



**A Reflection on Narcissus & the Nazirite:
Where Selflove and Love of G' Meet
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Fascinatingly, a character who catches a glance of themselves in the water appears both in Greek Mythology and in the Midrash. But there the similarity ends.

Thinking about the Myth and the Midrash....

- *In what way was Narcissus' self-love harmful?*
- *How does Judaism address the issue of self-love?*
- *Is the love of G' meant to derail self-love or redirect it?*
- *In what way can we apply the dramatic lessons learned from these two narratives to our Mussar practice?*



Ovid (8 CE) Metamorphoses Book III (A. S. Kline's Version)

Bk III:339-358 Echo sees Narcissus

...This loveliest of nymphs gave birth at full term to a child whom, even then, one could fall in love with, called Narcissus. Being consulted as to whether the child would live a long life, to a ripe old age, the seer with prophetic vision replied 'If he does not discover himself' ...One day the nymph Echo saw him, driving frightened deer into his nets, she of the echoing voice, who cannot be silent when others have spoken, nor learn how to speak first herself.

~~ Caravaggio (1594-96)

Bk III:359-401 How Juno altered Echo's speech

... Now when she saw Narcissus wandering through the remote fields, she was inflamed, following him secretly, and the more she followed the closer she burned with fire, no differently than inflammable sulphur, pasted round the tops of torches, catches fire, when a flame is brought near it. O how often she wants to get close to him with seductive words, and call him with soft entreaties! Her nature denies it, and will not let her begin, but she is ready for what it will allow her to do, to wait for sounds, to which she can return words.

...Scorned, she wanders in the woods and hides her face in shame among the leaves, and from that time on lives in lonely caves. But still her love endures, increased by the sadness of rejection. Her sleepless thoughts waste her sad form, and her body's strength vanishes into the air. Only her bones and the sound of her voice are left. Her voice remains, her bones, they say, were changed to shapes of stone. She hides in the woods, no longer to be seen on the hills, but to be heard by everyone. It is sound that lives in her.

Bk III:402-436 Narcissus sees himself and falls in love

As Narcissus had scorned her, so he had scorned the other nymphs of the rivers and mountains, so he had scorned the companies of young men. Then one of those who had been mocked, lifting hands to the skies, said 'So may he himself love, and so may he fail to command what he loves!' Rhamnusia, who is the goddess Nemesis, heard this just request.

There was an unclouded fountain, with silver-bright water, which neither shepherds nor goats grazing the hills, nor other flocks, touched, that no animal or bird disturbed not even a branch falling from a tree. Grass was around it, fed by the moisture nearby, and a grove of trees that prevented the sun from warming the place. Here, the boy, tired by the heat and his enthusiasm for the chase, lies down, drawn to it by its look and by the fountain. While he desires to quench his thirst, a different thirst is created. While he drinks he is seized

by the vision of his reflected form. He loves a bodiless dream. He thinks that a body, that is only a shadow. He is astonished by himself, and hangs there motionless, with a fixed expression, like a statue carved from Parian marble.

Flat on the ground, he contemplates two stars, his eyes, and his hair, fit for Bacchus, fit for Apollo, his youthful cheeks and ivory neck, the beauty of his face, the rose-flush mingled in the whiteness of snow, admiring everything for which he is himself admired. Unknowingly he desires himself, and the one who praises is himself praised, and, while he courts, is courted, so that, equally, he inflames and burns. How often he gave his lips in vain to the deceptive pool, how often, trying to embrace the neck he could see, he plunged his arms into the water, but could not catch himself within them! What he has seen he does not understand, but what he sees he is on fire for, and the same error both seduces and deceives his eyes.

Fool, why try to catch a fleeting image, in vain? What you search for is nowhere: turning away, what you love is lost! What you perceive is the shadow of reflected form: nothing of you is in it. It comes and stays with you, and leaves with you, if you can leave!

Bk III:437-473 Narcissus laments the pain of unrequited love...Bk III:474-510 Narcissus is changed into a flower

...He spoke, and returned madly to the same reflection, and his tears stirred the water, and the image became obscured in the rippling pool. As he saw it vanishing, he cried out 'Where do you fly to? Stay, cruel one, do not abandon one who loves you! I am allowed to gaze at what I cannot touch, and so provide food for my miserable passion!' While he weeps, he tears at the top of his clothes: then strikes his naked chest with hands of marble. His chest flushes red when they strike it, as apples are often pale in part, part red, or as grapes in their different bunches are stained with purple when they are not yet ripe.

As he sees all this reflected in the dissolving waves, he can bear it no longer, but as yellow wax melts in a light flame, as morning frost thaws in the sun, so he is weakened and melted by love, and worn away little by little by the hidden fire. He no longer retains his colour, the white mingled with red, no longer has life and strength, and that form so pleasing to look at, nor has he that body which Echo loved.

And now they were preparing the funeral pyre, the quivering torches and the bier, but there was no body. They came upon a flower, instead of his body, with white petals surrounding a yellow heart.



As it is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Shimon HaTzaddik said: In all my days as a priest, I never ate the guilt-offering of a ritually impure nazirite except for one occasion.

One time, a particular man who was a nazirite came from the South and I saw that he had beautiful eyes and was good looking, and the fringes of his hair were arranged in curls.

I said to him: My son, what did you see that made you decide to destroy this beautiful hair of yours by becoming a nazirite? A nazirite must shave off his hair at the completion of his term. If he becomes impure before the completion of his term, he shaves off his hair and starts his term of naziriteship again.

דַּתְנִינָא, אָמַר שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק :

מִיָּמַי לֹא אֶכְלָתִי אֶשֶׁם נְזִיר טָמֵא אֶלָּא אֶחָד.

פַּעַם אַחַת בָּא אָדָם אֶחָד נְזִיר מִן הַדְּרוֹם, וּרְאִיתִיו שֶׁהוּא יָפֵה עֵינָיִם וְטוֹב רוֹאֵי וְקוֹצוֹתָיו סְדוּרוֹת לוֹ תִּלְתָּלִים.

אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ : בְּנִי, מָה רְאִיתָ לְהַשְׁחִית אֶת שְׁעָרְךָ זֶה הַנְּאֻה?

He said to me: I was a shepherd for my father in my city, and I went to draw water from the spring, and I looked at my reflection in the water and my evil inclination quickly overcame me and sought to expel me from the world.

I said to myself: Wicked one! Why do you pride yourself in a world that is not yours? Why are you proud of someone who will eventually be food in the grave for worms and maggots, i.e., your body? I swear by the Temple service that I shall shave you for the sake of Heaven.

אָמַר לִי :

רוּעָה הֵייתִי לְאַבָּא בְּעִירִי,

הִלַּכְתִּי לְמַלְאוֹת מַיִם מִן הַמַּעַיִן וְנִסְתַּכַּלְתִּי בְּבּוֹאָה שְׁלִי,

וּפְחַז עָלַי יֶצְרִי וּבִקֵּשׁ לְטוֹרְדָנִי מִן הָעוֹלָם.

אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ :

רָשָׁע! לָמָּה אַתָּה מִתְנַאֵה בְּעוֹלָם שְׂאִינוֹ שְׁלָךְ, בְּמִי שֶׁהוּא עֹתִיד לְהִיּוֹת רָמָה וְתוֹלְעָה? הָעֶבֶדְךָ, שְׂאֵגְלַחְךָ לְשָׂמַיִם!