



Parshat Naso: Learning from Our Mistakes

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Dedicated by Baruch and Ora Sheinson, in honor of Yedidya Aaron Sheinson

In the Torah portion of Nasso, we learn of the treatment of the Sotah, a wife who is suspected of adultery. Because her guilt cannot be proven by witnesses, but her husband suspects her and cannot forgive her without proof of her innocence, a miraculous test determines her innocence or guilt. The woman is forced to drink “bitter waters that cause curse”¹, formed of water, the dirt of the sanctuary, and the ink of an erased curse. If the woman is guilty, she will die; if she is innocent, she will be cleared of all suspicion.

Immediately following the ordeal of the Sotah, the Torah addresses the vow of the *Nazir*. “A man or woman who sets him/herself apart by making a nazirite vow to abstain for the sake of G-d, from new or aged wine shall he abstain...”² This is a voluntary vow that any individual can take upon him or herself, to avoid wine or any grape products for a fixed period of time.

Why does the vow of the Nazir follow the ordeal of the Sotah? Rashi³ comments that “whoever sees an adulteress in her disgrace should vow to abstain from wine, for it leads to adultery.”⁴ One should learn from the experience of seeing another person (the suspected adulteress) stumbling, by committing oneself not to make the same mistakes (through the vows of the Nazirite) – even beyond the boundaries of our usual commandments.⁵

In contrast to the Torah’s ordering, the Talmud discusses the Nazir before the Sotah. Why does the Talmud reverse the order? The Mei Shiloach, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Ishbitz,⁶ explains this with an interesting exploration of mistakes. The usual way is that “one can only uphold the teachings of the Torah when he has stumbled in them,” i.e. a person makes mistakes and then learns from them. As mentioned above, this is why the Torah orders it in this way, first Sotah (mistake), and then Nazir (correction).

However, continues the Mei Shiloach, the sages of the Talmud embraced “Torat Imecha” (the Torah of our mothers). These two words are cited from Proverbs 1:8: “Hearken, my son, to the discipline of your

¹ Numbers 5:18

² Numbers 6:2-3

³ Acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaky, Jewish scholar and commentator on all books of the written and oral Torah, France, 11th century.

⁴ Based on Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 2a and Nazir 2a, and Midrash Bamidbar Raba 10:2-4

⁵ This is based on a source in the Talmud that says one can only be strong in Torah observance once one has fallen, see Babylonian Talmud (200 C.E.–500 C.E.) Gitin 43a

⁶ commentary on Bamidbar 6:2

father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother [Torat Imecha].” According to Rashi, “the discipline of your father” refers to the written and oral Torah, whereas “the instruction of your mother [Imecha]” are the safeguards for the Torah.⁷ This refers to the additional edicts of the rabbis, safeguards for the Torah which go beyond the “letter of the law” and are meant to keep us from stumbling. The sages loved the Jewish people the way a mother loves her child, and wanted the best for them. They therefore ordered Nazir (correction) before Sotah (mistake), so that the Jews would learn to be good and to restrain themselves from temptation, and would thus not need to suffer the pain of their mistakes.⁸

Although the sages understood that one can and should learn from one’s mistakes (as the Talmud teaches), the intention of the rabbis was that we should use the fences around the Torah to prevent ourselves from mistakes that could cause us pain, suffering, or distance from G-d.

Let’s look at this from the perspective of our Torah responsibility to protect our environment – our responsibility to protect ourselves and our children from environmental “mistakes” and the damage that our actions might cause.

In the history of the world, many cultures have made mistakes that have caused serious damage to their environments and ultimately to their own well-being. The book *Collapse*, by the Pulitzer-Prize winning author Jared Diamond, explores ancient and medieval societies that came to new lands and changed their environments, causing such serious consequences that, in the end, the entire society collapsed, leaving only ruins for us to study and learn from.

These settlers, whether in Greenland, Peru, North America, or the Polynesian islands, did not have the benefit of “the wisdom of their mothers” to help them understand the threats that befell them. Deforestation, overgrazing, changes in water use, and other changes had significant impacts on the environments upon which these societies relied. They made mistakes, and as a result, their environment was ultimately unable to sustain them.⁹ When these societies collapsed, the population faced war over scarce resources and starvation. Today we have modern examples of environmental destruction leading to starvation and warfare, such as in the genocide in Darfur, where an estimated 200,000 people have died and 2.5 million have been left homeless by a conflict that began in part as an agricultural skirmish over water supplies.¹⁰

⁷ Rashi describes the word “imecha” (your mother) as related to “amitecha” (your nation, i.e. the nation of Israel), as in (Ezek. 19:2) “What a lioness was your mother [meaning your nation]!” Invoking the concept of a “lioness,” he explains that the additional edicts of the rabbis serve as a guardian for the laws of the Torah.

⁸ Rabbi Herzl Hefter has explained this verse by elaborating the metaphor: that in a family, a father tends to be more comfortable with his child getting hurt and learning from mistakes in order to become independent, whereas a mother tends to want to protect the child from any pain and therefore tries to prevent mistakes from happening.

⁹ For example, an ancient people called the Anasazi, who lived in the U.S. Southwest, built an organized society and thrived for nearly six centuries, from 600 to 1200 C.E. Their main city, in Chaco Canyon (today located in New Mexico), included multi-story buildings with as many as 600 rooms. The Anasazi caused inadvertent environmental damage, by diverting streams with negative effects for agriculture; and by deforesting their land, eliminating a source of food and timber. The society collapsed after six centuries of success under the pressure of a drought which led to starvation, warfare, and the remaining refugees fleeing to other lands. There had been similar droughts in previous centuries, but the society had grown and the land resources had been weakened, so that the society, which could have sustained itself through drought in earlier generations, was left vulnerable. Surely most of the people felt that their resources, and their technology for managing their resources, would safeguard them from any environmental effects. Before we feel too confident about our own resources and technology, we should remember that the Anasazi lived in North America for six centuries -- longer than we have.

¹⁰ Alfred de Montesquiou, “Experts: Darfur Faces Environment Crisis,” Associated Press

As modern people living in the complex and global society of the industrialized world, we tend to be overconfident about our relationship to our land and our ability to create and manage the resources that sustain us. We extract seemingly limitless natural resources using the most advanced technologies of any society in human history. It seems impossible to imagine that our way of life could ever change, or that environmental impacts could ever truly affect our way of life.

We forget that modern Western society has existed for less than four hundred years. That seems like a long time, when we think of all that has happened in that period. But many cultures survived and thrived in an area of land for longer than four hundred years and were ultimately doomed by the consequences of the environmental choices, combined with unexpected circumstances that they could not change, like variations in weather patterns, or political changes elsewhere. Moreover, our global consumer society has existed for a much shorter period of time, only approximately 60 years. Its environmental impact is without comparison in human history.

We have an advantage over these ancient societies who degraded their land and ultimately were destroyed. We have the ability to learn from their mistakes, and also from our holy Torah, which teaches us how to protect our resources for ourselves and for future generations. The ordering of Sotah and Nazir in this week's Torah portion teaches us that we can learn from others' mistakes and from the safeguards of our Torah. We do not need to suffer through devastating consequences in order to learn to live differently.

Throughout our history, particularly in exile, the Jewish people have suffered along with the other nations, through famines, droughts, and other natural disasters, sometimes brought on by poor management of the environments in which those nations lived. Today, living in our own land in Israel, our responsibility is even more intense, to protect our land for our children and grandchildren.

We live in an extraordinarily complex society by all standards in the history of the world. The globalization of our world presents great opportunities, and can insulate us from certain types of problems, because we can rely on people across the planet to provide us with the products that we need. However, that globalization also makes us vulnerable. Even disasters or political challenges in distant countries can be felt in the costs of our food and energy resources. The complexity of our society also makes our impact on the environment vastly more significant and broad-reaching than earlier cultures.

Like Joseph, who foresaw the famine of seven years¹¹ and saved food resources for the "lean" times, we need to adopt a mindset that will take us through not only the good years, but leave enough so that unexpected challenges will not lead to disastrous consequences. We need to restrain ourselves, and to learn from the mistakes of others so that we do not have to experience the suffering of errors that could have been avoided.

As Jews and as participants in this globalized Western society, we must protect our land and our precious world, so that our children will be able to enjoy the good land and all the resources that G-d has granted us.

6.22.07, online at <http://www.forbes.com/feeds/ap/2007/06/22/ap3850406.html>

¹¹ See Genesis 41 and 42

Suggested Action Items:

1. Learn about the environmental challenges we face today, and the long-term consequences of our environmental actions. To get started, visit Canfei Nesharim's links page [<http://www.canfeinesharim.org/learning/links.php>] for a list of environmental science resources recommended by our Science Advisory Board.
2. "Going beyond the letter of the law" is sometimes appropriate when it comes to the environment, especially in cases where laws have not caught up to emerging science. One area where this is especially true is in the area of pesticides, so consider buying organic fruits and vegetables. See *Consumer Reports* on "When it pays to buy organic." [<http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/food/diet-nutrition/organic-products/organic-products-206/overview/>]
3. Make sure that you are following the law when it comes to the environment. For example: recycle.

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