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Who were the Nazirites, what did they do or not do, and why? (And how does the account of the Nazirites relate to the priestly blessings?) These topics arise from Numbers chapter 6.

We know what they didn't do. According to their vows, Nazirites, or Nazirs, refrain from vinegar, grapes, raisins, and wine. They don't get the hair cut on the head. And they don't approach a dead human body. (I don't quite understand Judaism's association of hair with strength, and its almost disrespectful fear of the dead for the sake of cleanliness.)

The Nazirite, male or female, might choose the duration of their vows, often 30 days. But some few choose life-long vows. And there's the special case of parents, the mother, or a temple priest, imposing the Naziriteship on an unborn child for the child's future. Such was the case, introduced in today's haftarah, of the only named Nazirite in the Tannach, Samson; he was assigned the lifelong role to battle the Philistines. Parents make many choices for their children, but what might be the effect of growing up different from most children by vows assigned? It seems that Samson, as a mighty adult, struggled with the vow which gave him strength, not cutting the hair.

The Talmud has a tractate devoted to the Nazirites. Nazirites might choose the role in a variety of formal ways, or simply by saying, as a Nazirite walks by, "me too". Maybe no witness is necessary. That phrase "me too," with its strange echoes to the social movement of today, suggests to me how serious and personal the choice of Naziriteship could be, and that we could respect it as so.

It's not clear what the Nazirites did, as opposed to what they didn't do. Rabbi Gerry Serotta suggested to me that a Nazirite should do something useful for social justice or welfare. (He and my eldest brother, Simeon, have for years served on the Interfaith Council of Metropolitan Washington; interfaith considerations may help us interpret the Nazirites.)

How to judge the Nazirites is played out in the Talmud. One rabbi and his camp say the Nazirites are “arrogant,” or emphasize sinfulness. Some say their asceticism is excessive; Maimonides counseled Jews not to be too stringent in religious practices. But others praise the Nazirites as exemplars of holiness; a story tells how a neighbor cheered a Nazirite, guiding him to avoid a vineyard, calling out, “walk the other way!”. So the Nazirite wouldn’t make a mistake and have to start the vows all over again.

Skepticism about the stringency reminds me of a Jewish joke, from [Accidental Talmudist](#). On Yom Kippur, in the synagogue, the cantor calls out, “O, G-d, I am nothing!” the rabbi follows, “O, G-d, I am nothing!” then a child in the back of the synagogue chimes in “O, G-d, I am nothing!” The rabbi turns to the cantor and says, “Hey, look who thinks he’s nothing.”

Can this critique relate to us, today? There’s the term, “virtue signaling”. When we protest for “Black Lives Matter” out in front of WES, are we accomplishing anything beyond feeling proud of our opinions, and wanting credit for them? Of course, in social movements, there’s variation in people’s motivation. I don’t think we’re virtue signaling: as we stand outside, many people greet us driving by, honking the horn, showing that they appreciate our support, that the struggle can and should continue. (I haven’t decided whether or not the Nazirites were protesting; and they had rules to follow.)

The Nazirites with their strange vows seem to view the body almost in a Buddhist, Hindu, or Taoist way. Caring for the body according to strictures or discipline seemed to have a holy effect on the individual and the world.

Such restrictions may have been conducive to the Nazirites setting themselves apart from the populace, and seeking support from each other. Some researchers wonder whether the Essenes, living in caves in the desert, perhaps responsible for the Dead Sea scrolls, were imitating the Nazirites (adding a few more restrictions).

The question of who were the Nazirites leads also to interfaith. When I search for Nazirites online, Christian material pops up. Was Jesus or one of his disciples a Nazirite? The term “Nazirite” is apparently confused, inaccurately, with “Nazarene”.

A Nazirite concludes the role by making a sin offering and a peace offering with a priest in the tent of meeting or temple. They might appear before the priest with their long hair and say simply, “I’ve successfully completed my Naziriteship;” maybe after some questioning, the priest would trust the claim, because of the vows. If there was a mistake, it might be covered by the sin offering. (The Talmud does not provide the verification process.) You then can get a haircut, and the hair clippings become part of the burnt offering.

The connection between Nazirites and priestly blessings? They both include the temple priests – or the Kohanim or descendants of Aaron, in the tribe of Levi.

The priestly blessings, so important for Shabbos services and bnai mitzvot, are the oldest Hebrew text that has been found. This ancient liturgy has survived the destruction of the temple, and is in use today (the Naziriteship hardly survived the disappearance of the sacrificial cult and temple).

The temple priests, or Kohanim, are not only accepting the offerings of the Nazirites, but also blessing all the Jews as a community. (Fabranken does this Shabbos ceremony distinctively, with all welcome to the role of Kohanim.) So, in Fabranken, you can be like a temple priest – but maybe shouldn’t be like a Nazirite.

Now some possible questions for discussion:

- Do you like / not like Fab’s collective priestly blessing?
- What do you think of “virtue signaling”?
- Have you made any isolating commitment, or “sacrifice” altruistic or not, or know someone who has, that you’d like to describe?