

O S S A N

FUSION
WITH RABBI JASON



with
Rabbi Jason Sobel

5785 - THE YEAR OF OPEN WINDOWS

TORAH PORTIONS
Parashat Nasso



THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTIONS

NUMBERS 4:21-7:89

Parashat Nasso / פרשת נשא

In this weeks guide...

COMMENTARY..... 1

"This little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine..." The lyrics to this classic children's song are relevant to this week's *parsha*. In His desire to bless the Children of Israel, God gave His priests a specific prayer—the "Aaronic Blessing." This simple yet beautiful prayer has been a source of hope and encouragement for millions of Jews and Christians throughout the millennia. But how does it connect to light?

NEW TESTAMENT TIE-IN..... 2

Have you ever the joke about how to tell the difference between Presbyterians and Baptists? Baptists won't talk to each other at the liquor store. OK, awful church humor out of the way. The American Church has had a...*complicated* relationship with alcohol over the course of the last 200+ years. This week's *parsha* has only enhanced that complexity. WHAT IF this ancient vow spoke to something more profound (and hopeful)?

HEBREW WORD STUDY..... 3

Speaking of the Nazirite vow, let's journey deeper and explore the Hebrew root word for "Nazirite." We begin our study at the dramatic deathbed scene of one of Israel's patriarchs and conclude it an even more intense moment: the night before our Lord's crucifixion. What compelling thematic bookends!

OVER VIEW

For those who enjoy technical details, this week's portion—*Parashat Nasso*—has the largest number of letters, words, and verses of any of the 54 weekly Torah portions. It addresses priestly duties, camp purification, and restitution for wrongs committed. Three significant passages stand out: the introduction of the Nazirite vow, the giving of the Aaronic or Priestly Blessing in order to put God's name upon the people, and the twelve days of ceremonies surrounding the consecration of the Tabernacle.

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Weekly Torah Portions – *Parashat Nasso* / פרשת נשא | with **Rabbi Jason Sobel**

Staff Contributor

COMMENTARY

This week, we read *Parashat Nasso* (Numbers 4:21-7:89). It covers a broad spectrum of topics, from the remaining instructions for the Levite families and their camps to the description of the (bizarre) jealousy ritual, the Nazarite Vow, and more. However, one of the most well-known and beloved elements of *Parashat Nasso* is the *Birkat Kohanim*, commonly known as “The Aaronic Blessing.”

In Numbers 6:22-27, we read,

Again *ADONAI* spoke to Moses saying, “Speak to Aaron and to his sons saying: Thus you are to bless *Bnei-Yisrael*, by saying to them:

‘*ADONAI* bless you and keep you!

ADONAI make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you!

ADONAI turn His face toward you and grant you shalom!’

In this way they are to place My Name over *Bnei-Yisrael*, and so I will bless them.”

One of the primary reasons *HaShem* called *B’nei Yisrael* out as His chosen people was (as Isaiah says) to be a light to the nations. He called them to live their lives set apart from the surrounding nations. The Lord wanted them to be countercultural and to live in a manner that drew attention from everyone else to their distinct lifestyle and worship practices, which contrasted with those of the pagan societies surrounding them. The purpose of this unique calling wasn’t so that everyone else would hate them (which sadly has become the norm), nor was it to make them completely isolated from the rest of the world. It was for the distinct purpose of God’s chosen people being part of His plan to draw the rest of creation to restoration with their Creator.

In the *Birkat Kohanim*, the priests are specifically commanded to bless Israel by proclaiming very specific words over them. By declaring these particular words, the priests would be placing the Name of God upon Israel, and He would bless them. In Hebrew, two of the three lines of this blessing declare that God would put His face or countenance upon them. This countenance in the Name of God is quite literally the “light to the nations” that He called Israel to be. As they wandered the wilderness, the Presence of God led them on their journey in the pillar of fire and cloud of witness. But we should remember that the Children of Israel weren’t the only people who could see this phenomenon—every single community they passed would have seen it with them. This supernatural wonder was a manifestation of God’s desire to restore all creation to their Creator, to draw them into His ways.

Today, we experience this same glory in the in-dwelling of the *Ruach HaKodesh*! May the reality of the Lord’s countenance upon us be as impactful to the world around us as His Presence was among Israel in the wilderness.

New Testament Tie-In

Our hair is a funny thing. And apparently, not having it is a global crisis. Several years ago, The Irish Times reported that while global spending on AIDS research was \$1 billion and nearly \$550 million went to overcoming malaria, “an estimated \$2 billion is spent worldwide on surgical procedures in an effort to prevent baldness.”¹ While this report is confounding (disturbing?), it exposes the (literal) value people place on having hair. And this focus on hair is not a recent phenomenon. The lovers in the Song of Songs comment on one another’s hair:

■ “Your hair is like a flock of ewe goats descending down from Mount Gilead” (iv.1), and “his hair is wavy, black as a raven” (v.11).

The Nazirite vow described in this week’s Torah portion involves hair as well: “All the duration of his Nazirite vow, no razor is to come on his head until the time of his consecration to *ADONAI* is over. He is to be holy, and the hair of his head is to grow long” (Numbers 6:5). When we think of (the biblical character) Samson—one of the more famous Nazirites—we tend to think of his long hair. We should note that Samson was an *unusual* Nazirite in that his vow was imposed and lifelong (cf. Judges 13). Typically, a Nazirite’s hair would grow for the vow’s duration. At its conclusion, he would “shave the hair of his dedication at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and he is to take the hair of his dedication and put it into the fire of the fellowship offering sacrifice” (Numbers 6:18).

What insights and deeper theological truth might this unusual process conceal?

In the Ancient Near East, hair was a sign of strength and virility in men (cf. 2 Samuel 10:4), and women would have worn intricate designs as expressions of feminine beauty (cf. 1 Timothy 2:9). Contrastingly, “Hammurabi’s code penalizes false witnesses by having half the person’s hair cut off. The Middle Assyrian code allows a debt-slave’s master to pull out his or her hair as punishment. Both laws suggest that shame is attached to the loss of hair.”² In this context, what if the Nazirite’s act of shaving their head was an expression of humility and death to self? What if it was a way to say, “My identity and confidence are based on *ADONAI*’s covenantal love (not superficial things)?” In this way, shaving one’s head becomes an entrance into liberty and freedom from dependence on others for validation and acceptance. It could have functioned as a sort of (cultural) death leading to new life.

But there’s at least one more fascinating connection to unpack.

Let’s compare three verses:

1. “For evils beyond number surround me, my sins have overtaken me—I cannot see—they are more than the hairs of my head—and my heart fails me.” – Psalm 40:13
2. “But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.” – Matthew 10:30
3. “No creature is hidden from Him, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.” – Hebrews 4:13

Hair is also an unexpected powerful metaphor for sins. Hair is on our heads, and sins are conceived in the mind before we ever express them through our bodies. Hair is (typically) numerous, and, as the psalmist noted, our sins are myriad. And in one very real sense, our sins are *over* us, weighing us down like a burden or weight which needs to be cast aside (cf. Hebrews 12:1-2).

But God sees every “hair.” He knows our weaknesses. While we live in these earthly bodies, we are vulnerable to committing sins. The Nazirite vow reminds us that though we may be powerless in ourselves to stop sins’ “growth” completely, we can shave them off and place them in the “consuming fire” of God’s love through confession and repentance. Once again, that shaved head represents a pathway to freedom and liberty through the redemptive, restorative work of *Yeshua*, our Messiah.

Hebrew Word Study

nazar [נָזַר] / “to separate, consecrate”

Most depictions of *Yeshua* from the early Roman period and onward portray Him with long hair. Why is that? Did *Yeshua* truly have long hair? Some have theorized that these depictions stem from him having been a “Nazarite.” However, *Yeshua*’s identification as a “Nazarene” (Matthew 2:23) might be a source leading some to confuse him with being a “Nazirite.” Although the two words are similar, they are unrelated words in Hebrew. So, what *does* it mean to be a “Nazarite,” and is there any reason to think he might have been one?

“Nazarite” in Hebrew is the word *nazir* (נָזִיר) and comes from the root word *nazar* (נָזַר), meaning “to separate, set apart” or “abstain.” Three consonants comprise this root:

- *nun* (נ) / 50
- *zayin* (ז) / 7
- *reish* (ר) / 200

We discover the word *nazir* for the first time in the Bible in Jacob’s poetic deathbed blessings and prophecies to his twelve sons. Notice his blessing to Joseph: “*May they be upon Joseph’s head, upon the crown of the one set apart (nazir) from his brothers*” (Genesis 49:26). One undergoing a Nazarite vow (becoming a *nazir*) vows to abstain from wine (or grape products), alcohol, cutting the hair on their head, and becoming *tameh* (ritually contaminated) by a dead body (cf. Numbers 6:1-8). Currently, Jews don’t practice this vow today in the absence of a Temple in Jerusalem. Due to the placement of the Nazirite section within the topical progression—it follows passages detailing the confession of sin (Numbers 5:5-10) and women suspected of adultery (Numbers 5:11-31)—and its inclusion of a sin sacrifice (Numbers 6:9-11), the ancient sages debated as to whether this was an elevated status of holiness³ or a corrective measure after a willful or involuntary sin.⁴

Although the word *nazir* only explicitly shows up less than a dozen times in the Hebrew Bible,⁵ Scripture mentions significant biblical figures (Samson,⁶ Samuel,⁷ John the Immerser,⁸ and Paul⁹) as *nazirim* (individuals who have undergone a Nazirite vow). But was *Yeshua* also one of them? *Yeshua* drank wine during his last Passover, so we can say that He did not undergo a lifelong Nazirite vow prior to or during His ministry.¹⁰ However, some have understood His statement at the Last Supper to be a Nazirite vow: “*Amen, I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine, until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God*” (Mark 14:25).

Did this statement serve as a vow to become a Nazirite? This proclamation has a much deeper meaning than simply taking on an elevated state of holiness. *Yeshua*’s declaration references the Messianic banquet mentioned by the prophet Isaiah (cf. Isaiah 25:6), which was a constant subject of His parables. More than *looking back* to this Torah passage, He may have been *looking forward* to the day when we would dine with the patriarchs, the great men and women of biblical fame, and He is sitting at the head of the table. May we see this come soon in our days!

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Rabbi Jason & Fusion Global present
HEBREW WORD STUDY

נָזַר

נָזַר / *nazar*: VB. to separate, consecrate.

The basic meaning of *nazar* is “to separate.” When the word occurs in the Niphal with the preposition *min* it has the meaning “keep oneself away from.” The verb is used in the sense of separation in Lev 22:2 where Aaron and his sons were commanded through Moses to keep away from the holy offerings that were presented to the Lord. These were portions of the sacrifices which were set aside for the use of the priests. But they could not use them as long as they were ritually unclean (v. 3). The word is used in the same construction in the sense of separating from idols (Ezk 14:7). It bears the meaning “abstain from” when used with *min* in the Hiphil in Num 6:3 where it occurs in connection with the Nazirite vow of abstinence.

taken from the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

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THOUGHTS for REFLECTION

Take some time this week to prayerfully consider and discuss with friends:

- Have you ever seen “hair” as a type or symbol of “sin”? So many of us put thought and effort into choosing a hairstyle. We spend money on stylists and products. A “bad hair day” can have a seriously negative ripple effect on those around us. And then there are the celebrities who suffer from male pattern baldness and finally decide to just shave it all off—liberation! Is there something sinful “hanging around” in your life that needs to be shaved off this week?
- Acts of self-denial—fasting, being the most obvious example—have long been foundational to a vibrant spiritual life. The underlying principle is not enjoying the *good* things of God’s creation is a way to experience the *better* realities of His Kingdom. John the Baptist might be a good example of a biblical character who embraced an “ascetic” lifestyle. What have your experiences been with this sort of practical consecration or abstention? Do you feel inspired to engage in some “*nazar*” and, if so, what would you hope it produces in you?

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NEXT WEEK'S READINGS: *Parashat Beha'alotcha* / פרשת בהעלתך

TORAH

Sunday / Numbers 8:1-14

Monday / Numbers 8:15-26

Tuesday / Numbers 9:1-14

Wednesday / Numbers 9:15-10:10

Thursday / Numbers 10:11-34

Friday / Numbers 10:25-11:29

Saturday / Numbers 11:30-12:16

Prophetic Reading (*Haftarah*):

Zechariah 2:14-4:7

New Covenant Reading:

Matthew 14:14-21

Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *Tree of Life Version*.

¹ Dick Ahlstrom, "Baldness Trumps Malaria? Funding Shows Something out of Kilter," *The Irish Times* (The Irish Times, June 8, 2017), last modified June 8, 2017, accessed May 26, 2022, <https://www.irishtimes.com/business/innovation/baldness-trumps-malaria-funding-shows-something-out-of-kilter-1.3109417>.

² Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Nu 6:5.

³ See Babylonian *Talmud Nedarim* 9b; *Midrash Sifrei Nasso* 1:84

⁴ See Babylonian *Talmud Sotah* 2a and *Rashi's* commentary to Numbers 6:2

⁵ Genesis 49:26 (referenced in Deut. 33:16); Leviticus 15:31, 22:2; Numbers 6:2, 3, 5, 6, 12, 13, 18; Judges 13:5, 7; 16:17; Lamentations 4:7; Ezekiel 3:18, 14:7, 33:9; Hosea 9:10; Zechariah 7:3; Amos 2:11-12

⁶ Judges 13:5

⁷ 1 Samuel 1:11

⁸ Luke 1:13-15

⁹ Acts 18:18

¹⁰ Also, the Gospels seem to testify that *Yeshua* did drink alcohol (see Matthew 11:18-19 and Luke 7:33-35).