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# **WEEKLY SHMUESS**

## **Parshas Naso**

**Abstinence Today**

**DRASHAS FROM THE  
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## *Naso – Abstinence Today*

### *Nazir: Abstaining From The Physical*

*Parshas Naso* discusses the laws of the *nazir* (the “Nazirite”), who is commanded to avoid contamination with a corpse, as well as to abstain from consuming wine and grapes, and to let his hair grow long.

Yosef was given a blessing by his father Yaakov that he shall be “like a Nazirite to his brothers”; the *Gemara*<sup>1</sup> states that ever since he was separated from his brothers, he abstained from wine, just as a *nazir*. The *Maharsha*<sup>2</sup> debates whether or not he became an actual *nazir* or if he was merely abstaining from wine. The other brothers also did not drink wine ever since they sold Yosef, and the *Maharsha* states that this was just to practice behavior of a *nazir*, but not that they were actually becoming *nazirites*. As for Yosef, the simple understanding is that he became a *nazir*.

Rashi translates the word *nazir* with the term “*perishus*”, abstinence, for when Yosef became a “*nazir*” from his brothers, it meant that he separated himself from them. The *Targum Onkelos* adds that a *nazir* is “to Hashem”, in separating himself from contamination, wine, and from cutting his hair.

Thus, the essence of being a *nazir* is the trait of *perishus*, abstinence. First the *nazir* practices *perishus*, and this leads him towards a higher level – *kedushah* (sanctity). That is

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<sup>1</sup> *Shabbos 139a*

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

what is meant by becoming a *nazir* “to Hashem”; the *Gemara* says that the word *nazir* is also from the word *nezer*, “crown”, for he is crowned and designated specially for Hashem.<sup>3</sup> But the main trait behind practicing *nezirus* is the trait of *perishus*/abstinence, in that a *nazir* practices *perishus*/abstinence by separating himself from materialism.

The *perishus* practiced by a *nazir* is the classic example of the entire concept of *perishus*. But it is also one of the rungs of the spiritual ladder of growth stated by Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair, which is explained in the *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*. The basis of growth is Torah, and this leads, in ascending order, to: *zehirus* (watchfulness), *zerizus* (alacrity), *nekiyus* (cleanliness), and *perishus*/abstinence.<sup>4</sup>

The trait of *perishus* is epitomized in the practice of *nezirus*. A *nazir* practices the total and absolute level of *perishus*, but a person must also practice *perishus* on a partial level, as part of his service to the Creator in his personal spiritual growth.

### ***Although “Nezirus” Is Not Practiced Today, Its Lesson Is Still Applicable To All***

Most of the Sages did not become *nazirites*. There were only a few. We already mentioned Yosef *HaTzaddik* as being one example who,

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<sup>3</sup> *Nazir 5a*

<sup>4</sup> [The levels after that are *taharah*\purity, *chassidus*\piety, *anavah*\humility, *yiras cheit*\fear of sin, and *kedushah*\sanctity]

according to some, did become an actual *nazir*. The *Gemara* states that Avshalom<sup>5</sup> was a *nazir*, and this is derived from the fact that his long hair entangled him in a tree and caused his death. According to one opinion of the Sages, Shmuel *HaNavi* was also a *nazir*. The most famous *nazir* in history was Shimshon *HaGibor*.

Tractate *Nazir* discusses three kinds of *nezirus*: 1) a *stam nazir*, who becomes a *nazir* for 30 days; 2) a *nazir olam*, who must practice *nezirus* his entire life, and 3) *nezirus Shimshon*, who is also for the person's entire life. The *Gemara* asks: What is the difference between *nazir olam* and *nezirus Shimshon*? The *Gemara* explains that a *nazir olam* may cut his hair when it feels too heavy upon him, whereas one practicing *nezirus Shimshon* may not.

These are all levels of being a *nazir*, and this kind of abstinence was only practiced by rare individuals throughout the generations. But most of our *tzaddikim* and Sages did not practice *nezirus*, certainly not in the active sense. However, they definitely were connected to the core of the behavior that lies behind *nezirus*.

*Nezirus* is not meant to be practiced by most [of *Klal Yisrael*], but the trait of *perishus*/abstinence, which is the very essence of *nezirus*, is certainly part of one's *avodah*, as laid out in the *beraisa* of Rabbi Pinchos ben Yair as explained in the *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*. The trait of *perishus*/abstinence is one of the rungs of the ladder of growth which leads to *kedushah*, *ruach hakodesh*, and *techiyas hameisim*.

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*5 son of Dovid HaMelech, who eventually rebelled against his father and tried to kill him, who was punished and killed for his sins*

So although *nezirus* is not meant to be practiced by most people and it is not of practical relevance, its very idea, *perishus* (abstinence) is definitely a part of our personal *avodah*.

### ***Abstaining From The Forbidden***

What defines *perishus*? When one commits any of the 365 prohibitions of the Torah or any of the Rabbinic prohibitions, this is worse than a lack of *perishus* since it is a violation of that which the Torah and the Sages have forbidden. So where does *perishus* come in? *Perishus* is about keeping a distance from that which is forbidden. The Sages forbade the *nazir* from eating grapes, so that he will stay away from wine. Only wine is forbidden by the Torah to a *nazir*, but by keeping a distance from grapes, he further avoids the wine.

There are two examples of *perishus*. One example is when a person keeps a distance from the "forbidden", and another example is where a person keeps a distance from materialism.

The first kind of *perishus* is to keep a distance from the forbidden. The Sages forbade certain actions so that one will not come to violate that which is already forbidden; that is the first kind of *perishus*, making something forbidden in order to avoid doing the forbidden.

The second kind of *perishus* is to avoid materialism. What is the idea of this kind of *perishus*? It is because man is made of a body and soul, and his main task is to lessen the physical body's hold on him and to increase the power of the soul. By connecting to

materialism, the physicality of the body is given further expression, which increases the hold of the body upon the person. In order to avoid awakening the body's physicality and to increase the soul's power, one needs to abstain from materialism, even if the materialism in question is totally permitted, in order that he shouldn't awaken the physicality of the body.

This was practiced by the "*kat perushim*", the "group of abstainers", mentioned in *Chazal*. These were people who separated themselves from material matters. Those who became *nazirites* practiced this on the absolute level, but there were also those who did not take upon themselves *nezirus* yet still practiced abstinence from materialism to some level.

### ***Abstinence From Society***

There were two types of this kind of abstinence that was practiced. One way how this was practiced was to separate oneself from society. This is written about in *sefer HaMaspik L'Oivdei Hashem*, written by Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam, who explained that our *Avos* chose to be shepherds because they preferred to be away from society. One kind of *perishus* is separating from society and civilization, and going into seclusion in deserts and fields.

This was also accomplished by those who would fulfill the teaching of *Chazal*, "Become exiled to a place of Torah." If a person leaves his environment in order to go to a place of Torah, it is like going into exile and it is a form of *perishus*.

However, in our generation, this matter is not so simple. There was a well-known discussion between the Chazon Ish and the

Satmar Rav, centering around the words of the Rambam, that if a person lives in an environment which is spiritually harmful, he should go to live in the desert. If so, why don't we go live in the desert today, since the environment around is so impure? The Chazon Ish responded to this that in our today, going to a "place of Torah" [the yeshivos] is considered like leaving civilization and going into the desert.

(Nowadays, however, it is very hard to define what a true "place of Torah" is. In any case, most of our leaders did not actually practice *perishus* through physical seclusion – rather, they dwelled within society and civilization.)

### ***Abstinence Within Society***

But there is a second kind of *perishus*/abstinence, as explained by Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam (in *Sefer HaMaspik*) and in *Chovos HaLevovos*. One abstains not by separating from society, but one abstains even as he is amongst society. This can be accomplished either through doing certain acts of abstinence, or it can be accomplished on an inward level. Both can be done while living in society amongst others.<sup>6</sup>

Acting with abstinence is a refined, subtle matter. The *Mesillas Yeshtarim* explains that there are prohibitions of the Torah which are applicable to all people, and there are other matters which are "Sanctify yourself with that which is permissible to you", which are not the same with each person. *Perishus* is possible after a person recognizes his current spiritual level, and after he becomes aware of it, he

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<sup>6</sup> See *Ma'or VaShemesh, Kedoshim; Ohel Elimelech* 81

abstains from certain behaviors, anything which he knows will further attach him to This World. He abstains in that amount, and not more than that.

This is based on the dispute in the *Gemara* if a *nazir* is called a saint or a sinner<sup>7</sup>, and also because the *Gemara*<sup>8</sup> says that it is forbidden to cause pain to oneself. On one hand, a *nazir* is called a saint, but on the other hand, he is called a sinner. When is the *nazir* a saint, and when he is a sinner? If he pains himself by abstaining from certain matters and it is within his level to handle, he is called a “saint”. Even in this case, there is some aspect of sin, as *Tosafos* explains in Tractate *Taanis*, regarding one who fasts on Shabbos over a bad dream). But if he pains himself by abstaining and it is not within his level to abstain, he is abstaining more than necessary, and in this regard, he is a sinner.

The only exception to this would be if someone abstains more than his current level because he is exercising *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice), the level reached by Rabbi Eliezer ben Dordaya, about whom Rebbi stated, “There are those who acquire their share in the World To Come, in one hour.”

### ***Minimal Abstinence From The Physical***

But in the normal order of things, *perishus* must be a minimal abstinence, according to one’s personal level. One should abstain by withholding himself from a little bit of physical enjoyment of this world, and this is how he practices *perishus*. Then he can go the next level.

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<sup>7</sup> *Nedarim 9b-10a, Nazir 4a*

<sup>8</sup> *Tractate Bava Kamma: Chapter Eight*

But it must be emphasized that in order for a person to do this, he must really know what his level is. Much exertion is needed in order to know oneself very well, and what his true level is. It is impossible for a person to know exactly what his level is, just as it is impossible to determine the exact moment of midnight. But as much as can get to know his level, he should try abstaining a little bit from some materialism, slowly but fundamentally progressing.

One’s *avodah* is to keep abstaining a little bit more, until he can reach the level of *kedushah*/sanctity, where he can sanctify worldly pleasures because he is so connected to holiness, as explained in *Mesillas Yescharim*.

In the generation we live in, the world is filled with pursuing all kinds of materialism and lusts, to the point that it is difficult to know how to live a true and internal kind of life. One needs to settle his mind and determine how he can abstain, on his own level, from materialism. One should know how much he needs to make use of materialism, and what he can say no to.

This will differ with each person, according to his own current level. It must be emphasized, once again, that one must abstain only according to the level he is at. If he abstains too little, he will not really grow that much. If he abstains too much, he will exhaust himself, because he will be acting way above his energies, and it will backfire on him. The results are often tragic. From abstaining too much, he will eventually rebel and then fall abysmally, in a way that could not have been ever imagined.

By practicing *perishus* through making small and slow progress, one begins the *avodah* of living a life of *perishus*, and it can be

accomplished even while living amongst others. However, this is but the external level of *perishus*. The inner level of *perishus*, as explained in *Chovos HaLevovos*, is that a person can reach a level where he is amidst hundreds of people, yet he is still separated from them and from their behaviors. On a deeper level, he is inwardly attached to Hashem, to the root of his soul.

A person cannot reach inner abstinence, though, unless he first reaches external abstinence. He must first practice external abstinence, before he can get to the inner level.

Until now, we have briefly explained the levels of *perishus*/abstinence, as explained in the words of *Chazal* and by those who came after them, who explained this matter.

### ***Internal Abstinence: Living Internally***

The inner level of *perishus* is when one lives inwardly, recognizing that he has an inner world of his own. This is a subtle matter to understand, so let's explain it.

There is a misconception about this matter. Practicing *perishus* amongst people seems to be that even in the presence of other people, one doesn't have any feelings for them, because he is inwardly disconnected from them, so he doesn't care what happens to them. With such an attitude, he will no doubt become an anti-social person, cutting himself off emotionally from anyone around him. This is not the way of the Torah, whose ways are "ways of pleasantness".

The truth about *perishus* is totally different than the above attitude. It is, on one hand, to be around people and to be disconnected

from the way they behave, from their world, from their lifestyles, and from their worldviews; and at the very same time, to feel connected to all others, in the very depths of the soul. That is true *ahavas Yisrael*, to recognize that at our root, all Jewish souls are one.

The following illustrates how a person can have *perishus* amongst others yet still have *ahavas Yisrael*. When a baby is born, it cannot speak or express itself. Slowly as time goes on, the parents become more and more connected to their child. Yet, the parents are not connected to their child's life. They love him, they think about him, they are connected to him, and they will care for him and exert themselves for him. But they are not found in the child's world.

In the same way, we can understand what internal *perishus* is. Without internal *perishus*, a person just lives life as it is, living in this world as it is, and that is how most people live. Some are more careful with observing *halachah*, and some less, but most people feel like they are connected to this world as it is. Even in those who learn Torah and strictly observe the *mitzvos*, they live the world as it is.

But if someone cares about his soul and he searches for spiritual growth, for truth, for closeness to Hashem, he develops an inner world of his own. In his external behavior, he will behave like everyone else, except for some minor external differences, such as learning more Torah and fulfilling more *mitzvos*, which would earn him the title of "*masmid*", but this is all external behavior. Inwardly, a person can slowly distance himself from the people found on this world, from their lifestyles, opinions, and ways of thinking.

What interests most people will usually not interest him, and the same is true vice versa.

This internal separation from others is not only meant to be practiced by those who strictly observe Torah and *mitzvos* when they need to separate themselves from the lifestyles and opinions of those who do not keep the Torah, who regard the forbidden as permissible. Rather, this separation is necessary even from those who strictly observe Torah and *mitzvos*, when they are attached to This World and are very interested in the news and events of the world, and who feel “out of it” if they do not listen to the news and don’t follow everything that goes on in the world today.....

### ***The Balance Between Separation From Society And Connection To Others***

The *Gemara* says that “one’s mind should mix with others”. One needs to get along with others and pleasantly mix with them.

But we can compare this to a father and a grandfather sitting by the Shabbos table and observing their young children. The father and grandfather are interested in getting to know all of their children and grandchildren, and they will ask them questions and the children will answer them. Perhaps they also get *nachas* from them. But they are not really that interested in the child’s life. They are not found in their world and are not connected to that place. Rather, they are found their own lives (and in fact, it is pitiful if they would become connected to the world of their children and grandchildren).

A true inward kind of life is to relate to others with “ways of pleasantness”, to feel

connected to others, to get along with others, and, to some extent, to be interested in the welfare of others. But being interested in others and inquiring about what’s going in their life should not be about feeling interested in others’ lives. Rather, it is about inquiring about their well-being and to want good for them. Since that is what others may need, one should do so, to show care and concern for others by showing an interest in their lives. It is an act of *chessed* and it is *ahavas Yisrael*.

It is for the same reason that a father and mother must show an interest in their child when he is throwing a ball, and to look interested in his ball. Although the parents don’t care about the ball, they need to show an interest in his ball, because that is what the child needs in order to feel cared about. Understandably, the love of parents for their child should go deeper than this, according to the abilities that Hashem has bestowed upon them.

### ***Becoming More Inward***

If internal *perishus* (inward separation from others’ lives) is not preceded with external *perishus* (external seclusion from others), it is very likely that practicing internal *perishus* will lead to delusion. However, to remain at the level of external *perishus* alone is like a body without a soul. The main aspect of *perishus* is to develop a rich, internal world in oneself.

The more a person is immersed in Torah study, not superficially but in the depths of his soul, the more one reaches into his soul and reveals his unique share in his world, he is connected to his *pnimiyus* (inner world), and even more so, to the root of his soul’s light,

Hashem. It as the *Chovos HaLevovos* describes, that the pious individual [who practices internal *perishus*] can be on a level where even as he is amongst people, he is inwardly connected and attached with Hashem. That is the highest level, and it only comes at the end.

But way before that, a person must build his inner world of Torah, his inner world of deep self-recognition, of inner work with his soul and all its parts.

Slowly but surely, as he does this, his inner world will expand, beginning with a small opening and eventually becoming filled with much *daas* (inner knowledge). He will have an inner expansiveness to live in, his own private inner estate. This is called living a life of true *perishus*.

### ***Practicing Inner Perishus/Abstinence Today***

This way of living, of internal *perishus*, is possible even when a person lives within society, in the world we recognize and know. Anyone can find a quiet place to go to where he can practice some separation from society today.

Understandably, one should not go to places that are lowly and impure. One should try to look for the most refined place he knows of. Although even the best places today are gruff compared to what it used to be like in the earlier generations, one should still find quiet and refined places in the world to go to, where he can build his own inner world and feel separate from the world around him. He can live in his own internal world.

The *Chovos HaLevovos* said: “He mourns in his heart, but there is joy on his face”. In other words, one can live with alternating

modes. He can have a place in himself where his own inner world is, and he can have a place in himself for others. Living life in this way is not the same thing as being a *nazir*, who had to avoid becoming contaminated to a corpse, avoid wine and grapes, and to refrain from cutting his hair. But it is still the very same perspective and attitude of living like a *nazir*.

If a person cannot relate to a life of *perishus* at all, he cannot become truly and completely connected to the Torah and to Hashem. He may be somewhat connected, and he will certainly receive reward for this, but if one searches for an internal and truthful life, he must know that practicing external *perishus*, and mainly inward *perishus*, is the way of living that was practiced by our forefathers, throughout the generations.

External *perishus*, such as taking to the deserts and secluded fields, was only practiced by individuals, such as the prophets. But the practice of *perishus* within society, as well as internal *perishus*, was practiced by all great people throughout the generations. They all had an inner world inside of themselves which elevated them above their surroundings, yet at the same time, they all related to those around them with pleasantness; love for the Jewish people, and with bestowing good upon others.

### ***In Conclusion***

May Hashem help us all separate as much as we can from materialism and from This World; we cannot become loners from society, who live apart from civilization (may Heaven help them), but even as we are within society, we can abstain from the world, each of us on our own level, until the time of the



redemption, when the world will be improved and we will be able to fully live in it. In the time being, where This World is still here and it remains the way it is, each person can still find his own internal world, where one can connect himself to his own soul, to the Torah, and to the Creator.