may trim his hair

After the nazirite period ends, the nazirite is still prohibited from wine, haircutting and tuma, **until after** he/she brings the 3 sacrifices in the Temple. Now-a-days, since there is no Temple, a nazirite is permanently prohibited from wine, haircutting and tuma the rest of his his/her life, since there is no longer a Temple in which to bring the sacrifices. The only modern-day nazir that lived in the past century was teacher in Merkaz Harav Kook Yeshivah in Jerusalem, which I once met. His nazirut prohibitions lasted till the day he died, since there was no Temple for him to bring the 3 sacrifices in.

The book tells the story of a person who, when the Temple still existed, vowed to be a nazir, and during his nazirite period the Temple was destroyed, which meant he had no means bringing the sacrifices to end his nazirut prohibitions. The rabbis did him a favor by annulling his nazirut, based on the justification that had he known that the Temple would be destroyed and preclude him from ending his nazirut, he would not have made the nazirite vow in the first place

The most famous nazir in the Bible is strongman Samson. Samson's nazirut was **stricter** than the standard nazirut in that Samson's nazirut started from the day he was **born**. According to some rabbis, Samson was more **lenient** than the standard nazirut in that he was **not** prohibited from contacting a corpse, as evidenced by the fact that Samson killed so many Philistines. Other rabbis disagree, and say Samson **never** touched a corpse; he killed the Philistines from a **distance**. The rabbis debate whether a person is able to accept a Samson-type nazirut on himself and, if so, what prohibitions would that entail. Some rabbis argue a people are incapable of a Samson-type nazirut, since a Samson-type nazirut entails 2 things that no one can achieve – (1) the nazirut starting from birth and (2) the nazirut being divinely ordained.

In the last page of this book, 2 rabbis (Nehorai and Yosi) argue whether **Prophet Samuel** was a nazir too. One rabbi said Samuel was a nazir based on the Bible saying a MORAH (Hebrew word for razor) never passed over his head. The second rabbi disagreed, saying Samuel was NOT a nazir, and that the Bible passage stating a MORAH never passed over Samuel's head meant FEAR never passed over his head (since MORAH in Hebrew and in Yiddish also means fear). Then the first rabbi responded that you cannot say FEAR never passed over Samuel's head, since another passage indicated Samuel DID fear lunatic King Saul. Then the Talmud states that these same 2 rabbis (who argued over the meaning of MORAH) agreed that a person who responds AMEN to someone else's bracha receives **more** heavenly reward than the person who initially **recited** the bracha. Other rabbis disagreed and taught a person responding AMEN receives the same heavenly reward as the person reciting the bracha. And therefore a zealous person, who wants to be the first to do a mitzvah, will jump to recite the bracha (and let others say AMEN).

Both a nazir and a kohen are **prohibited** from touching a corpse. Except that they are both **required** to perform the mitzvah of handling a corpse to bury it, if no one else is around to perform that mitzvah. In a case where a nazir and a kohen are walking together and encounter a corpse that has no one else around to bury it – the rabbis debate which of them (nazir or kohen) should volunteer to handle the corpse so that the other can avoid becoming tamai.

This book ends with the following teaching, made famous by the fact that we recite it every morning at the end of davening: Rabbi Elazar quoted Rabbi Chanina as saying that Torah scholars increase peace in the world, based on their slightly-contorted interpretation of a passage in the Book of Proverbs as saying "and all your children are scholars of Gd, and build great peace for you." And with that this book of the Talmud ends.