YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Naso**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch Gigi**

**"All the Days of His Separation He is Holy to the Lord"**

Summarized by Nadav Schultz

Translated by David Strauss

*Parashat Naso* follows along the lines of *Parashat Bamidbar*, continuingits description of the arrangement of the camp in anticipation of the impending journey toward the Promised Land. It begins with the count of the Levites, moves on to the internal differentiation between the various camps, and concludes with an account of the dedication of the *Mishkan*.

In the middle of the narrative, however, within the descriptions of the encampment, the flow is abruptly interrupted by three passages that seem out of place – the passages concerning a *sota* (a woman suspected of adultery), a *nazir*, and the priestly blessing. This phenomenon is not unique to our *parasha*, but recurs many times throughout the Torah: in the midst of recounting the history of our people, the Torah suddenly switches to discuss halakhic matters that are not part of the narrative. Each such interruption invites us to investigate why the Torah saw fit to teach those laws precisely in that place.

**Sanctity of the family**

As stated, our *parasha* deals with the order of the camp, which is arranged around the *Mishkan*: the Levites on the inside, organized according to their families ("And the Levites shall encamp around the *Mishkan*" – *Bamidbar* 1:54), and the other tribes surrounding them ("The children of Israel shall pitch by their fathers' houses; every man with his own standard, according to the ensigns; a good way off shall they pitch round about the Tent of Meeting" – *Bamidbar* 2:2).

In light of this guiding principle, we can understand the appearance of these laws in our *parasha*. The section dealing with a *sota* comes to teach us that the entire idea expressed in the structure of the camp is irrelevant if the sanctity of the basic family unit is not preserved. Therefore, the Torah is stringent about even a possibility of defilement between husband and wife, as conveyed via the introduction in this context of the laws of a *sota*.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Sanctity of the individual**

The laws of the *nazir* take us another step forward in this direction: not only does the family unit constitute an essential and indispensable component of the sanctity of the camp, but the individual does as well. The individual can sanctify himself by accepting the laws of the *nazir*.

We shall now expand a bit on the mitzvaof *nezirut*. The Mishna in *Nida* records a dispute:

A *Kohen Gadol* and a *nazir* may not defile themselves [by contact] with their [dead] relatives, but they may defile themselves with a mitzva*-*corpse (someone who died and has no one to tend to his burial). If they were walking along the way and found a mitzva-corpse, Rabbi Eliezer says the *Kohen Gadol* should defile himself, and the *nazir* should not. The Sages say: The *nazir* should defile himself, but [even] a regular *kohen* should not. Rabbi Eliezer said to them: Let the *kohen*, who does not bring a sacrifice upon defilement, defile himself, but not the *nazir*, for he brings a sacrifice upon defilement. They replied: Let the *nazir*, whose sanctification is not permanent, defile himself, but not the *kohen*, whose sanctification is permanent. (*Nazir* 47a)

We see from this *mishna* that there is a comparison between the *Kohen Gadol* and the *nazir*: both are forbidden to defile themselves by coming into contact with a corpse, even one of his seven close relatives. This raises the question of what the law would be in the case of a mitzva*-*corpse, for the sake of which it is permissible to defile oneself – is it better to call upon the *Kohen Gadol* or the *nazir* to accept impurity in order to tend to this corpse?

The Gemara understands the disagreement as follows:

It is understandable that [in the case of] a *Kohen Gadol* and a *nazir*, one [view] reasons that the *Kohen Gadol* is of superior sanctity, and the other reasons that the *nazir* is of superior sanctity. (Ibid.)

It is clear to the Gemara that we are not dealing here merely with a technical question. It is true that the *Tannaim* disagree about the practical *halakha*, but at the heart of the matter lies a more fundamental disagreement: Who is more holy, the *Kohen Gadol* or the *nazir*? Is it the *Kohen Gadol*, whose sanctity is from birth, or is it the *nazir*, whose sanctity is the product of his verbal declaration?

Rabbi Eliezer argues that the *nazir* is holier than the *Kohen Gadol*, and his proof is that the *nazir* brings a sacrifice if he becomes impure. According to Rabbi Eliezer's understanding, this requirement indicates that the sanctity profaned in the case of a *nazir* is greater than that which is profaned in the case of a *Kohen Gadol*, whose defilement does not require a sacrifice. According to the Sages, however, the *Kohen Gadol* is more holy because his sanctity is permanent, while the *nazir*’s sanctity is limited in time. They do not accept Rabbi Eliezer's proof from the *nazir*'s sacrifice in the case of defilement. It would seem that they understand this offering as attesting to the *weakness* of the *nazir*'s sanctity: the *nazir* was momentarily sanctified beyond his ordinary state; if he subsequently becomes impure, that indicates that he had tried to sanctify himself beyond what was appropriate for him. Since that is the case, the Torah requires him to bring a sacrifice as part of his purification process.

The *Tosafot* (ad loc., s.v. *nazir*) ask why *nezirut* is necessarily considered a state of temporary sanctity. After all, a person can vow to be a *nazir* for life! While they offer one answer, I would like to take a slightly different approach and suggest that *nezirut* is indeed, by definition, a transitory matter.

*Chazal* explained the passage dealing with *nezirut* as follows:

Why is the section dealing with the *nazir* placed in juxtaposition to the section dealing with the *sota*? To tell you that he who has seen a *sota* in her disgrace should abstain from wine, because it [may] lead to adultery. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 6:2, based on *Sota* 2a)

Normally, it is appropriate to conduct oneself in a moderate fashion, as the Rambam discusses in his introduction to tractate *Avot*. There are times, however, when a person realizes he is prone to an unhealthy extreme in one of his traits. In the case of the above *midrash*, a person tends to excessive drinking and this will lead him to transgress the bounds of sexual restraint. Although there may be no specific transgression in indulging in drink, the Ramban has already explained that even in the absence of a prohibition, there is a personality problem:

The Torah… permitted sexual intercourse between man and his wife, and the eating of [certain] meat and wine. If so, a man of desire could find room [to allow himself] to be immersed in sexuality with his wife… and to be among the heavy drinkers of wine and the gluttonous eaters of flesh, and speak all profanities freely, since this prohibition has not been [expressly] mentioned in the Torah, and thus he will become a sordid person within the permissible realm of the Torah! (Ramban, *Vayikra* 19:2)

In order to escape from this predicament, a person can grab hold of the opposite extreme for a certain period of time. For a limited period, he can imagine himself to be a *kohen*, forbidden to drink wine while engaged in the Temple service. But unlike the *kohen*, whose prohibition is permanent, in the case of an ordinary person, it is a temporary prohibition. The goal is not to attain the same sanctity as a *kohen*, but to balance and rectify the *nazir*’s inner qualities.

Therefore, we rule in accordance with the Sages – the *Kohen Gadol* is holier than a *nazir*. Even if it is possible that one temporarily rises to the level of a *Kohen Gadol* by accepting *nezirut*, that is of no consequence; after all, this consecration is only for a set period of time, and it is certainly less than the permanent consecration of a *Kohen Gadol*.

**Sanctity of the priest**

The appearance of the priestly blessing, following the conclusion of the section dealing with a *nazir*, continues the same progression of arranging the people of Israel and its sanctity around the *Mishkan*. We are all familiar with the well-known words of the Rambam at the end of *Hilkhot Shemitta*, in his explanation of why the entire tribe of Levi was sanctified:

Why did the Levites not receive a portion in the inheritance of [the Land of Israel,](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/588018/jewish/Israel.htm) and in its spoils, alongside their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister to Him and to instruct people at large in His straight paths and righteous judgments, as it is stated: "They will teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your [Torah](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1426382/jewish/Torah.htm) to Israel" (*Devarim* 33:10). Therefore they were set apart from the ways of the world. They do not wage war like the rest of the Jewish people, nor do they receive a portion of the Land, nor do they acquire for themselves through their physical power. Instead, they are God's legion, as it is stated: "God has blessed His legion" (ibid. v. 11), and He provides for them, as it is stated: "I am your portion and your inheritance" (*Bamidbar* [18:20](https://www.chabad.org/9946#v20)). (*Hilkhot Shemitta* 13:12)

This seems to rest on an assumption that every group needs a subgroup to look up to, an elite group whose function is to exemplify to the rest how they should behave. In the case of the Jewish people, it is the *kohanim* – "For the lips of a priest shall preserve knowledge, and the Torah shall be sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of the Lord of Hosts" (*Malakhi* 2:7). The *kohanim* are to serve as living testimony to the word of God, teaching the people how to behave – and this is especially manifest in the priestly blessing, when they turn toward the people and bless them in the name of God.

This understanding is at the basis of the appearance of the priestly blessing in our *parasha*, as Rabbi Yitzchak Arama explains at length in his commentary to the Torah, *Akeidat Yitzchak* (*Bamidbar*, *sha'ar* 74). In his view, the priests’ goal in their blessing is to assist the people in understanding the source of the world's bounty. They are to awaken the people to the abstract understanding that the Creator is the source of mercy, that He shows favor to man, and so on.

According to the Rambam, this role – teaching God's word to the people and facilitating their connection to the *Mishkan* and He who dwells therein – is not unique to the priests, but to a certain extent to the entire tribe of Levi – and for this they are exempt from obligations such as fighting and working in the fields. And yet, the Rambam goes on to add a surprising ruling:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be his portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world just as He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared: "God is the share of my portion and my cup; You support my fate" (*Tehillim* [16:5](https://www.chabad.org/16237#v5)). (Ibid., *halakha* 13)

The Rambam introduces the idea that it is not only the tribe of Levi who can sanctify their lives to God, by imparting His word to the people. According to the Rambam, any individual can decide to dedicate his life to God, by completely disengaging from the life of this world, and focusing on the life of the world to come. Here we return to the figure of the *nazir* we discussed earlier: according to the Rambam, although we rule in accordance with the Sages, one who dedicates his life to God can achieve a level similar to that of the *Kohen Gadol* and be a partner in the same task of service before the Lord.

This conception of the Rambam is not applicable to the masses. But one who accepts upon himself a vow of permanent *nezirut* – not in its length, but in its essence; that is, one who dedicates his entire being and essence to the service of God – will see blessing, and he will merit fulfillment of the verse: "All the days of his separation he is holy to the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 6:8).

[This *sicha* was delivered on *leil Shabbat*, *Parashat Naso* 5779 (2019).]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. The laws of *sota* teach that we are stringent about any case of uncertain impurity in a private domain. See *Nazir* 57a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)