

PARASHAS NASO

The Edge of the Abyss

It was an uncommon and unsettling sight. The accused adulteress stood before the presiding priest in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem as he interrogated her carefully about her alleged infidelity. If she persisted in her denials, she was given special bitter waters to drink. If she was innocent, the waters would bestow blessing on the fruit of her womb. But if she was indeed guilty as charged, her belly would swell and she would die.

What was someone to do if he happened to witness this sordid scene? Our Sages take note of the juxtaposition of the laws of the accused adulteress and the laws of the Nazirite vow. From this they infer that "whoever sees an adulteress in her state of degradation should take upon himself the Nazirite vows of abstention from wine which stimulates desire."

The question arises: Why is it necessary to go to such extremes in order to curb our impulses? Is this the path that leads to personal growth? Surely, the optimum approach would be to contemplate the degradation and utter senselessness of adultery and all other forms of immorality, to study, to learn, to forge a close bond with Hashem. Surely, that would be preferable to taking vows of abstention.

Moreover, the Torah tells us that one who takes the Nazirite vow is required to bring a sin offering. What was his sin? Our Sages explain that it is sinful to proscribe the legitimate forms of pleasure, such as drinking wine in moderation, that Hashem has made available to people. If so, why indeed should one who sees the degradation of an adulteress take the somewhat sinful Nazirite vow rather than follow a more spiritual path?

The commentators explain that contemplation, study and character development are certainly the preferred methods of gaining control of our carnal impulses. It is far better to supplant our lustfulness with a transcendent spirituality that eschews adultery than to tie down our lustfulness forcibly with fearsome vows.

Nonetheless, when we feel a sudden powerful impulse penetrate our defenses, we must act immediately. This is no time for contemplation and deep thoughts. A fire is raging, and we must spring into action. Once the fire is brought under control, we can return to our exalted introspection. But first we must take drastic action.

When a man sees an accused adulteress in a state of degradation, with her hair disheveled and her garments rent, when he hears the accusations of adultery, he can easily feel a surge of temptation. If he leaves it unchecked, it can take root in his heart and worm its way into his very essence. Therefore, the Torah suggests that he act quickly and take the Nazirite vow. He must stem the sudden tide of lustfulness before it gathers force and inundates him completely.

A poor woman received a precious gift from a rich farmer. It was an egg. Rarely had she held an egg in her hands, and as she lifted the treasure before her eyes, many thoughts passed through her mind.

What would she do with egg? She had plans. This single egg would change her life. She would place under her neighbor's chicken until it hatched. Then she would take the precious little chick and take care of it until it grew into a strong, healthy chicken. Her chicken would lay more eggs, which would then hatch and become more chickens. She would sell some of her surplus chickens and buy a goat with the money. Then she would sell the goat's milk and save up the money to buy more goats. Before too long, she would be a rich woman living.

Meanwhile, as she wandered blissfully through her fantasies, her grip on the egg loosened, and it fell to the ground.

In our own lives, we often experience moments the eerie feeling of stepping back from the edge of the spiritual abyss, of coming within a hairsbreadth of doing something shameful. When we feel this jolt, it is simply not enough to breathe a sigh of relief and go on as if nothing had happened. Rather, it is important to take concrete action to reinforce our choice of right over wrong. We must do whatever we can to ensure that in the future we will stay far away from the edge of the abyss.