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A Nazirite for Rent

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A NAZIRITE FOR RENT

By Aharon Shemesh*

Abstract

This article argues that a unique socio-religious phenomenon of professional nazirites has existed towards the end of the second Temple period. Alongside those who became nazirites out of religious piety, there were also people who took upon themselves the vow of nazirhood in order to make a living off the donations of rich patrons. Some of the early Rabbis opposed this phenomenon and introduced new laws that made this type of nazirhood impractical. This is thus an interesting test case for the complicated dynamic between popular religious practices and beliefs and the established religious institutions and elite.

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to reconstruct and to describe a unique socio-religious phenomenon which I believe existed towards the end of the second Temple period. My reconstruction combines a literary and philological analysis of difficult rabbinic sources with scattered historical evidence from both rabbinic and non-rabbinic sources, like the gospels of the New Testament and Flavius Josephus. Besides simply shedding light on a dark corner of the life in Jerusalem in the eve of the destruction of the Temple, it may also serve a test case for the complicated dynamic between popular religious practice and belief and the established religious institutions and elite.

Biblical commentators, traditional and modern alike, have already noted that the Torah's legislation of the nazirhood in Numbers 6: 1-21, deals solely with the case of a temporary nazirite, whose vow has a predetermined term of observance. The Torah ignores the phenomenon of a lifelong nazirite like the biblical figure of Samson, the prophet Samuel,¹ the nazirites mentioned in Amos (20:11-12) along with the prophets, and alluded to in Lamentations 4:7. Some scholars even argued that the priestly legislators of Numbers 6 objected to charismatic lifelong nazirites and that the enactments of this passage were intended to limit the phenomenon and subject it to the priests, primarily to prevent its development as a force endangering priestly hegemony.²

Life however, is apparently stronger than the formal law and despite the biblical limitation of nazirhood to a temporary predetermined period of time, we can infer from various second temple sources, that religious impulses compelled people to take the vow of nazirhood

¹ Samuel's mother Hannah promises in 1 Sam 1:11 that if God will grant her a male child she will dedicate him to God and "a razor will not pass over his head." The Masoretic text does not make use of the word "nazirite". In the Septuagint version of this verse she also mentions that the child will abstain from wine and strong drink. This undoubtedly echoes the nazirite laws in Numbers 6:2-5. Furthermore, 4QSam^a reads "and I will make him a nazirite forever," in verse 22. M. Naz.9:5 records a dispute between the R. Jose and R. Nehorai regarding this issue.

² See: Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), 357-8, Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence : the Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Philadelphia : Fortress, 1995), 160-1 and n. 154., Gary B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1903), 57-8 and Jacob Licht, *A Commentary on the Book of Numbers* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), I, 27 both suggest that the book of Numbers ignores the case of lifelong nazirites because they took no terminable vow and offered no special offerings, and thus never had any special relations with the priests. In light of the evidence discussed below (see especially note 3), I find it difficult to accept Yaira Amit's claim that lifelong nazirite never existed and that the phenomenon is a theoretical rabbinic elaboration of the biblical text. See Yaira Amit, "Lifelong Nazirism, The evolution of the Motif," *Te'uda* 4 (1984): 23-36.

upon themselves for an unspecified period of time on the one hand and a lifelong nazirhood on the other hand.³

How did the Rabbis and the halakhic tradition that they inherited deal with this phenomenon and what then should be the law in such cases?

Nazir O'lam – A lifelong nazirite

The Mishna has two distinct descriptions of lifelong nazirhood. Mishna Nazir 1: 2, rules as follows:

מה בין נזיר עולם לנזיר שמשון?
נזיר עולם: הכביד שערו מיקל בתער ומביא שלש בהמות ואם נטמא מביא קרבן טומאה.
נזיר שמשון: הכביד שערו אינו מיקל ואם נטמא אינו מביא קרבן טומאה.

What is (the difference) between a lifelong nazirite (*nazir o'lam*) and a Samsonian nazirite (*nazir Shimshon*)? A lifelong nazirite, when his hair becomes heavy, may lighten it with a razor, and he brings three animals, and if he becomes impure, he brings the sacrifice for uncleanness. A Samsonian nazirite, when his hair becomes heavy, may not lighten it; and if he becomes impure, he does not bring the sacrifice for uncleanness.

According to this mishna, a lifelong nazirite may shorten his hair whenever he feels it is too "heavy". In that case he should also bring the three animals sacrifices required by scripture in Numbers 6: 13-20 and then his nazirhood automatically resumes.

Mishna Nazir 1:4, however has a different ruling:

הרי אני נזיר כשער ראשי וכעפר הארץ וכחול הים, הרי זה נזיר עולם ומגלח אחת לשלושים יום. ר' אומר: אין זה מגליח אחת לשלושים יום. ואי-זה הוא שהוא מגליח אחת לשלושים יום? האומר: הרי עלי נזירות כשער ראשי וכעפר הארץ וכחול הים.

[A person who says:] "I am a nazirite as the hair on my head," and "as the dust of the earth" and "as the sand of the sea" – is a nazirite forever and shaves once every thirty

³ The most interesting evidence for the existence of a life long Nazirites are the inscriptions "Hanania son of Jonathan the Nazirite," and "Salome wife of Hanania son of the Nazirite," etched on the sides of two ossuaries found in archeological excavations on Mount Scopus, dated to the first century AD. See Nahman Avigad, "The Burial Vault of a Nazirite Family on Mount Scopus," *IEJ* 21 (1971): 185. Obviously, one would not be named "The Nazirite" for taking a vow of nazirhood for any short period of time; Jonathan was therefore a life long nazirite! Further, it testifies to the phenomenon's relative rareness on the one hand and to the social standing of nazirites on the other.

days. Rabbi [Judah the prince] says: such a person does not shave once every thirty days. And who shaves once every thirty days? The person who says, “I vow nazirhood as the hair of my head” and “as the dust of the earth” and “as the sand of the sea.”

The Rabbis in this mishna disagree over the exact wording of the vow that one must take in order to become a lifelong nazirite (*nazir o'lam* = forever), but all agree that the practical consequences of such nazirhood is a never ending series of thirty day periods of nazirhood – a very different practice than that of mishna 1:2. Though some commentators suggest to identify the two, arguing that the description of mishna 2 “when his hair becomes heavy” equals “once every thirty days” of mishna 4, this is not the case; to lighten the hair is not identical with shaving it, and “when his hair become heavy” is not the same as “every thirty days”.⁴ While mishna 1 presents lifelong nazirhood as one continued period of nazirhood (though the nazirite is allowed to shorten his hair from time to time), mishna 4 presents a different concept, taking lifelong nazirhood as an endless series of short periods of nazirhood of thirty days each. What is the relation between these two descriptions of lifelong nazirhood? Below I will argue that the two mishnas reflect a legal development; mishna 1 is the older of the two, while mishna 4 represents a novel concept of lifelong nazirhood.

Stam nezirut – The vow of nazirhood for unspecified period of time

Mishna Nazir 1:3 relates to the case of unspecified nazirhood:

סתם נזירות שלשים יום. אמר: הריני נזיר אחת גדולה; הרי אני נזיר אחת קטנה, אפילו מיכן ועד סוף העולם - נזיר שלשים יום.

An unspecified nazirhood is for thirty days. If he said: “I am a nazirite for a big one,” [or] “I am a nazirite for a small one,” even [if he said: “I am a nazirite] from now until the end of the world,” he is a nazirite for thirty days.

The straightforward meaning of the mishna’s decree “An unspecified nazirhood is for thirty days” is that if the person who made the vow of nazirhood did not specify its duration, the default span of time is thirty days. In other words, the duration of an unspecified vow is in fact

⁴ See David Halivni, *Sources and Traditions; A Source Critical Commentary on Seder Nashim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1968), 360-1, contra Yaakov N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Mishnaic Text* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Dvir, 1948), 612.

predetermined, just like a specified one; if not by the person who uttered the vow then by legal default.

There is however an alternative halakhic rule for the unspecified nazirite. I suggest this alternative is expressed in the following homily from Sifre Numbers, a compilation of legal midrash from the school of Rabbi Ishmael, redacted c. 300 C.E.

Sifre Numbers 25 (Ed. Horowitz, 32) according to MS Vatican Ebr. 32

”גדל פרע שער ראש”. למה נאמר? לפי שהוא אומר ”עד מלאת הימים”. שאם אמר הרי אני נזיר סתם. קורא אני עליו ”עד מלאת הימים” שומע אני מיעוט ימים שנים. [תל’ ”גדל פרע”. כמה הוא גידול פרע. אין פחות מל’ ימים]. אבל מחודש ומעלה: או חודש ויום אחד או חודש ושני ימים.

“He shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow long” (Num. 6:5) Why is this statement required? Since it is said: “Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy” (Num. 6:5), [what would the law be] If one said: “Lo, I shall be a Nazirite,” without further specification. May I invoke in his case the rule, “Until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the Lord, he shall be holy” and may I then infer that the smallest multiple of days is two [and so the nazirite will be obligated by his vow for two days only]?

Scripture says, “He shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow long.” And how long a spell is required for the hair to grow long? Not under thirty days. But the spell must extend beyond a month: or a month and a day, or a month and two days.

In contrast to the Mishna’s positive phraseology “An unspecified nazirhood is for thirty days”, the midrash has a negative definition to the unspecified nazirite vow: “And how long a spell is required for the hair to grow long? Not under thirty days”. This is to say that in case one makes the nazirite vow without specifying its length, the duration of the nazirhood can be no shorter than thirty days: “but a month and a day or a month and two days” or longer.⁵ Note also that this last sentence does not assume a fixed period of time for the unspecified nazirhood, rather it may be of any length which is not shorter than thirty days. The crux of the matter is that

⁵ Menachem Kahana in his forthcoming commentary to the Sifre follows Meir Friedman (Ish Shalom) and suggests the midrash’s comment “or a month and a day, or a month and two days” be read as referring to the Mishna’s rule (m. Naz. 3:1) that an unspecified nazirite should shave his head on the thirty first day, which equals a month and a day – in case of a 30-day month, or a month and two days – in case of a 29-day month. This explanation is difficult to accept. It doesn’t fit the beginning of the statement, “but the spell must extend beyond a month” that assumes a unfixed period of time, and therefore the end of the sentence: “but a month and a day or a month and two days,” should be read as examples for “beyond a month” not as its definition.

according to this tradition, the duration of an unspecified nazirhood is indeed not predetermined; it will cease only when the nazirite decides to terminate it. In this case he or she would come to the temple and offer the three animals decreed by the Torah (Numbers 6: 13-20), then shave their hair and burn it "on the fire that is under the sacrifice of well-being" (18). When the ritual carried out by the priest is completed - "and then may the nazirite drink wine" (20).

The relationship between these two traditions requires clarification. These two competing stances may have existed side by side within rabbinic circles, but one of them might represent an earlier halakhah and the emergence of the other marks a shift towards a new understanding of the concept of nazirhood.

Let us first reflect on the following dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai.

Tosefta nezirut 2:10 (according to ms. Erfurt)

אמ' ר' שמעון בן לעזר. לא נחלקו בית שמיי ובית הלל על שנדר נזיר שלשים יום שאם גילח ביום שלשים לא יצא. על מה נחלקו. על שנדר סתם. שבית שמיי אומרים: אם גילח ביום שלשים יצא. ובית הלל אומרים: אם גילח ביום שלשים לא יצא.

R. Simeon b. Eleazar says: The House of Shammai and the House of Hillel did not differ concerning one who vowed to be a nazirite for thirty days, that if he cut his hair on the thirtieth day, he has fulfilled his obligation. Concerning what did they dispute? Concerning a case in which one vowed without further specification. For the house of Shammai say: if he cut his hair on the thirtieth day, he has fulfilled his obligation, And the House of Hillel say: if he cut his hair on the thirtieth day, he has not fulfilled his obligation.⁶

⁶ According to MS Vienna the House of Hillel are of the opinion that he has fulfilled his obligation and the House of Shammai holds that he has not. m. Naz. 3:1 reads: "One who said: 'I am a nazirite,' shaves on the thirty-first day. And if he shaved on the thirtieth day – he has fulfilled (his obligation). 'I am a nazirite thirty days' if he shaved on the thirty day – he has not fulfilled his obligation." The Mishna's ruling accords with the opinion of the House of Hillel according to MS Vienna and that of the House of Shammai according to MS Erfurt. As Saul Lieberman noted (Tosefta Ki-fshuta, 560) it might well be that MS Vienna was emended in order to make the Mishna coincide with the ruling of the House of Hillel. According to MS Erfurt however, the Mishna's ruling is in line with the opinion of the House of Shammai, an exceptional though not very rare case. Furthermore, it may be that the mishana's demand that even in the case of an unspecified nazirhood vow, the nazirite should in the first place wait until the thirty-first day (and only *post factum*, if he shaved on the thirtieth day – he has fulfilled his vow) is not part of the original stance of the House of Shammai, rather a compromise made by the editors of the Mishna to bridge the gap between the general rule that the Halakhah is according to the House of Hillel and the de-facto norm which is in this case according to the opinion of the House of Shammai.

R. Simeon b. Eleazar relates to an earlier text or tradition, according to which the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai disagreed over the law in the event a nazirite shaved his head on the thirtieth day. While the House of Shammai were of the opinion that he fulfilled his obligation, the Hillelites were of the opinion that the shaving was premature (as the nazirite didn't complete a full thirty days of his nazirhood) and he didn't fulfill his obligation.

R. Simeon's own intention is to clarify (or claim) that the dispute between the two houses was with regard to the case the nazirite made an unspecified vow, but in case he explicitly vowed to be a nazirite for thirty days, all agree that if he shaved on the thirtieth day he has not fulfilled his obligation.

The dispute between the houses can be formulated thus: According to the House of Hillel a vow for thirty days and an unspecified vow are governed by the same rules; the House of Shammai distinguishes between the two. Both Talmuds struggle to explain the latter's opinion. Assuming that "an unspecified nazirhood is for thirty days" there should be no difference between a vow for thirty days and an unspecified vow. Therefore, just as in the case of an explicit vow for thirty days, if the nazirite shaved on the thirtieth day he has not fulfilled his obligation, the same law should apply in case of an unspecified vow.⁷ I suggest this was the Hillelite conceptual understanding of the unspecified vow: If one made a vow and didn't specify its duration, the default is that it lasts for thirty days. In order to explain the Shammaite opinion in this dispute, we ought to assume they had a different understanding of the "unspecified vow", that distinguishes it conceptually from the predetermined - specified vow. According to the House of Shammai, an unspecified nazirite vow has no fixed duration and it remains in force as long as the nazirite does not terminate it. There is however one restriction; following the Torah's decree that the a nazirite should "let the locks of the hair of his head grow long", he may not end the vow until thirty days have passed - a time span based on an arbitrary convention that hair that has grown for less than thirty days is not "long." In this case the House of Shammai hold

⁷ See: y. Naz. 1:3 (53:3); b. Naz. 5:1. Both Talmuds offer two explanations. According to one explanation, the duration of unspecified nazirhood is in fact 29 days, therefore if the nazirite shaved on the thirtieth day he has fulfilled his obligation, while in the case of specified vow for 30 days, he or she can only shave on the thirty first day, and if they shaved on the thirtieth day they have not fulfilled his vow. According to the second explanation, an unspecified nazirhood is indeed thirty days long; nevertheless if he shaved on the thirtieth day he has fulfilled his vow because even part of the day is counted as a full day. However, in case the nazirite specifically vowed for 30 days, it is taken to mean "full thirty days" therefore if they shaved on the 30th day they have not fulfilled their obligation. The weakness of both explanations is nevertheless, apparent and a better one is needed.

that "if he shaved his head on the thirtieth day – he has fulfilled his obligation." On the other hand, when a man vows to be a nazirite for thirty days, because he explicitly predetermined the duration of his vow for thirty days, he must keep his vow for a full thirty days; he may shave only on the thirty-first day, and if he shaved on thirtieth day – he has not fulfilled his obligation.

There is a scholarly convention that in many cases the disputes between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel reflect changes and development in halakhah. The opinion of the House of Shammai tends to conform to "old" halakhic norms and stances, and the opinion of the House of Hillel marks the "reformed" opinion.⁸ It is thus plausible to assume that in our case too, according to the old halakhah if a person takes an unspecified vow of nazirhood they continue to be a nazirite until they decide to end their vow by offering the proper sacrifices. The rule that an unspecified vow effects 30 days of nazirhood was an innovation, introduced by the House of Hillel.

Intermediate Summary

Let me briefly summarize my hypothesis thus far. In spite of the Torah's limitation of its nazirhood legislation to the temporary, predetermined type, the people would take both unspecified and lifelong nazirhood vows as well. In the second temple period an unspecified vow was understood as meaning that it had no fixed duration. Terminating the vow and offering the proper sacrifices were at the nazirite's own discretion, provided that he (or she) had been growing their hair for at least thirty days. Similarly, and in line with this concept, a lifelong nazirite too was allowed to shorten his hair from time to time as long as at least thirty days had passed between haircuts. This is the halakhic tradition recorded in mishna 1:1. A new concept of nazirhood emerged toward the end of the second temple period. According to this view, every nazirhood is predetermined. Therefore if someone vowed to be a nazirite without specifying the duration of their nazirhood, they are obligated by their vow for thirty days. This view is first attested in the ruling of the House of Hillel who were of the opinion that there is no distinction between an unspecified vow and a vow for thirty days and that in both cases the nazirite should shave his head on the thirty-first day, and if he shaved on the thirtieth day, he has not fulfilled his obligation. Just like in the old view, the law governing a lifelong nazirhood in the new

⁸ See Aharon Shemesh, *Halakhah in the Making; The Development of Jewish Law from Qumran to the Rabbis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 133-35.

formulation is principally the same as that of the unspecified vow. Accordingly, a lifelong nazirhood is considered an endless series of predetermined periods of thirty days nazirhoods, and therefore a lifelong nazirite (*nazir o'lam*) should shave first on the thirty-first day and every thirty days thereafter (m. Naz., 1:4). The most important practical difference between the old conception of nazirhood and the new one is that while according to the new system, every nazirite has a fixed date for shaving their head (on the thirty-first day in the case of an unspecified nazirhood, and every thirty days thereafter for a lifelong nazirite), in the old system the date of the actual shaving is up to the nazirite (on the condition that that they did not cut their hair for at least thirty days).

Let's Shave a Nazirite

Realizing that many of the nazirites at the time of the Temple – those who took an unspecified vow upon themselves, or lifelong nazirhood, were in fact, at any given moment, in a state that they could shave their heads and perform the concluding sacrificial ceremony in the temple, is the key to some stories and traditions from the late second temple period. We know from various second temple and rabbinic sources that it was customary for rich people to donate money to cover the nazirite's expenses. Here are two such episodes:

In Antiquities 19.293-4 Flavius Josephus describes the return of Agrippa I from Egypt to Jerusalem after he received confirmation of his kingship over Judaea and Samaria from Claudius Caesar in the year 41 C.E.: Agrippa, naturally, since he was to go back with improved fortunes, turned quickly homewards. On entering Jerusalem, he offered sacrifices of thanksgiving, omitting none of the ritual enjoined by our law. Accordingly he also arranged for considerable number of nazirites to be shorn.

It should first be noted that this story testifies to the popularity of the nazirhood at that time, since Agrippa could sponsor a “considerable number” of nazirites. Nevertheless, it is puzzling how it miraculously happened that so many nazirites had finished their period of nazirhood exactly on the same day that Agrippa wished them to? The answer is that they all were either nazirites for unspecified duration or a lifelong nazirites and, as explained above they were in fact ready to shave their heads at any given moment.

The following tradition is even more compelling. Acts chapter 21 relates that when Paul arrived in Jerusalem he was asked by the local Jewish-Christian community to perform some acts of righteousness in order to refute the rumors that he was preaching against keeping the commandments.

Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow, take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.

In this case it is explicitly said that the four nazirites were “under a vow” and had not yet finished their period of nazirhood. Here again the story is easily explained if we understand that these nazirites were under a vow for an unspecified time and according to the old reading of the law they were allowed to terminate their period of nazirhood at any time and this is exactly what they did at the request of Paul.⁹

To Be a Nazirite

At this point an assessment of the practical aspects of being a nazirite is in order. According to Numbers 6 nazirites should refrain from drinking wine or any other intoxicant, they should not cut their hair but let it grow long, and they are forbidden to defile themselves by coming in contact with the dead. To what extent did these three prohibitions impose a real restriction on the normal life style of a first century Jew who lived in Jerusalem? I would argue that of these three restrictions, only the prohibition on consuming wine would have been considered a burden at the time, and not a very heavy one.¹⁰ Haircuts, on the other hand, were

⁹ For another reading of this story, see: Ariel Furstenberg and Yair Furstenberg, “The Nazirhood Period and its Concluding Ceremony; A study of Tannaitic Literature,” *Sidra* 22 (2007): 57-80. Rabbinic literature uses a special term for this phenomenon לגלח נזיר (to shave a nazirite), see for example: m. Naz. 2:5-6. Cf. Yaakov N. Epstein, *Prolegomena ad Litteras Tannaiticas*, (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Magnes and Dvir, 1977), 384.

¹⁰ Some scholars suggest the daily consumption of wine in 1st-2nd century Palestine was as high as $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 liter: Shimon Dar, *The Spread of Settlement in Western Samaria in the Second Temple Period, the Talmudic Period and the Byzantine Period* (Tel Aviv: SPNI, 1982), 260-1; Magen Broshi, *Bread, Wine, Walls and Scrolls* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 162). This estimate is mainly based on Cato’s list of wine’s quantities that the master of the land should supply to his slaves. Cato, *On Farming, De Agricultura, A modern translation and commentary*, by Andrew Dalby, (Blackawton: Prospect Books, 1998), 141-3. According to this estimation one should admit that a total abstention from wine was indeed a serious matter. Joseph Tabori, *Pesach Dorot* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996) provides a more balanced account. Women, children and poor people rarely drank wine. Though wine was relatively inexpensive, even well-to-do men drank wine mainly in the context of festive meals, banquets and symposia.

not frequent. The Talmud rules: “The king should have his hair cut daily, the high priest once a week and other priests once in every thirty days” (b. San. 22b). Keeping oneself pure also was a common practice for many of Jerusalem’s habitants at the time of the Temple, including priests and others, termed *haverim*, who adhered to restrictions such as eating all their food in a state of purity. (In passing, it should be noted, that if this assessment, which I intend to expand elsewhere, is accurate, it calls for a reevaluation of the seemingly consensual view of nazirhood as an ascetic phenomenon).¹¹

The real burden the vow of nazirhood created was financial: the three animals to be brought for the ending ceremony and the guilt offering in case the nazirite became impure during their vow. In the economy of the first century this was quite costly. Nevertheless, a unique social arrangement developed in order to enable less well-to-do nazirites to meet their sacrificial obligations. From various second temple and rabbinic sources (two of them quoted above) we know that it was customary for rich people to donate money to defray the nazirite’s expenses. This was usually made in form of a vow the patron took upon himself “to shave a nazirite”.¹² Consequently, what we are left with, regarding the financial commitments of a nazirite, is the risk of having to purchase a guilt offering in the event he became impure as the result of contact with a human corpse. Even this issue is not that simple, as I hope to show in the next paragraph.

Nazir Olam – a lifelong Nazirite – Once Again

I now turn to a closer look on the laws of the lifelong nazirite mentioned first in mishna 1:2. Here it is again according to the version attested in most mss. and the printed edition:

מה בין נזיר עולם לנזיר שמשון?
נזיר עולם: הכביד שערו מיקל בתער ומביא שלש בהמות ואם נטמא מביא קרבן טומאה.
נזיר שמשון: הכביד שערו אינו מיקל ואם נטמא אינו מביא קרבן טומאה.

What is (the difference) between a lifelong nazirite (*nazir o’lam*) and a Samsonian nazirite (*nazir Shimshon*)? A lifelong nazirite, when his hair becomes heavy, may

¹¹ See for now Aharon Shemesh, “Why did Simon The Righteous Refrain from Eating the Sacrifice of the Nazirite,” in *By the Well – Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, (eds. U. Erlich, H. Kreisel and D. J. Lasker; Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 2008), 653-658.

¹² Thus for example m. Naz. 2:1 discusses with the case of one who vows: “I am a nazirite and shaving a nazirite will be upon me” and his fellow heard him and said “And I, and shaving a nazirite will be upon me” and rules that: “If they are shrewd, each shave the other; and if not, they shave other nazirites.”

lighten it with a razor, and he offers three animals, and if he becomes impure, he brings the sacrifice for uncleanness. A Samsonian nazirite, when his hair becomes heavy, may not lighten it; and if he becomes impure, he does not offer the sacrifice for uncleanness.

MS Budapest, Kaufmann A50 ("MS K") of the Mishna, considered the most reliable witness to the so-called Palestinian tradition of the Mishna, has, however, a slightly different version. While according to the majority of MSS. if a lifelong nazirite becomes impure "he offers the sacrifice for uncleanness," MS K reads: "he **does not** bring the sacrifice for uncleanness." Though K's reading can be easily dismissed as a scribal error resulting from the similarity between this rule and the following one regarding the Samsonian nazirite, I hold that this is an authentic textual tradition and most probably the original one. This is because the same halakhic tradition (i.e. that a lifelong nazirite who becomes impure does not have to bring the sacrifice for uncleanness) is attested independently elsewhere.

Sifre Numbers 32, ed. Horowitz, 38 according to MS Vat. Ebr. 32.

"זאת תורת הנזיר" - אחד נזיר ימים ואחד נזיר עולם. לקרבן טהרה. או לקרבן טומאה? ת'ל "ביום מלאת ימי נזרו". לא אמרתי אלא במי שיש לו ספק (=פסק)¹³ לנזירותו.

[A] "This is the law (Torah) for the nazirite" (Num. 6:13) - both for the temporary nazirite and a lifelong nazirite.

[B] The rule here applies only to the offering covering the completion of the vow in a condition of cleanness.

[C] Or might we say that it also covers the offering brought in connection with the interruption of the vow by reason of corpse-uncleanness?

[D] Scripture states: "when the time of his separation has been completed" – I have thus spoken only of those whom their nazirhood has a conclusion (i.e. a temporary nazirite, to exclude a lifelong nazirite).

The homily discusses Numbers 6:13, the first verse of the biblical passage describing the concluding sacrificial ceremony of nazirhood. In section [A] the homilist states that this ceremony – "The Torah" – applies to both temporary and lifelong nazirite. The rest of the homily follows a classical structure of midrash halakhah (legal midrash). The homilist seeks to clarify the scope (or the limits) of the equality between a nazirite for specific spell and a perpetual nazirite,

¹³ For the variants ספק – פסק, see: M. Bar Asher, "Preliminary studies of the Hebrew of the Sages as reflected in manuscript Rome 32 of Sifre on Numbers," *Teuda* 3 (1983): 156.

stated in section [A]. He begins in section [B] by stating that this equality refers only to the following periscope, the sacrifices of the concluding ceremony. In section [C] the homilist challenges his own statement [B] and suggests the possibility that the rule might also apply to the sacrifices a nazirite is obligated to offer in case they become impure during nazirhood (described earlier in verses 10-12). In line with the fixed structure of this type of homily, the next stage of the homily ought to function as a rejection of the previous suggestion and a reaffirmation of the initial statement [B]. However, the text of section [D], as we have it, does not fit this structure. Not only does it not reject [C]; its contents seem to contradict the initial statement made in section [A]. From the words “when the time of his separation has been completed,” which are the immediate continuation of 6:13 quoted at the outset of the midrash, the homilist deduces that the passage refers only to a temporary nazirite and not to a lifelong nazirite. This is of course an explicit contradiction to section [A] where the homilist declares that the passage regarding the sacrifices of the concluding ceremony refers to both temporary and perpetual nazirites.

I find no other way to reconcile this contradiction but to emend the text of section [D]. As the phrase “one his nazirhood has a conclusion” appears many times in the course of the Sifre commentary on the biblical portion of nazirhood,¹⁴ it is not implausible to assume that by scribe’s error it was copied from another place and mistakenly inserted here. If we read section [D] without the last sentence it becomes clear and fits perfectly into the overall structure of the homily. Furthermore; according to this reading, section [D] indeed rejects the hypothetical suggestion in [C]. The argument is simple: “The Torah” that applied equally to nazirite for specific spell and a perpetual nazirite [A], is only that of the ending ceremony - “when the time of his separation has been completed,” but the rule regarding the sacrifices for impurity applies to the temporary nazirite only, not to the lifelong nazirite.

Apparently then the halakhic tradition of the Sifre corroborates of MS K of the Mishna. According to this tradition only a temporary nazirite must offer sacrifices if they become impure during nazirhood, but the lifelong nazirite is exempted from this obligation, and “if he becomes impure, he **does not** bring the sacrifice for uncleanness.”¹⁵

¹⁴ E.g. Sifre Numbers 25 (ed. Horowitz, 30); 27 (34).

¹⁵ The rationale for exempting the lifelong nazirite from bringing the sacrifice for uncleanness is nowhere explained. It might however been deduced from a close reading of verses 11-12 which read as follows: “The priest shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as burnt offering, and make expiation on his behalf for the guilt that he incurred through the corpse. That same day he shall reconsecrate his head and rededicate to the Lord his term of

Admittedly, the halakhic tradition expressed in the Sifre Zuta, the parallel midrash on Numbers from the school of Rabbi Akiva, is that a lifelong nazirite must offer sacrifices for uncleanness like the temporary nazirite. Sifre Zuta has two consecutive homilies on Numbers 6:13: “This is the law (Torah) for the nazirite”. The first reads: “One rule (Torah) applies to all nazirites to bring the sacrifice for uncleanness (זאת תורת הנזיר. תורה אחת לכל הנזירים שיביא קרבן) (טומאה),” and the second: “One rule (Torah) applies to all nazirites to bring the sacrifices for the completion of their vow in a state of cleanness (זאת תורת הנזיר. תורה אחת לכל הנזירות שיביא קרבן) (טהרה)”. The homilist probably read the verse as referring to both the previous section in the chapter (vs. 8-12) which deals with the sacrifices the nazirite should offer for impurity during nazirhood, and the following section (vs.14-20), which describes the ceremony for the completion of the nazirhood in state of cleanness, and deduces from the words “This is the law for the nazirite” that it applies to all types of nazirites, temporary and longlife alike.

It seems then that the issue of whether a lifelong nazirite who becomes impure is obligated to bring the sacrifices for uncleanness was disputed by the school of Rabbi Ishmael and the school of Rabbi Akiva. The reading of MS K represents the view of the former and that of the other mss. reflects the tradition of the latter. Very much like the disputes between the House of Hillel and the House of Shmmai, scholars tend to view Rabbi Ishmael as the bearer of the old tradition and Rabbi Akiva as the innovator. I believe this is the case here as well. Most likely, the old tradition was that a lifelong nazirite who becomes impure does not have to bring the sacrifices for uncleanness; he just has to purify himself and resume his nazirhood.

A Nazirite for Rent

The outcome of the above lengthy discussion is that our popular intuitive depiction of the nazirite as a holy ascetic figure who refrains from the pleasures of life and dissociates himself from society in order to contemplate and to dedicate himself to the service of God is far from being accurate. This notion is, at least to some extent, due to the dual use of the Hebrew “nazir”

nazirite; and he shall bring a lamb in its first year as a penalty offering. The previous period shall be void, since his consecrated hair was defiled.” The Torah here links between the sacrifice for uncleanness and the rule that “The previous period shall be void.” Consequently one may conclude that the sacrifice for uncleanness is only required in case the previous period is void, that is in the case of temporarily nazirhood, But in the case of a lifelong nazirite, as the renewed nazirhood is not a compensation for the lost days but simply the continuation of the prolonged nazirhood, there is no need for the uncleanness sacrifices. For a similar homily with regard a nazirite who become impure on the last day of his nazirhood, see Sifre 31 (ed. Horowitz, 36).

to denote the biblical nazirite and monks as well. But, the biblical nazirite is not a celibate, nor he is expected to conduct an ascetic life style. As I argued above, complying with the three prohibitions of naziriteship mandated by Scripture was not a great burden. Furthermore, the vow of nazirhood didn't in fact result, in many cases, in any expenses for the nazirite himself. On the contrary, it might well be that nazirites gained some benefit from the support they received from their rich patrons.

As for these patrons themselves, they may well have been motivated by deep religious impulses. Donating for sacrifices to be offered in the Temple was always considered an act of righteousness and donating towards the sacrifices of the nazirite was probably even more desirable¹⁶. Nevertheless, the stories we read above about Agrippa I and especially the story about Paul also reveal the important social role of the act. "Shaving a nazirite", besides being an act of piety, functions to secure the donor's position in society, since everyone knows not only that he is a righteous man but also that they have the means to donate. The more nazirites he "shaves" the more financial ability is displayed. Such a socio-religious reality may have created a fascinating symbiotic relationship between nazirites and philanthropists. The nazirites indeed needed the rich people to finance their sacrifices but at the same time they also served the latter's need to show off their righteousness and wealth.¹⁷

This kind of social arrangement may in turn have encouraged poor people to take nazirhood upon themselves in order to benefit from the rich people's donations. Indeed, I believe this reality is reflected in the following dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai recorded in Sifre Zuta 6:3, ed. Horowitz p. 244

יביא, יביאם בעל כרחו
מכאן היו בית שמאי אומרים נודרין לנזירות ובית הלל אומרים אין נודרין שמא ינזר לחייו. אמרו להם בית שמאי
מפני מה אתם אומרים שלא ילמוד לאכול משל בריות אם אינו נזיר והוא אומר נזיר אני נמצא מונע עצמו מלשתות
יין ומליטמא למתים בשביל לאכול סעודה אחת.

¹⁶ This is because one of the three sacrifices the nazirite has to offer is exceptional, and this is the sin offering (or purification offering, as Jacob Milgrom prefers to translate the Hebrew חטאת). The nazirite is in the only case for this sacrifice to be offered by an individual which is not for the atonement for a specific sin. Thus t. Ned 1:1 records a tradition about the early Hasidim (Hasidim ha-rishonim) who were used to vow a vow of nazirhood in order to enable them to bring the sin offering.

¹⁷ There are not a few examples for similar symbiotic relations between suppliers of "religious services" and people in need for them. Suffice to mention those who are paid by others to recite Kaddish or psalms (*Tillim zugres*) in memory of their deceased relatives.

“This is the ritual (Torah) for the nazirite: On the day that his term as nazirite is completed, he shall be brought to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.” – He shall bring them even forcibly. From here the House of Shammai deduced that one should vow to donate for the sacrifices of the nazirite.¹⁸ The House of Hillel were of the opinion that one should not vow for the sacrifices of the nazirite lest he (i.e. the nazirite) may vow for his living. The House of Shammai said to them: Why do you say so; Is it in order that he will not be accustomed to eat at the expense of others?! If he is not a nazirite and he says “I am a nazir” he is refraining himself from drinking wine and becoming impure to have one meal!

Though this homily is not easy to read and even more so to translate, its general content is nevertheless clear. The House of Hillel disapproved the popular custom to “shave a nazirite” exactly because it encouraged people to take upon themselves the vow of nazirhood for the wrong reason, that is to make a living of it. The House of Shammai on the other hand, dismisses fears voiced by the House of Hillel, and argue that it is not reasonable that a person will undertake nazirhood and its restrictions, only for the benefit of one sacrificial meal at its end. The extent of the phenomenon is difficult to assess. It might very well be, as Adiel Schremer suggested to me, that the fact that the two schools debated over the issue suggests that it was only in its initial stages and not yet widespread. On the other hand, it is clear that the House of Hillel considered it to be significant enough to decree that one should not donate for the expenses of any nazirite. To recall, what allowed for this phenomenon to develop was the halakhic tradition that a nazirite for an unspecified duration may terminate nazirhood at any given time after he grows their hair long for thirty days as well as the tradition that allows a lifelong nazirite to shave their hair whenever it becomes heavy. It is therefore not surprising that the House of Hillel also changed the definition of unspecified nazirhood and declared that “an unspecified nazirhood is for thirty days.” Consequently if a person takes the vow of nazirhood, even if they do not specify its duration, the vow will terminate after thirty days and they will have to bring the three animals sacrifice to the Temple. Obviously, he can’t be sure that he will find a sponsor to pay for his sacrifices and as a result he will be reluctant to vow “for his life.”

¹⁸ My reading and translation of the Hebrew “נזירים לנזירות” follows that of Horowitz (in his comments to the midrash) and J.N. Epstein (above note 9). S. Lieberman however, reads it as referring to the nazirite vow itself. That is to say that the house of Shammai encourage people to vow the nazirite vow, while the House of Hillel discourage it (see: Saul Lieberman, *Sifre zuta (the Midrash of Lod) and The Talmud of Caesarea* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1968), 19.

Apparently towards the end of the second temple period, Jerusalem saw among many other nazirites not a few professional nazirites who made their living by supplying rich people with the opportunity to shave their heads and to show their righteousness and richness. Actually we shouldn't be very surprised. Temples and other holy places of pilgrimage everywhere and always attract all kind of opportunists who know how to take advantage of the religious, commercial and financial activities that take place there.¹⁹ The professional nazirites portrayed here were but only one expression of this wider phenomenon.

The new halakhah that redefined an unspecified nazirhood as a nazirhood for thirty days, and the new definition of lifelong nazirhood as ongoing periods of thirty days, not only discouraged people from making the vow of nazirhood for their living as I have explained above, but at the same time negated the phenomenon of lifelong nazirhood in general. While according to the old law, the nazirite could trim his or her hair at will, according to the new halakha they are obliged to bring the nazirite sacrifice every thirty days. Obviously this new rule makes it for impractical for anyone to vow to be a lifelong nazirite. The halakhic change introduced by the House of Hillel should thus be seen also as a general resistance to the phenomenon of lifelong nazirhood.

History so it seems, sometime does repeat itself. Just as the legislator of the nazirhood law in Numbers objected the phenomenon of the charismatic lifelong nazirhood and tried to limit it, so too did the House of Hillel. It is difficult to know to what extent the new halakhah achieved its goal in limiting the scope of lifelong nazirite, as not much later the Temple was destroyed and the whole institute of nazirhood ceased to exist.

¹⁹ See: S. Lieberman, above n. 18.