

Introduction to Tractate Nazir

The Nazirite, treated in Num. 6: 1–21, is an Israelite who for a determinate period observes important laws governing the priesthood by not drinking wine, by not cutting hair, and by not contracting corpse-uncleanness. Scripture deals with two topics, the restrictions self-imposed by the vow, and the offerings required in connection therewith. The law of *Nazir* amplifies the matter in the following way:

- I. The special vow of the Nazirite
 - A. The language of the vow to be a Nazirite
 - B. Stipulations and the Nazirite vow
 - C. The duration of the vow
 - D. Annulling the vow
- II. The special offerings of the Nazirite: designation and disposition
- III. Restrictions on the Nazirite
 - A. The grape
 - B. Cutting hair
 - C. Corpse-uncleanness
 - D. Doubts in the case of a Nazirite

A person who has taken the Nazirite vow, then, is comparable to a *kohen* or priest and is subject to certain prohibitions and assigned a particular position in the conduct of the Temple cult. The priest cannot serve if he is drunk, contaminated by a corpse, or bald. (A bald-headed man may not serve as a priest, Mishnah tractate *Bekhorot* 7:2A.) The Nazirite vow forms a subdivision of the larger category of vows and is understood as continuous with the exposition of that topic. This follows from the right of the husband to annul his wife's vows, including the Nazirite vow.

As noted also for *Nedarim*, the law in *Nazir* focuses not on the literal language that invokes the vow, but on euphemisms that may or may not pertain. Language that is similar in sound or in sense takes effect. Stipulations that might affect the vow, conditions under which the vow is or is not invoked, the making of sequences of Nazirite-vows in a single moment, and the duration of the vow (undefined in Scripture) are taken up next. The intervention of the husband with regard to the vow his wife has taken is discussed following that.

The laws of *Nazir* then turn to designating the diverse animals that are to serve as the Nazirite's offerings at the end of the vow, with special attention given to situations in which the animals are not used in accordance with the original language of sanctification. At stake in the vows treated by both the laws of *Nedarim* and in *Nazir* (for the special vow of the Nazirite) is the realization of intention brought about through the use of language.

The sages portray matters relating to the language used for vows as contaminating. Language ought to express carefully reflected-upon intentionality, as in the designation of an animal to expiate an inadvertent, newly-realized sin. Too often, however, language conveys the outcome of temper and frustration. Designating a beast as consecrated for the expiation of sin realizes a noble, godly intention. Designating the benefit one receives from one's spouse as *qorban* (set aside for an offering) may use language to disguise a lowly and disreputable intention, to humiliate, reject, or disgrace the other. The sages' message states that the language of vows is dangerous because it realizes intentionality. Thus such vows had best be expressed with probity and restraint. These virtues of probity, restraint, and reflection are too often opposite from the traits of mind and character of the vow-taking Israelite, whether wife or husband, host or guest, salesman or customer.