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## Stories with a Twist [43]

### My Son, on What Account You Wish to Destroy This Lovely Hair?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Nazir 4b  
Also Tosefta Nazir (Lieberman) 4:7 & Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 9b

Revise June 2022



### Background to Our Story

#### Narcissus (mythology)



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissus\\_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissus_(mythology))

In Greek mythology, Narcissus was a hunter from Thespiae in Boeotia (alternatively Mimas or modern day Karaburun, Izmir) who was known for his beauty. According to Tzetzes, he rejected all romantic advances, eventually falling in love with his own reflection in a pool of water, staring at it for the remainder of his life. After he died, in his place sprouted a flower bearing his name.

The character of Narcissus is the origin of the term narcissism, a fixation with oneself. This quality, in turn, contributes to the definition of narcissistic personality disorder, a psychiatric condition marked by grandiosity, excessive need for attention and admiration, and an inability to empathize.

#### Shimon Hatzadik (ca. 400 B.C.E. ca. 300 B.C.E.)



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Nazir. Koren publishers Jerusalem.  
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Shimon HaTzaddik, or Shimon the righteous, is the first Sage mentioned in the chain of transmission in tractate *Avot* (1:2). He is described there as one of the remnants of the Great Assembly. According to Josephus, his full name was Shimon ben Honyo ben Yadua. Based on the few mentions of him in the Talmud, it seems that he was the High Priest during the beginning of Greek rule in Eretz Yisrael and was the one who received Alexander of Macedon when he came to conquer Eretz Yisrael. Several tales are told about him in Josephus's *Antiquities*, and he is praised at the end of the

book of Ben Sira. It is possible that ben Sira had contact with Shimon HaTzaddik. That book also describes how Shimon HaTzaddik came out of the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, a description later inserted into the liturgy of Yom Kippur. Ben Sira further relates how Shimon HaTzaddik rebuilt the ruins of Jerusalem and initiated the building of the walls of the Temple. He is lauded in the Jerusalem Talmud for his righteousness and piety, and the *Tosefta* (*Sota* 13:8) states that after him the priests in the Temple would no longer say God's ineffable name in the priestly blessing, since the Sages did not think that the people were worthy of it.

## **Nazir – Nezirut**



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

A nazirite or nazirite, (in Hebrew *nazir*), refers to a Jew who took the ascetic vow described in Numbers 6:1-21. The term "nazirite" comes from the Hebrew word *nazir* meaning "consecrated" or "separated". This vow required the man or woman to:

- Abstain from wine, wine vinegar, [grapes](#), [raisins](#), and according to some — alcohol and vinegar from alcohol
- Refrain from cutting the hair on one's head
- Avoid corpses and graves, even those of family members, and any structure which contains such

After following these requirements for a designated period of time (which would be specified in the individual's vow, and not to be less than 30 days), the person would immerse in a Mikvah and make three offerings, a lamb as a burnt offering (*olah*), an ewe as a sin-offering (*hatat*), and a ram as a peace offering (*shelamim*), in addition to a basket of unleavened bread, grain offerings and drink offerings, which accompanied the peace offering.

The nazirite is described as being "holy unto the LORD" (Numbers 6:8), yet at the same time must bring a sin offering. This contradiction has led to divergent approaches to the nazirite in the Talmud, and later authorities.

### **Becoming a nazirite**

A Jewish man or woman can only become a nazirite by an intentional verbal declaration. This declaration can be in any language, and can be something as minor as saying "me too" as a nazirite passes by.

A person can specify the duration for any amount of days greater than or equal to 30 days. If a person does not specify, or specifies a time less than 30 days, the vow is for 30 days. A person who says "I am a nazirite forever" or "I am a nazirite for all my life" is a permanent nazirite and slightly different laws apply. Likewise if a person says "I am a nazirite like Samson," the laws of a Samson-like nazirite apply. However if a person says that he is a nazirite for a thousand years, he is a regular nazirite.

### **Ending of the nazirite period**

At the end of the nazirite period the nazirite brings three sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. The first is a ewe for a *chatat* (sin offering), the second is lamb for an *olah* (elevation offering), and finally a ram as a *shelamim* (peace offering) along with a basket of matzah and their grain and drink offerings. After bringing the sacrifices the nazirite shaves his or her head in the outer courtyard of the Temple.

## **Attitudes toward nazirites**

The nazirite is called "holy unto the Lord" (Numbers 6:8), but at the same time must bring a sin-offering (Numbers 6:11) and his sins are explicitly referred to ("and make atonement for that which he sinned"). This apparent contradiction, pointed out in the Babylonian Talmud, lead to two divergent views. Samuel and Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar, focusing on the sin-offering of the nazirite, regarded nazirites, as well as anyone who fasted when not obligated to or took any vow whatsoever, as a sinner. A different Rabbi Eliezer argues that the nazirite is indeed holy and the sin referred to in the verse applies only to a nazirite who became ritually defiled.

Maimonides, following the view of Rabbi Eliezer Hakappar, calls a nazirite a sinner, explaining that a person should always be moderate in his actions and not be to any extreme. Nevertheless he does point out that a nazirite can be evil or righteous depending on the circumstances.

Nahmanides, in his commentary on the Torah, sides with Samuel and Rabbi Eliezer. He explains that ideally the person should be a nazirite his whole life. Therefore ceasing to be nazirite requires a sin-offering.

Many later opinions compromise between these views and explain that a nazirite is both good and bad.

## **Nazarites in Halacha**



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If one undertakes a vow in order to improve his character and correct his ways, it is considered praiseworthy. Examples of this include: A glutton who renders meat forbidden to him, a drunkard who takes a vow rendering wine forbidden to him, and one who is proud of his beauty and undertakes naziriteship. However, it is inadvisable to take many vows. It is preferable to improve one's character without the use of a vow (Rambam *Sefer Hafla'a*, *Hilkhot Nedarim* 13:23–24; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh De'a* 203:7).

## **Numbers 6: 13-20**

13. This is the law of the nazirite: On the day his period of naziriteship is completed, he shall present himself at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

14. He shall bring his offering to the Lord: one unblemished lamb in its first year as a burnt offering, and one unblemished ram as a peace offering,

15. and a basket of unleavened cakes; loaves of fine flour mixed with oil, and unleavened wafers anointed with oil, with their meal offerings and their libations.

16. The kohen shall present it before the Lord, and perform the service of his sin offering and his burnt offering.

17. He shall make the ram as a peace offering to the Lord, along with the basket of unleavened cakes, and the kohen shall perform the service of its meal offering with its libation.

18. The nazirite shall shave the head of his naziriteship at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, and he shall take the hair of the head of his naziriteship and place it upon the fire which is under the peace offering.

19. The kohen shall then take the cooked foreleg of the ram, one unleavened loaf from the basket and one unleavened wafer, place [them] in the hands of the nazirite after he has shaven off his nazirite [head].

20. The kohen shall wave them as a waving before the Lord; it is consecrated to the kohen, along with the breast of the waving and the thigh of the uplifting. After this, the nazirite may drink wine.

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud Nazir 4b

אמר שמעון הצדיק: מימי לא אכלתי אשם נזיר טמא, חוץ מאדם אחד שבא אלי מן הדרום, ופה עינים וטוב ראי, וקווצותיו סדורות לו תלתלים. אמרתי לו: בני, מה ראית לשחת שער נאה זה?

אמר לי: רועה הייתי לאבי בעירי, והלכתי לשאוב מים מן המעיין, ונסתכלתי בבבואה שלי, ופחו יצרי עלי וביקש לטורדני מן העולם. אמרתי לו: ריקה. מפני מה אתה מתגאה בעולם שאינו שלך, שסופך להיות רמה ותולעה? העבודה שאגלחך לשמים.

עמדתי ונשקתיו על ראשו. אמרתי לו: כמותך ירבו נזירים בישראל, עליך הכתוב אומר: "איש...כי יפלא לנדר נזיר להזיר לה'".

Shimon HaTzaddik said: In all my days as a priest, I never ate the guilt-offering of a ritually impure nazirite <sup>1</sup>, apart from the offering of one man who came to me from the South, who had beautiful eyes and a fine countenance, and his locks were arranged in curls.

I [Shimon HaTzaddik] said to him: My son, what did you see to become a nazirite, which would force you to destroy this beautiful hair, as a nazirite must cut off all his hair at the conclusion of his term?

He said to me: I was a shepherd for my father in my town, and I went to draw water from the spring, and I looked at my reflection in the water. And my evil inclination quickly rose against me and sought to drive me from the world <sup>2</sup>. I said to my evil inclination: Empty one! For what reason are you proud in a world that is not yours, as your end is

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<sup>1</sup> Shimon HaTzaddik was concerned that the nazirite had made his vow impetuously and that it was not fully genuine. After he became ritually impure, the nazirite would regret having taken his vow even more, since he was then required to bring additional offerings and restart his term of naziriteship.

<sup>2</sup> Some commentaries explain that since he saw that he was so handsome, his evil inclination encouraged him to try to entice women; he thought that they would not refuse someone that attractive (Rivan). Others suggest that his evil inclination was for homosexual relations (Arukh). Others say that since he found himself so handsome he was concerned about excessive pride (Rabbi Yitzhak Tzarfati). Similarly, the Maharsha, who has a lengthy homiletic interpretation of this entire passage, explains that he found himself to be so handsome and intelligent that he decided that it was beneath his dignity to continue working as a shepherd.

to be maggots and worms. I swear by the Temple service that I will become a nazirite and shave you for the sake of Heaven.

Shimon HaTzaddik relates: When I heard his response, I arose and kissed him on his head, and said to him: May there be more nazirites like you in Israel, whose intentions are noble. With regard to you the verse states: "When either a man or a woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord" (Numbers 6:2).



### Explaining the Story

What's going on in our story? (The sequence of events)

### Comprehension & Analysis Questions

**?** Based on the opening of our story and based on the background we read, what is the general opinion of Shimon Hatzadik regarding nazirites? Why?

**Bonus ?** What do you think is the general opinion of Shimon Hatzadik regarding beauty and aesthetics?

**?** What are the four classical interpretations of "*And my evil inclination quickly rose against me and sought to drive me from the world*"?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Can you think of another possible interpretation?

**?** How did the nazirite in our story "abstain for the sake of the lord"?

**Extra Bonus ?** Why doesn't the nazirite shave his hair immediately upon looking at his reflection in the spring?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Extra Bonus ?** Why does Rabbi Shimon Hatzadik bless the nazirite?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

## **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

! Personal moral and spiritual growth comes through fighting the evil inclination through our internal dialogue.

! Idolatry: when the means becomes the end!

! What was so commendable by the nazirite to deserve the special blessing of Shimon Hatzadik? Two readings:

- Destroying "the obstacle" for the sake of heaven (My reading)
- Transforming and Elevating "the obstacle" for the sake of heaven (Rabbi Gedaliah Machlis' Reading)



Realizing that his beauty was becoming for him an end in itself, the man in our story is determined to fight his evil inclination, and strengthens himself with a declaration of intent (the nazirite vow): "I swear by the Temple service that I will shave you for the sake of Heaven."

Shimon Hatzadik blesses the man because he recognizes that his right and difficult decision was the product of an inner struggle, and because of that even more commendable.