

A Taste of Torah

Effects of Withdrawal

By Rabbi Shmuel Halpern

Since virtually the beginning of time, man has sought to overcome his physical limitations. For some, this means a complete abstinence from the physicality of this world, such as the celibacy we find in some religions. What is the Jewish view vis-à-vis asceticism, and overcoming the limitations imposed on us by our physicality?

In this week's Torah portion, we have the story of the Nazir: a person who vows to abstain from wine, from cutting his hair, and from *tumas meis* (becoming ritually impure due to a human corpse). In the Books of the Prophets, we find mention of schools of the Nazirites along with schools of the prophets. It would seem, then, that the Nazirites were on the same track as the prophets, attempting to become as close as humanly possible to Hashem. By abstaining from wine, they hoped to overcome the confines of their physical existence.

Considering the lofty goals of a Nazir, it is difficult to understand why, at the culmination of the Nazir process, one must bring an *chatas* (sin) offering as an atonement. What is there to atone for?

Regarding the prohibition against *tumas meis*, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) explains that there's a great danger to abstinence. When one refrains from partaking in physical pleasure, one takes a step away, in a sense, from the world in which he lives. This, in turn, may lead a person to believe that the proper path to serving Hashem lies in removing oneself from our physical world. In truth, Judaism teaches that appreciation to G-d should go along with every physical pleasure. This is an

extremely powerful way to strengthen our loving bond with our Creator. It is an engaged and joyous life as a part of this physical world that Hashem desires from us. A Nazir who temporarily withdraws from this world in order to reach great spiritual heights has, in effect, entered a realm that is nearer to death. Experiencing the impurity of death via a human corpse will pull him even further into this territory.

This also explains the *chatas* offering. The Nazir, having pulled back from the physical world in which we are expected to participate, must atone for the acts of self-denial.

The human soul is eternal, and the free-willed choices we make become part of that eternity. Our life in this world is meant to provide an opportunity to allow that eternal soul to grow and flourish through our choosing properly. The practical applications of this concept can be life-altering. Imagine, if every time we took a slice of bread into our hands, we paused to appreciate how Hashem provides us with our sustenance. Our material enjoyment is then deepened and elevated by a love for He who provides the pleasure. It is for this reason that our Sages instituted the concept of making blessings over the food which we eat. We hold the food in our hands and focus on the Provider and Sustainer of all living things. We then elevate the mundane act of eating to one of connection with Hashem. We can concentrate on the benevolence that we receive from Hashem on a daily basis and feel the love with which He gives it.

Stories For The Soul

Take What You Need

Rabbi Yaakov Weisberg was a student of Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1891-1962). He described his great teacher's eating habits. "The Rosh Yeshiva knew exactly how much he needed to eat," he said, "and he never ate more." He continued that if a piece of chicken was brought that was slightly too large, Rabbi Kotler would ask for a second plate, cut off the extra and place it on the plate, then eat whatever remained on his own plate.

Rabbi Kotler often ate in the yeshiva he had founded, Beth Medrash Govoha. It once happened that the cook in the yeshiva decided that since Rabbi Kotler was constantly discussing Torah subjects while he ate and didn't pay a great deal of attention to his food, it would be easier for him to eat his chicken if she cut the meat off the bone for him before serving it. After doing so, she felt the portion looked too small, so she cut the meat off an additional piece and placed it on his plate.

Rabbi Kotler was, as usual, preoccupied with discussing Torah thoughts with his students in the dining room. About halfway through his portion, though, he glanced down at the plate, ate a couple more small pieces, and left the rest on the plate! Despite his involvement in Torah, he sensed that there was more food than he felt he needed.

This week's parsha discusses a Nazir, who, among other things, abstains from consuming wine. Both asceticism and physical pleasure have their place in Judaism. But we must strive not to over-indulge in the physical pleasures of this world.

Kollel Happenings

A DEEPER LOOK AT THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SHACHNE SOMMERS

Join Rabbi Shachne Sommers as he discusses a number of difficulties encountered in the weekly Torah portion, and develops a comprehensive approach to resolve the issue, simultaneously conveying a deeper understanding of the material being discussed. Tuesday nights at the Southeast Kollel Torah Center, 8-9 pm, for men and women.

THE M.B. GLASSMAN FOUNDATION GOLD LUNCH & LEARN PROGRAM

The M.B. Glassman Foundation GOLD Program is a division of the Denver Community Kollel dedicated to bringing Torah study to seniors in the community. Don't miss a great Lunch-and-Learn class on the weekly parsha at the East Side Kosher Deli, 499 S. Elm St. at 12:00 am. There is no charge for the lunch or the learning! Transportation can be arranged. For more information, contact rmf@denverkollel.org or call 303-820-2855.

LEARN 2 LEARN

You have long dreamed of acquiring the tools to achieve proficiency in learning Gemara on your own. But how? The Denver Community Kollel offers a comprehensive, step-by-step, level-by-level program crafted for people just like you. All you need is the ability to read Hebrew; we will teach you the rest. For more information, contact rmh@denverkollel.org.

Increase Your Jewish IQ

By Rabbi Yaakov Zions

Last week we asked: What shape were the *Luchos* (Tablets) given at Mt. Sinai?

A: According to the Talmud (Bava Basra 14a), the face of each of the two tablets was square, six by six *tefachim* (handsbreadths), and three *tefachim* thick. This is in contrast with most depicted versions (even in Torah literature and synagogues) showing the tablets as rectangles or rectangle-like with rounded tops. There has

been some discussion whether this was done intentionally, and if it should be continued as a *minhag* (custom). (See *Michtavim U'mamorim* by Rabbi E.M. Shach, Vol. 2, page 68).

This week's question: How many different prayers can you think of which require one's feet to be straight and together?

To submit an answer to Rabbi Zions, email ryz@denverkollel.org.

Lives of Our Torah Leaders

The Rambam Part V

Yet another tragedy befell the Rambam. In 1169, the ship on which his brother Dovid was sailing was caught in a storm and shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean. Dovid was lost at sea, as was the entire family fortune. This left the Rambam bereft not only of his beloved brother, but also of his assets and source of income. In addition, the burden of supporting Dovid's family fell upon the Rambam's shoulders.

In a letter discovered in the Cairo Genizah, the Rambam writes:

The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life - worse than anything else - was the demise of the saint, may his memory be blessed, who drowned in the Indian Sea, carrying much money belonging to me, him, and to others, and left with me a little daughter and a widow. On the day I received that terrible news, I fell ill and remained in bed for about a year, suffering from a sore boil, fever, and depression, and was almost given up. About eight years have passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, [and] he was my student.

With the responsibility of providing

for two families, the Rambam began to practice as a physician. The Rambam had trained in medicine in both Cordoba and Fez. In this vocation, for which he would later become famous, he managed to earn enough for the two families for the next twenty or so years.

In 1190, the Rambam, whose reputation as a physician had spread, was appointed physician to al-Qadi al-Fadil, the Grand Vizier of Sultan Saladin, the powerful Kurdish ruler of Egypt and Syria. The Rambam later became the court physician to Saladin himself.

The Rambam's new position removed his financial worries, and also gave him a great deal of political influence in the royal court of the most powerful man in the Middle East. The Rambam used his considerable clout to help his brethren in Egypt and the Land of Israel (then called Palestine). It is worthwhile to point out that Saladin recaptured Jerusalem from the Christian Crusaders, who had banned Jews from living in the Holy City during their reign; Saladin permitted the Jews to live there again.