



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Naso

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May 31, 2014

Naso

Reality vs. Delusion



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Is wanting the ordinary to be extraordinary a delusional fantasy? Is dreaming that you can achieve great things delusional? Is thinking you can be a light bulb when the world says you are but hanging from a dark ceiling delusional?

This is a sermon about delusions – and what the Torah has to say on the subject, which it addresses in *Parshat Naso* by way of a most fascinating phenomenon. This phenomenon has long hair, doesn't drink wine or eat raisins, and never goes to funerals. It is a phenomenon the likes of which have been represented (accurately or inaccurately) in many major Hollywood productions and TV specials.

The Nazir is one of the coolest Jews. He is compared to an angel, likened to a High Priest, has long flowing hair and the physical strength of a bodybuilder on steroids.

The Nazir teaches us how to be excellent, how to realize our growth potential and not cut ourselves short, and how to turn ordinary existence into extraordinary *reality*.

The Nazir teaches us that we control the world, the world doesn't control us.

We just have to be a little delusional.

**REALITY VS. DELUSION:
IS JUDAISM REMOVED FROM REALITY?**

1. Being Delusional (3 Jokes)

#1

A psychiatrist was doing his normal morning rounds when he entered a patients' room on the psych ward. Inside, he found one patient, Yankel, sitting on the floor, pretending to saw a piece of wood in half, and he found another, Moshe, hanging from the ceiling, by his feet.

The doctor asked patient Yankel what he was doing. Yankel replied, "Can't you see that I'm sawing this piece of wood in half?"

"Aha," said the doctor, "and what's your friend doing?"

"Oh. He's a little crazy. He thinks he's a light bulb."

The doctor looked up and noticed the hanging man's face was very red. So he said to Yankel, "You should get him down from there before he hurts himself."

"And what? You want I should work in the dark?"

#2

A man, who had been in a psychiatric hospital for some years, was the brink of release.

The director of the institution, in a fit of commendable caution, decided however to interview him first.

"Tell me," said he, "if we release you, as we are considering doing, what do you intend to do with your life?"

The patient said, "It would be wonderful to get back to real life and, if I do, I will certainly refrain from repeating my former mistakes. I was a nuclear physicist, you know, and it was the stress of my work in weapons research that helped put me here. If I am released, I shall confine myself to work in pure theory, where I trust the situation will be less difficult and stressful."

“Marvelous,” said the director.

“Or else,” ruminated the inmate. “I might teach. There is something to be said for spending one’s life in bringing up a new generation of scientists.”

“Absolutely,” said the director.

“Then again, I might write. There is considerable need for books on science for the general public. Or I might even write a novel based on my experiences in this fine institution.”

“An interesting possibility,” said the director.

“And finally, if none of these things appeals to me, I can always continue to be a teakettle.”

#3

A man runs to the doctor and says, “Doctor, you’ve got to help me. My wife thinks she’s a chicken!”

The doctor asks, “How long has she had this condition?”

“Two years,” says the man.

“Then why did it take you so long to come and see me?”

The man shrugs his shoulders and replies, “We needed the eggs.”

2. The God Delusion

Is wanting the ordinary to be extraordinary a delusional fantasy? Is dreaming that you can achieve great things delusional? Is thinking you can be a light bulb when the world says you are but hanging from a dark ceiling delusional?

A few years ago, the evolutionary biologist and radical atheist, Richard Dawkins, published a book entitled, *The God Delusion*. As the title implies, the book maintains that God is a delusion and, thus, anyone who believes in God is inevitably delusional. Religion, the ultimate system of worshiping God, is delusional. And religious people, the practitioners of said religion, are delusional by extension.

After all, if one cannot prove God exists – and indeed scientific theory argues against God’s existence – then God must be a delusion. If the world does not demonstrate a God, then God must be a fantasy, a myth, a figment of our imaginations.

Thus, *The God Delusion*.

According to this book, I, as a rabbi, am delusional. And all of us here in this synagogue on Shabbat – a Godly act if there ever was one – are delusional.

I couldn’t agree more and here is why:

A delusion is described as a belief or impression that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality or rational argument.

Reality today is not pretty. The world we live in is dark, corrupt, and finite. Just a few days ago a human being, that most enlightened of creatures, shot up a museum in Belgium. Look around ... *reality* is a group of terrorists in Africa kidnapping a school full of girls ... *reality* is a student opening fire in a school, killing his classmates and teachers ... *reality* is a cultured nation murdering six million men, women, and children just because they were the grandchildren of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

Such a dark *reality* requires a greater ideal, a dream, a delusion.

The idea of God implies that there is something more to the world than this supposed reality. It implies that there is a *higher reality*, one that inspires goodness and peace. In contrast, believing that the state of the material world is the *final reality* – that it’s all there is – allows for the idea of God to be but a psychotic delusion.

3. Parshat Naso

This week's Torah reading informs us how to turn the "God delusion" – where darkness is real, and light but a psychotic rambling – into the "God reality" – where light is real and darkness is but the color of your coffee.

And it really is very simple, as we shall see.

Parshat Naso begins with the subject of shipping and handling, an explanation of how the Levites were meant transport the Tabernacle and its vessels through the wilderness. It then moves right along to adulterous perceptions, and on to priestly blessings and the offerings of the tribal leaders.

Smack in middle of all this is one of the most fascinating phenomena in all the Torah. It is a phenomenon that has long hair, doesn't drink wine or eat raisins, and never goes to funerals. It is a phenomenon the likes of which have been represented (accurately or inaccurately) in many major Hollywood productions and TV specials.

It is the phenomenon of the Nazir, and it contains profound lessons for each and every one of us – lessons how to lead and how to follow, how to be and how to be excellent, how to turn ordinary existence into extraordinary reality.

This is how the Torah introduces the subject:

The Lord spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to the children of Israel, and you shall say to them: '[This is the law] when a man or woman sets himself apart by making a Nazirite vow for the sake of the Lord...'¹

And then the Torah lists the things that people who decide to become Nazirites should abstain from: 1) consuming wine or any grape derivative; 2) cutting of hair; 3) coming in contact with a deceased body. The Torah closes by describing the offerings the Nazirites must bring when they conclude their vow.

And that's it. A somewhat dry passage, if you ask me.

¹ Numbers 6:1:2.

4. Samson the Strong

But then this week's Haftorah,² adds spice to the mix by relating the story of the most famous Nazir in history – *Shimshon Hagibar*, Samson the Strong, the most muscled Jew to ever walk on the face of the earth. Yes, the Samson of Samson and Delilah fame, the one you read about or saw on TV.

Samson was a Nazir from birth³ – because he was raised as such by his parents – and he became a mighty protector of Israel. The idolatrous and corrupt Philistines were the archenemy of the Jewish people and Samson was Israel's bodyguard.

Samson's physical prowess was directly tied to and a result of his Nazirite status, but the Philistines did not know that. So they bought the services of Delilah who then started pressing Samson for the secret to his strength.⁴ Finally, Samson revealed it:

And he told her all his heart, and said to her, "A razor has not come upon my head, for I am a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I will be shaven, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any man."⁵

Delilah, Samson's love, divulged the source of his power to the Philistines. When they paid her (shrewd woman that she was, Delilah waited until she had the money in hand), Delilah coaxed Samson to sleep and shaved off his locks.

When the Philistines came to capture him, Samson found that he had lost his superhuman strength. The Philistines overwhelmed him and gauged out his eyes.

In one last hoorah, while chained to the pillars of a pagan temple, surrounded by thousands of Philistines, Samson cried out to God to empower him one last time to destroy this people.

² Judges 13.

³ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 18, p. 63ff at length for a nuanced discussion on this.

⁴ See Judges 16.

⁵ Ibid 16:17.

God answered Samson's prayers and Samson, charged with one more jolt of superhuman – indeed, divine – power, was able to pull down the pillars to which he was chained, bringing down the entire pagan temple upon himself and the multitudes of Philistines.

And Samson said, "Let my soul die with the Philistines," and he bent with (his) might, and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. And the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his lifetime.⁶

5. Status of the Nazir

From this we see that the status of the Nazir is no simple matter. It carries with it the blessing and gift of superhuman strength. Indeed, our portion uses some lofty language to describe the holiness that results from the Nazir's vow of abstinence:

For the crown of his God is upon his head. For the entire duration of his status as Nazir, he is holy to the Lord.⁷

Of the Torah's 613 mitzvahs, no less than ten – two positive, eight negative – are concerned with the Nazir.⁸ This stresses his paramount significance.

So elevated is the Nazir, so divinely crowned, that the Midrash⁹ compares the him to an angel, whose ethereal being is completely sanctified and hallowed.

And, to further emphasize this point, another Midrash¹⁰ compares the Nazir to the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest himself:

⁶ Ibid 30.

⁷ Numbers 6:7-8.

⁸ See Rambam Hilchot Nazir.

⁹ Shemot Rabba 10-11.

¹⁰ Bamidbar Rabba 16.

“Come and see – all who sanctify themselves down below, are reciprocally sanctified from up on high. As this Nazir has challenged himself, even in painful ways, just to distance himself from negativity, he is considered before Me [God] as a High Priest...”

The word Nazir can either be translated as “ascetic/removed” or as “crowned,” the latter meaning originating with the neizer which is used for the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest as well – *The crown of the anointing oil upon him.*¹¹

From all of this we understand that the physical gifts and biological muscle-power that the Nazir acquires are a direct result of his lofty spiritual status – by never cutting his hair, by abstaining from wine and every grape product, and by standing removed from death, the Nazir becomes holy, sanctified, like an angel and a High Priest.

That’s nice you say, but what does this all mean? And what lesson can it teach us today?¹²

6. The Meaning of Yafli

To answer that question, we need to focus on a particular word – *yafli* – that the Torah uses in describing a person’s commitment to becoming a Nazir – *A man or woman who sets himself apart (yafli) by making a Nazirite vow for the sake of the Lord ...*

The commentaries translate the word *yafli* in three different ways. Rashi translates it as “separation,” because the Nazir sets himself apart from all other people. The Targum translates it as “articulation,” because Nazir must speak and articulate his vow.¹³ Ibn Ezra translates it as “wondrous/fascinating,” as the Nazir lifestyle outside common norms and quite exceptional.

¹¹ Leviticus 21:12.

¹² Though the legal status of *nazirut* is not for most people, and is not (completely) applicable today (when we don’t have the Temple), its spiritual lessons are relevant to all of us at all times.

¹³ See Nazir 62a, Chagigah 10a.

These three translations of the word *yafli*, spotlight three defining and categorizing aspects of the Nazir:

- 1) the Nazir *separates* and abstains from the conventional norm; it is normal to drink wine and get hair cuts and go to funerals, the Nazir does the abnormal thing
- 2) the Nazir must *articulate* his vow in words; he cannot just think it
- 3) the Nazir becomes a *pela*, a wonder, a fascination, a unique and unprecedented character

7. What the Nazir Sees¹⁴

Simply put, the Nazir is “delusional.” He looks at the reality around him and doesn’t like what he sees, so he looks for a higher, better, purer reality. That is delusional. The only difference between a delusional mental patient and a Nazir is that the Nazir succeeds. As they say, the difference between genius and insanity is success.

The reason, of course, that the Nazir succeeds and doesn’t end up in an institution is because the Nazir’s dreams and delusions aren’t delusional at all, but rather divine.

When the Nazir looks at the world, he sees materialism and it is embodied in three things: 1) self-indulgence; 2) limits on growth; and 3) death.

The reality of the material world is that we all like to indulge in it. Wine and grape products personify this and thus the Nazir separates himself from this indulgence. The world calls it delusional; the Nazir calls it divine.

¹⁴ For the following see Lubavitcher Rebbe’s talk, 23 Menachem Av 5744, printed in Hitvadoyut p. 1469ff.

The reality of the material world says we are limited – our potential and energy is limited, and we must cut our dreams short. Comes the Nazir and refrains from cutting his hair, from shaving his growth-potential, and allows his power to grow. The result? Superhuman strength. The world calls it delusional; the Nazir calls it divine.

Finally, the reality of the material world says that all things must die, that decay and disease is the norm. Corpses are reality and eternal life is a delusion. The Nazir, now holy and sacred like a High Priest, may not come near death. The Nazir asks: Who says death and dying has to be the reality? Why can't life and living be the reality? Why do we have to bind ourselves exclusively to biology? Why can't we connect ourselves to the source of life itself, God the Creator of all? And the Nazir thus stands clear of death. The world calls it delusional; the Nazir calls it divine.

8. Personal Lesson: Articulate Your Dreams

But how does this ethereal, idealistic, powerful Nazirite way of living begin?

In the simplest of ways – a simple articulation, a simple word, a simple commitment to live like this. Then, Heaven responds, as the Midrash declares: *“Come and see – all who sanctify themselves down below, are reciprocally sanctified from up on high.”* The Nazir has but to articulate his commitment to sanctify himself down below and the Creator Himself sanctifies him from on high, bestowing the physical strength of Samson, the halo of angels and the spiritual crown of the High Priest.

The number-one thing that the Nazir teaches us is that within the ordinary lie nuggets of the extraordinary. All we have to do is stop cutting ourselves short, but allow ourselves to grow. Indeed, the mitzvah of a Nazir is twofold, 1) *not to be negative* and limit ourselves by cutting our growth potential; 2) *to be positive* and allow ourselves to grow and reach, dream and believe. True delusion is thinking you are limited; true reality is knowing you are unstoppable.

Often times, we are afraid to try because either we don't believe that we have the ability or because we are afraid of failure. Comes the Nazir and teaches us: In order to take something mundane and make it holy – to take a routine, ordinary object and make it special and extraordinary – all that's required is speech, articulation, communication. Just commit to it and it will be.

Why? Because God reciprocates. When we commit to holiness and soulfulness, then God likens us to High Priests and angels. When we sanctify ourselves down below, God sanctifies us from up on high. And then indeed our powers and abilities are superhuman for they come from God, the original Superpower.

And we do this, three things happen, all encapsulated in the word *yafli*: We begin to separate ourselves from the mundane norms; we begin to articulate much deeper things; and life itself becomes wondrous, outstanding, and exceptional.

As with Samson, when we commit ourselves to a higher purpose, if we allow our spiritual hair to grow,¹⁵ if we don't "cut short" our dreams and potential, our personal power (certainly our spiritual power) will grow exponentially as well.

9. Shavuot: The Dream Begins

What better time to renew our dreams than this coming Tuesday evening when the holiday of Shavuot commences, when we metaphorically gather at the foot of Mount Sinai and prepare to receive the Torah from God Himself.

What, in a word, is God giving us on Shavuot? What, in simple English, is this Torah?

The Torah is the dream of what we could be. If we are mired in matter, a dream may seem like a delusion; but if we are anchored in the Torah, then even the greatest delusion can be transformed into a dream.

¹⁵ See Derech Mitzvotcha, *Tigalcha HaMetzora*, for the spiritual significance of hair.

On the mountain of Sinai, God articulated the *Aseret Hadibrot*, what is ordinarily translated as “The Ten Commandments,” but what extraordinarily really means “The Ten Words/Sayings.”

On Sinai all God did was articulate how the world could be, and thus, so the world shall be.

So, too, when we articulate our dream – 1) to abstain from prosaic indulgence so that we can have poetic luxury, 2) to never, ever cut short our potential or stifle our endless growth but allow it to flourish, 3) to abhor death and shun it like the contamination it is – then, so it shall be.

Thus says the Lord, the True Reality. Some call it delusional. We call it divine.

10. Conclusion: We are What we Think

Sally moaned to her mom and brother, “Nobody loves me...the whole world hates me!”

Her brother, busily occupied playing a game, hardly looked up at her and passed on this encouraging word: “That’s not true. Some people don’t even know you.”

We are what we think. The world is what we think it is. If we think it is a place of self-indulgence, limitations and death, then unfortunately so shall it be. If we commit to it being a tool for a higher purpose, with an unlimited growth trajectory, and a place of life, then so it shall be.

Everything in life is ordinary – until we begin to make it extraordinary.

God is only a delusion if we think this world is true reality. If we realize that God is the True Reality, then perhaps an appropriate title for Dawkins’ next book will be, *The World Delusion?*

We all here, in this synagogue one this Shabbat preceding Shavuot, have just read from the Torah. Was that a delusional act?

Only if changing the world for the better, making it a home for light and peace, and finding the extraordinary in the ordinary is delusional.

May God Almighty reciprocate our commitment right here with words of His own. As the Midrash states, *All who sanctify themselves down below are reciprocally sanctified from up on high.*

As we commit to sanctify ourselves and this world down below, may God do the same and reciprocally sanctify the world and all of us from up on high, with the coming of the ultimate and eternal redemption immediately. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!