

**The Nazirite and the Angel: Messengers of God**  
**Parshat Naso**  
**Numbers 4:21 – 7:89/Judges 13:2 - 25**



***Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt  
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf.  
“He was the perfect child.”***

Among the many topics in Parshat Naso is the law of the Nazirite. A Nazirite was a person who took a vow for a limited time period to serve God by abstaining from alcohol, not cutting his hair, and avoiding all forms of impurity. The Torah recognized that sometimes people needed more extreme forms of observance either out of religious enthusiasm or guilt. The sages debated whether this practice was advisable: was it a reflection of devotion to God or an unnecessary restriction of things normally permitted the individual

Today’s Haftorah deals with another type of Nazirite vow. This person was dedicated to God by a parent and was expected to observe the Nazirite restrictions his entire life. Only two life-long Nazirites are mentioned in the Bible: Samuel and Samson. In today’s Haftorah we read about the birth of Samson. An angel appeared to the mother of Samson to announce his birth. She is instructed to refrain from alcoholic beverages throughout her pregnancy and to make sure that her son refrains from wine and from cutting his hair during his life. The nameless woman then goes to her husband and reports on her experience. Unconvinced, he praises God to send the “man of God.” The angel confirms the earlier announcement and then in a fiery column ascends to heaven as Manoah offers a sacrifice to God.

**Judges 13:3 -5**

An angel of the Lord appeared to the women and said to her: “You are barren and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son. Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicant, or to eat anything impure. For you shall conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a Nazirite to the Lord from the womb on. He shall be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines.”

**Numbers 6:2 - 6**

When either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazirite, to separate themselves for the Lord; he shall separate himself from wine and strong drink, and shall drink no wine vinegar, or vinegar of strong drink, nor shall he drink any liquor of grapes, nor eat moist grapes, or dried. All the days of his separation shall he eat nothing that is produced from the grape vine, from the seeds to the grape skin. All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled, during which he separates himself for the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. All the days that he separates himself for the Lord he shall not come near a dead body.

**Genesis 18:1 – 3, 9-10, 16**

And the Lord appeared to him in the plains of Mamre; and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him; and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself to the ground, And he said, My Lord, if now I have found favor in your sight, pass not away, I beseech you, from your servant; And they said to him, “Where is Sarah your wife?” And he said, “Behold, in the tent.” And He said, “I will certainly return to you at this season; and, lo, Sarah your wife shall have a son.” ... And the men rose up from there, and looked toward Sodom; and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way.

**Genesis 32:25 - 30**

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him. And he said, Let me go, for the day breaks. And he said, I will not let you go, except you bless me. And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, Jacob. And he said, “Your name shall be called no more Jacob,

but Israel; for as a prince you have power with God and with men, and have prevailed.” And Jacob asked him, and said, “Tell me, I beg you, your name.” And he said, “Why is it that you ask after my name?” And he blessed him there.

### **Mishnah Nazir**

What difference is there between a Nazirite like Samson and a life-Nazirite? A life-Nazirite, whenever his hair becomes burdensome, may thin it with a razor and then offer three animal sacrifices, while should he be ritually defiled, he must offer the sacrifices prescribed for defilement. The Nazirite like Samson is not permitted to thin his hair if it becomes burdensome, and if ritually defiled, does not offer the sacrifices prescribed for defilement.

*One could take three types of Nazirite oaths: One could promise to be a Nazirite for a limited period of time, one could make an oath in which he said “I hereby promise to be a Nazirite like Samson,” and another in which the person promises to be a “life-long Nazirite.” Different type obligations applied to each oath.*

### **Abraham Kariv (quoted in Studies in Bamidbar by Nehama Leibowitz)**

His Nazirite vows of abstention were to act as a spiritual brake upon him guaranteeing that his usual might should be used for the purpose God had granted him it. As a Nazirite of God he would also remain a mighty man of God. He had to be sober and pure all his life to remain true to his mission. Naziriteship was a sacred institution. The man who left his hair untouched preserved his natural appearance and was thereby capable of keeping faith with the divine.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. God announces the birth of Samson by sending an angel to his prospective mother to tell her that she will give birth to a son. Why does God send the angel to the mother and not the father? Is there anything in this chapter that leads us to assume that she is more worthy of learning this news than Manoah? If so, why does the Bible never bother to tell us the name of Samson’s mother?
2. How does Samson’s mother know that the mysterious visitor who appears to her is an angel? Is there anything distinctive about the appearance of angel? (Try to put aside our western Christian angelic images and think in terms of the Bible and Jewish literature.) Compare this passage with other passages in the Bible which speak of angels. How are they similar to one another and how are they different? Is there anything distinctive about the angelic messengers that might lead one to assume that they are supernatural beings?
3. How does the word *mal’ach* reflect both the human and supernatural aspect of these beings? How is the *mal’ach* (an angel or a messenger) and Samson similar to one another? How are they different from one another?
4. Read the entire chapter of today’s Haftorah. Compare what the angel tells the wife of Manoah with what she chooses to tell her husband when she reports on the encounter? How are they different from one another? Why does she choose to leave certain pertinent facts out?
5. As mentioned above, the Torah and the passage from the book of Judges speak about different types of Nazirites. Compare these two passages. How are they similar to one another?
6. Why was it necessary for Samson to be a Nazirite? Why didn’t God send a regular person to serve as the savior of the Israelites from their Philistine neighbors? Given his holy calling, how are we to explain Samson’s failings as a human being?
7. How do you think being a life long Nazirite might have been different from being a Nazirite by choice? How do these two different experiences reflect different types of religious encounters with God?
8. We no longer allow the institution of the Nazir today. Why do you think this is? What psychological/ emotional/ spiritual needs might have led people to become Nazirites in ancient times and how do people express those same needs today? Do you think the same needs that led to the Naziriteship still exist in our society today?

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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*