

SITUATIONAL CONTROL



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT NASO
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

The struggle for self-control is one of the most important, hardest-fought battles of all time. Unfortunately, there are many casualties, and our will often loses to temptation. To become a Nazir, we are told in Parshat Naso, one must take a vow, which commits one to abstain from grape products, from defiling oneself to a human corpse and from having one's hair cut. The pasuk uses a strange word to describe the act of vowing, namely, *yafli*. Ibn Ezra presents two possibilities as to what the word could mean. The first is that it connotes setting oneself apart (*yafrish*). The second is that it means wonder (*pelah*). Most people just give into their temptation. The Nazir's commitment to self-control, Ibn Ezra argues, is so rare and powerful as to be called wondrous. On the one hand, the Nazir inspires us to have more self-control, and on the other, reminds us that most people fail, or even worse, don't even try.

The topic that immediately precedes that of Nazir, is that of Sotah. A woman whose husband warns her in front of witnesses not to seclude herself with another man, and she does so anyways, must go through the Sotah ceremony to determine whether she committed adultery. Intrigued by the juxtaposition of these two otherwise seemingly different concepts, the Midrash proposes a connection. Nazir comes after Sotah because anyone who witnesses the downfall of the Sotah will be so dedicated to avoiding such demise, that he or she will commit to not drinking any wine out of fear that wine could lead to adultery.

The connection the Midrash is making between Nazir and Sotah is not tangential or coincidental. It is revealing the core message behind both concepts. The ideal way to deal with temptations, both the mitzvah of Sotah and the mitzvah of Nazir are telling us, is by avoiding the battle in the first place. To avoid becoming a Sotah, don't put yourself in an environment that is conducive to sin. This includes not drinking wine as well as avoiding situations of seclusion that are more primed for temptation. Along comes the parsha of Nazir and the idea becomes intensified. Usually the Sages are responsible for implementing additional restrictions as fences and barriers to protect Biblical commandments but the case of the Nazir is one of the few examples where the Torah itself provides added restrictions serving to protect the original law. Don't just avoid wine, but avoid any grape products. Don't just avoid grape products, but avoid even approaching a vineyard!

In a 2016 article entitled "Situational Strategies for Self-Control," Dr. Angela Duckworth argues that situational strategies are the most salient and effective ones to avoid self-control failures, yet they are also the most underappreciated and underutilized. We often take the battle against temptation head on and eventually lose to that delicious looking piece of chocolate cake. We think we will be able to study, but become powerless to avoid the allure of our phones. The smartest and most effective strategy is to not buy the chocolate cake in the first place and to leave our phone off when we want to focus.

Yes, the struggle for self-control is a difficult one, but perhaps we are going about it all wrong. Fighting a head-to-head battle between willpower and temptation is only a last resort. Many have fallen in the heat of passion or the intensity of an emotion. The better way, learning from the Sotah's mistakes and taking the lead from the Nazir, is to avoid the battle in the first place. Avoid temptations and situations that could lead to sin. In so doing, perhaps we can have better luck in succeeding in our self-control goals and become happier, healthier, and more spiritually refined people.

RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

PsychedForTorah.com

PsychedForTorah@gmail.com

[@PsychedForTorah](https://www.instagram.com/PsychedForTorah)

