

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

THE LITTLE PRINCE AND HIS ROSE YESHIVA

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

"An aspiring *maggid shiur* need not know every source that everyone else knows. What matter is knowing one hundred sources that no one else knows." A friend's rebbe told me this years ago to help me overcome feeling inadequate for my lacking *bekint*. To some extent he succeeded, because in principle he was right. The great shiurim of the past emerged from the capacity to notice things that other people hadn't, not from comprehensively renoticing everything they had.

This approach carries with it a temptation to intellectual miserliness. Every time you teach one of your hundred sources, after all, if you're any kind of effective pedagogue, other people learn them! Your students will talk to other teacher's students, or become teachers themselves, and pretty soon it will just be one of the things that every *maggid shiur* knows.

The proper solution to this dilemma, of course, is to keep learning, so that your supply of unique sources refills faster than it is depleted. But the more shiurim you give, the harder that gets.

All this was back in the days before the Bar Ilan Responsa Project, let alone Otzar HaChokhmah, Hebrew Books, Al Hatorah, or Sefaria. The database revolution has democratized both sides of the equation. On the one hand, *bekint* for the purposes of giving a shiur can be easily obtained by tracing a chain of citations from the Talmud, or by working backward from an article by Rabbi Bleich, a responsum of Rav Ovadiah z"l, or an entry in the Encyclopedia Talmudit (if they've gotten up to your letter), et al. On the other hand, just about every source in history has been indexed to standard sources, so that anyone inputting the right search string, or reading the standard anthologies, will likely meet all that was once considered unusual.

Preparing for this devar Torah, I had what you might call a "The Little Prince and His Rose" experience. I followed an interpretive thread on the parshah and realized that it gave me the chance to share with you one of my favorite esoteric (so I thought) sources. But as I no longer

recalled the title of the book where had seen it quoted years ago, I typed the key phrase into Bar Ilan in the hope that it might be tagged. It turned out that the idea had come up repeatedly in the past, and of course was referenced in the Daf Al Daf anthology. My source was no longer special at all. "I thought that I was rich, with a flower that was unique in all the world; and all I had was a common rose."

The fox comes along and teaches the little prince that "It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important. You are responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose . . ." Talmud Torah is not a waste of time. But it may be that the function of a successful Torah teacher now is to present the sources he or she loves in a way that makes students and readers want to develop their own special relationship with them, so that there will be always be someone to make sure they are properly understood and have their proper place in a tradition that is now so accessible across intellectual and spiritual communities, in such breadth that, like multiculturalism, it begins by celebrating diversity and ends in homogenization.

So here we go. Bamidbar 6:14 teaches that a one who takes an oath of *nezirut* brings a sin-offering = *chatat* at the conclusion of his period of *nezirut*. The obvious question is: Why a sin offering, which is brought in the case of accidental sin? In what way have they sinned, and if they have sinned, in what way was it accidental?

The simple answer is that the Torah is talking about the special case in which the *nazir* had violated his oath by accidentally becoming *tamei meit* = acquiring corpse-impurity. But this seems difficult to fit into the verses, which seem to say that every *nazir* brings such a sacrifice.

The Talmuds accordingly cite several Tannaim as holding that every *nazir* sins per se. What is the sin? One possibility is that it is arrogance, *yohara*. The Nazir's oath demonstrates a belief that he or she is holier than everyone else and so requires additional religious restrictions, what Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb refers to as mistaking

sanctimony for sanctity. This seems to be the reason that Shimon the Tzaddik refused to eat from any Nazirite's sacrifice (except for that of one young shepherd whose oath was taken so as to force himself to shave the hair which tempted him to narcissism).

A second position, attributed to Rabbi Elazar haKappar, holds that the sin is unnecessary teetotaling, causing one's body suffering by depriving it of the pleasures of alcohol. This position was taken to an extreme by Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin in his tour de force essay "Mishpat Shylock," in which he argued that since our bodies belong to G-d, we have no authority to cause them any suffering or deprive them of any pleasure.

Rabbi Zevin's position is obviously unsustainable in Jewish tradition, as noted in Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli's rejoinder, and easily leads to absurd conclusions such as the obligation to eat dessert if one has a sweet tooth, and worse. It rests on the false assumption that ownership is absolute, so that any limits on our rights to our bodies demonstrates that we are not owners. But Halakhah, and most legal systems, limit the rights of property owners significantly, and the prohibition of *bal tashchit* applies to all our possessions. We may own our bodies as much as we own anything.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Elazar haKappar's position is given halakhic weight, and is among the sources the Talmud cites for a prohibition against self-wounding (although it seems more likely an aggadic derivative thereof). But in what sense then is the sin of the *nazir* accidental?

A third possibility leads us to my rose. A beraita on Nedarim 10a reads:

רבי יהודה אומר:
חסידים הראשונים היו מתאווין להביא קרבן חטאת,
לפי שאין הקדוש ברוך הוא מביא תקלה על ידיהם,
מה היו עושין?
עומדין ומתנדבין נזירות למקום,
כדי שיתחייב קרבן חטאת למקום;

Rabbi Yehudah says:

The First Pietists were desirous of bringing a sin-offering because the Holy Blessed One never causes them to sin accidentally.

What would they do?

*They would rise and voluntarily swear nezirut to the Omnipresent, so as to be **obligated** to bring a sin-offering to the Omnipresent.*

According to Rabbi Yehudah, the sin may be the same self-denial as Rabbi El'azar HaKappar, or more likely the whole phenomenon of voluntarily taking an oath and thereby risking a profanation of G-d's Name. But the advantage of his position is that it explains why the sin is considered accidental. The oath is taken deliberately, but the intent is to fulfill a command of G-d that would

otherwise be inaccessible to them. They are sinning for the sake of Heaven.

But are they sinning at all, if that is their motive? And if they are, does G-d accept their sin-offering?

Mishnah Yoma 8:9 seems directly on point.

האומר "אחטא ואשוב, אחטא ואשוב" - אין מספיקין בידו לעשות תשובה.
One who says "I will sin and repent, I will sin and repent" – he is not enabled to perform repentance.

Why should he then be enabled to atone via a sin-offering?

Perhaps because the Mishnah only states its ruling about someone who plans to sin twice – but sinning once, in order to have the experience of repentance, is not disapproved of. After all, it doesn't seem fair to deprive the perfectly righteous of this experience, when the dominant opinion seems to be that "In the place where the masters of repentance stand, the perfectly righteous are unable to stand"!?

What emerges is a very powerful legitimation of spiritual ambition, alongside a recognition that such ambition will always be in profound tension with law in general and halakhah specifically. Because of course this ambition is profoundly dangerous and antinomian. One commentator suggests that this was the argument that Potiphar's wife made to Yosef HaTzaddik: how can you achieve your potential if you never do anything that generates the obligation to repent? Yosef's response is that interpersonal obligations cannot be sacrificed in such schemes – the sin to G-d he could bear, but not the great wrong to his master.

This, I suggest, is the key to the law of the *nazir*. It gives an outlet for supererogatory ambition, for commoner Israelites to be quasi-High Priests, but in a way that gives the ambitious no basis for power over others; they have only the restrictions of the High Priest, not his rights or obligations. The process ends with a forced formal admission that this ambition is in some sense sinful. Absent that concession, they would be Icarus, flying too near the sun so that their wings melt and they drown. Or perhaps in Jewish terms, they would be Nadav and Avihu.