

**Thoughts on Orlando**  
**Naso 5776**  
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It is hard to find the right words to say in the aftermath of the unspeakably horrific events of this past week in Orlando. The gruesome images and sounds of carnage at the Pulse nightclub were the first thing that greeted us upon turning on our computers and phones after a spectacular Yom Tov, and for those who receive newspapers, even before that. It's hard to know where to begin, but to let something of this shocking magnitude go by without comment would be an abdication of responsibility. What can our tradition teach us that can provide us with some guidance, with a path forward?

This week's Sedrah tells us about the laws governing the Nazir- a man or a woman who takes a vow to abstain from wine and any grape products, haircuts and any contact with corpses. Why would a person ever become a Nazir? These laws are exceedingly restrictive; perhaps one can live without

intentional contact with corpses, but why would one knowingly deprive oneself of that which is not at all prohibited? This is particularly surprising when one considers that the opinion of Rabbi Elazar HaKappar, in the Talmud in Nazir (19b), who views this kind of abstention as a sin, the reason one is required to bring a *korban chatas*, a sin offering, at the conclusion of the stipulated Nazirite period! So why would anyone be a Nazir?

The Talmud (Nazir 2a) suggests an important reason that someone might take on this restrictive lifestyle:

תניא, רבי אומר: למה נסמכה פרשת נזיר לפרשת סוטה? לומר לך שכל הרואה סוטה בקלקולה יזיר עצמו מן היין.

When a person observes the debasement and humiliation of a Sotah, who is suspected of adultery, he or she should abstain from wine. Becoming a Nazir is a response to something broken or offensive in a community, in a society and in another person and is a way to respond religiously to this kind of brokenness.

This past week, we have all seen something that has shaken us to our core, for so many reasons. To be very clear, I don't subscribe to the prevalent *zeitgeist* in which each interest group has taken one aspect of the horrific events in Orlando and used it for their own political ends. What happened was terrifying for so many reasons- everyone is right. First, it was an act of

radical Islamic terror, perpetrated by someone who professed allegiance with ISIS afterward. The notion that such terrorism is alive and well on our home turf and can be lurking anywhere is terrifying indeed, and should be doubly so for us as a Jewish community. Second, the ease with which someone unhinged can commit an act of bloodshed is terrifying. This is true with or without a gun, whether you are a vociferous advocate for or against gun control. In this case, the perpetrator was able to purchase a deadly weapon despite being on a no-fly list, despite being under investigation from the FBI, despite being the subject of a call to the police *from the owner of the ammunition shop where he purchased the gun* and despite a history of mental illness. It is terrifying because, while there should be no shame or stigma to mental illness, if it is untreated or unmanaged it can manifest into the most evil displays we have ever seen. It is terrifying because the victims in this carnage were not selected at random; there were other, more crowded venues where a psychotic, sociopathic, hateful terrorist could have unleashed carnage had he just been for blood. Instead, it was the LGBT population that was targeted. Yes, the Torah does prohibit homosexual behavior but it also prohibits murder; as Jews, we must be sensitive to any group that is singled out for persecution because of behaviors or identification. Faced with so many terrifying realities, what can we learn and how should we react? I believe that we can find several paradigms within the Torah's introduction to the character of the Nazir.

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה כִּי יִפְלֵא לְנֹדֵר נֹדֵר נָזִיר לְהַזִּיר לַיהוָה

Speak to the children of Israel, and you shall say to them: A man or woman who sets himself apart by making a nazirite vow to abstain for the sake of the Lord.

What is the meaning of this word, יִפְלֵא? It is superfluous and seems not to be a standard introduction; a better phraseology might have been “A man or a woman who vows to become a Nazirite.” I’d like to share with you three explanations that may shed some light and establish a different response paradigm.

Rashi interprets this anomalous word to mean, “verbalize.” In order for any vow to take effect, it must be verbalized, passing a person’s lips into the world outside. So often, when we confront tragedy, our expressions remain in the realm of the verbal. It’s almost a cliché that we express thoughts and prayers with victims; indeed, the New York Times Magazine, some months ago, devoted their language column to the genesis of this expression and its devolution into meaninglessness. Verbalization is a paradigm for dealing with tragedy, and it certainly important to speak about what we are feeling, especially at a time like this. There is a debate recorded in the Talmud (Yoma 75a) about what to do when a person is experiencing worry, anxiety or fear. Shlomo Hamelech tells us (Mishlei 12:25)- דַּאגָּה בִּלְב אִישׁ יִשְׁחַנָּה - when

worry is in a person's heart, he should speak about it. Rav Ami and Rav Asi dispute what kind of speech is entailed.

רבי אמי ורבי אסי, חד אמר ישיחנה מדעתו, וחד אמר ישיחנה לאחרים" (יומא ע"ה, א')

Rav Ami said, we should remove it from our consciousness, while Rav Assi says we should find others with whom to speak about it. Sometimes, we just want to forget about what we have seen or went through, though speaking and verbalizing what it is we are feeling is important. Speaking and verbalizing on their own, though, is insufficient because speaking about it leaves our sentiments in the realm of lip service. For this, the Ramban offers a different explanation, and perhaps a different paradigm.

Commenting on Rashi's explanation, the Ramban points out that it does not actually address the word itself. פלא is from the word פלא, which means something surprising, miraculous or out of the ordinary. What about the act of being a Nazir is a surprise or miraculous? The Ramban explains that the Nazir takes on an abstemious lifestyle after a tragedy in order to summon God to perform a miracle. Often, when faced with a tragedy like this, whose magnitude is so immense and which touches on so many political flashpoints, we call for miracles by externalizing our worries and summoning outside forces to deal with the issue. We rally to demand greater gun control or less, to tighten immigration or not to, to demand

greater acceptance for and show solidarity with different populations and communities- and sometimes these are effective but just as often, they are caught in the loggerheads that is the hopelessly divided political system and the awful rhetorical tone that sadly is the hallmark of most political discussion these days. For this, the Baal HaTurim offers a different explanation, and establishes a third paradigm.

The Baal HaTurim explains that what is miraculous here is not the Nazir- it's that a person, any person, can take and adhere to such a vow. That a person is able to rise in holiness as a result of initiative is truly a miracle. The true response of a Nazir, the one that determines whether the Nazir is holy or not, is one in which he or she seeks to work on him or herself. The Baal Shem Tov outlined a theology in which everything that happens to a person and everything that a person encounters is for that person's benefit or improvement. If I see a person eating non-kosher or violating Shabbos, it means I need to strengthen myself in those areas. If I see a person berating or hurting another person, it means I need to recommit myself to being a better, more patient person. Indeed, the language of the Talmud is instructive. שכל הרואה סוטה בקלקולה - anyone who sees a Sotah in *her* state of humiliation, must יזיר עצמו מן היין - separate *himself* from wine. When we confront a wrong, an embarrassment or a tragedy, the person from whom we should seek improvement is ourselves, because we are ultimately the

only people who can really exercise control over ourselves. This is our challenge as well in Sunday's aftermath. Yes, we need to advocate for greater vigilance and strong counter terrorism in the halls of power so we can eradicate hatred and hateful ideologies from our midst. But in our lives, we must also work on the way we speak, making sure that the language we use, even about strongly held opinions, is not expressed in hateful and divisive ways. And yes, we may have strongly held views on gun control (this is Texas, after all), but there may be a lesson to be learned here regardless of political views. In our lives, it is easy to end a life with a weapon, but it is so much easier to end a life with a click of a mouse or a keystroke by slaughtering a person's reputation in a manner that leaves them no recourse to fight, or that publicly humiliates them in a way that negates their sense of self worth. This attack took place in an area where members of the LGBT gathered, among other things, for an evening free of judgement. In our lives, we have to make sure that we, too, are people free of the same for anyone who wishes to open up to us about their challenges and struggles, no matter what they are. This is in no way contradictory to any Torah prohibitions of any kind, to which, of course, we must remain faithful. When people open up to us about their struggles and challenges, the only response must be love, acceptance, understanding and discretion.

When darkness proliferates in the world, let us turn inward and seek to improve ourselves, so that one by one, we will use our greatness to dispel it

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