NO JEWISH NUNNERIES
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Temple Sholom, Vancouver BC
May 25, 2018

When I was in my third year of university I took a summer job as a delivery guy for Domino's Pizza. I'll spare you all the reasons why that was one of the best jobs I ever had but trust me when I say there some days I wish I was just a pizza delivery guy, driving in my 1986 red Honda Civic listening to Billy Joel and delivering pizza.

When I started at the store, working with the other members of the crew, most like me on summer break from university I quickly made friends and became part of the team. It wasn't a particularly stressful job and our manager was only a few years older than any of us, so we had a pretty relaxed work environment.

One evening we got to talking about what we were going to do for our careers after university. One was going to law school, another computer science, education, physiotherapy, the list went on. When it came to me I shared that I was studying to be a rabbi. There was silence, I was used to the blank stares, from one of my work friends came the inevitable question, "what's a rabbi?"

My pizza was up, and I needed to get it to the customer in 30 minutes or less, so I quickly explained, "you know like a priest but for Jewish people."

I headed out the door for my delivery.

When I got back to the store later that evening as we were all cleaning up I noticed the rest of the crew was acting kind of odd around me. Not mean or anything but, not really engaging in the jokes and banter that always ended our shift. Finally, one of them gathered up his courage and asked, "so what was it like when you decided to give up sex, drinking and making money?"

Now I was between girlfriends at the time, not yet of legal drinking age, and my only job was delivering pizza, and I didn't get how any of that was really my choice. But then he pushed further, "wow being a Jewish priest, I just don't think I could ever do that, I just like my life way too much to give it all up for God."

The penny dropped and I quickly clarified that rabbis do not take a vow of poverty, chastity, celibacy or sobriety – though again given my present circumstance I could provide him no evidence that those things were not presently true in my own life.

We laughed that nervous laughter when you have just escaped an awkward moment and I spent the rest of the shift explaining how being a rabbi was really quite cool.

I hadn't thought about that story for almost 30 years until I read this week's Torah portion and the description of the Nazirite, the Jewish ascetic that takes a vow to distance themselves from all pleasurable practices.

In Numbers 6 we read:

> *"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set himself apart for the Lord, he shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant: he shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any grapes fresh or dried. Throughout his term as a nazirite, he may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds or skin. Throughout the term of his vow as a nazirite, no razor shall touch his hair...Throughout the term...he shall not go in where there is a dead person, even if his father or mother or his brother or sister should die, he must not defile himself for them..."*

If you've never heard of this before, it's for good reason, we don't really cover this topic in Hebrew school and though the Nazirite appears prominently in this week's Torah Portion its a role that has been rejected by rabbinic tradition for more than 2,000 years.

What is interesting and instructive is why it was rejected. To my knowledge Judaism is the only religion that does not promote or aspire to a complete subjugation of the self in service to God. **It is not a mitzvah to love God more than you love yourself, in fact in Judaism it is considered a great sin.**

In the Talmud, Rabban Gamaliel the son of Rabbi Judah the Prince taught:

> *Great is the study of the Torah when combined with a worldly occupation, for toil in them both puts sin out of mind. **All study of the Torah** which is not supplemented by work is destined to prove futile and causes sin.*

Judaism clearly states that you can indeed be too Jewish. That you must avoid going so deep into the religion and faith that you lose sight what it means to live in <u>this</u> world.

There have always been two traditional models of the ideal Jew, The Chasid and The Chacham.

The first paradigm is the figure of the chasid, which translates as devout or pious. Some go so far to understand a chasid as a saint or tzadeek, probably closest to the Nazirite. The chasid is extreme in his piety - studies Torah 24/6 as we say and prays on the seventh day that he might be able to study more torah.

The contrast to the Chasid is the Chacham or 'wise man'. Whereas the Chasid strives for perfection, the Chacham aspires for balance. Maimonidies, that great Jewish philosopher of the middle ages wrote:

> *"The perfect man needs to inspect his moral habits... every day..., Whenever he sees his soul inclining to one of the sides he should rush to cure it. For no one is completely free of moral vice. In truth, it is the middle way that should be praised"*

Where our Torah offers the example of the Nazirite, extreme piety, our tradition rejects such a model as sinful and instead promotes a life of balance. Not only in religiosity but in our daily lives as well.

And this is where the ancient example of the Nazirite, rejected for 2,000 years informs our lives today.

In my years of working with individuals and families as a rabbi I would say that the struggle I encounter most in counseling situations and conversations over the kiddish lunch centers around struggling with finding balance in our lives.

Finding balance in our lives is the one thing that we all struggle with the most and for longest. From the time we are children well into our retirement, we are pulled in all directions by our inner desires and our outer responsibilities.

My children struggle with the pull of their iPhone and the expectations of their parents to be present in conversation.

As they get older they will struggle with the balance of relationships, the demands of school and social pressures.

Adolescence is all about finding balance between childhood and maturity, do either too much too soon or for too long and High School can be its own private misery.

Our university years and early careers are much the same, wrestling with the freedom that comes with independence and the demands that freedom places on us to our own laundry, pay to put gas in the car and show up for school and work when we've been out late with friends.

And looking around this room of parents and grandparents I don't need to remind you of the constant balancing act you do in those roles. We are pulled in a hundred directions at once and the only thing that seems to keep us sane in the midst of the whirlwind is having a compass point that we can focus on and therefore find balance.

How do you make sure your life is in balance? What do you do for yourself when it gets out of balance?

Again Maimonidies in his rabbinic text Shemonah Perakim offers this guide:

Good acts are those midway between two extremes that are bad,
namely, excess and absence.
Prudence, for example, is midway between
excessive desire and its absence…
Generosity is midway between
miserliness and extravagance.
Courage is midway between
recklessness and cowardice.
Self-confidence is midway between
arrogance and debasement.
Dignity is midway between
being overbearing and being obsequious…
Humility is midway between
pride and shame.

Each of us is born with drives and desires. Our goal is to reach our potential in life without being sidetracked or overrun by our passions and pleasures along the way. Some people would suggest that the only way not to become overwhelmed by temptation is to deny ourselves of it completely --

especially as young adults, when the temptation is so great. And others would argue that life is also about experiencing these joys, that life without food and drink and pleasure is a life not lived. YOLO the hipsters say, and have tattooed on their arms, You Only Live Once.

It is our goal as human beings and as Jews to live life well and live it responsibly. For most of us it means tasting and sampling along the way, but always in moderation, finding a balance.

Judaism is all about balance, even though it may appear that the Torah and Mitzvot are always make demands on us.

In Judaism we follow neither rejectionist nor escapist theologies. We embrace and engage G-d's world while fully aware and engaged in the world around us.

Every mitzvah, every intentionally Jewishly rooted action we do achieves just that. We take the physical and transform it to the spiritual, not by breaking it or running away from it, but by confronting it and molding it into something sacred and purposeful.

"Jews have no nunneries," goes the proverb. A synagogue is not meant to be a monastery, but a sacred space where we learn, pray and gather as community to create spiritual value within the material world.

So, the Nazirite, who because of his own moral weakness found it necessary to distance himself from that which the Creator permitted us, is somewhat sinful after all. And his attitude does indeed require some atonement.

Judaism calls upon us to live a higher, otherworldly life within this world. Rather than allowing the emptiness of a society to bring us down, we are challenged to assertively insist on changing our society for the better.