

Making Your Own Rules

As I've said many times before, you don't need me to read you headlines from the *New York Times*. Shul is a place where we not only *rehearse* what's going on outside but where we can find a meaningful *response* to current events. We turn to the wisdom of our tradition to make sense of the world, taking the crucial opportunity to pause and reflect. In so doing, we strive to remember the scope of our own power – in its narrowness and its breadth. Every one of us affects the world we live in, our tradition teaches us, but none of us alone can change the world. Each of us can cultivate a practice of right and righteous life, and through our work and our relationships, we can magnify the blessings of peace our Torah imparts.

/

Now, having said all that – there was indeed an article in yesterday's *Times* that I do want to bring to light. It wasn't about politics or economy or war but rather about poetry; and it perfectly reflected what I think is the purpose of our reflection on Shabbat.

Every couple of months, the literary critic A. O. Scott walks readers through a poem, highlighting key themes and explicating the literary techniques that bring them to light. And his review of "Some Rules" by Wendy Cope happens to offer a lucid commentary on the Torah portion this week.¹

Wendy Cope is a British author whose best-known poem is "The Orange," which Jessica and I included in our wedding 16 years ago. "Some Rules," published in *Poetry* in 2007, is a villanelle, a tightly-formed poem of five sestets and a quatrain using a predictable pattern of only two end rhymes. And I do confess that it's not very original or surprising that a rabbi was drawn to a poem that invokes in its title *rules*.

Some Rules²
by *Wendy Cope*

Stop, if the car is going "clunk"
Or if the sun has made you blind.
Don't answer e-mails when you're drunk.

You fire off something fierce. You're sunk.
It's irretrievable. It's signed.

¹ "My Life Was a Trainwreck. Then I Read this Poem" by A. O. Scott and Aliza Aufrichtig. *New York Times*, May 28, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2026/05/28/books/poem-wisdom-wendy-cope.html>

² Published in *Poetry*, July/August 2007. See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=190&issue=4&page=67>.

You feel your spirits going “clunk.”

Don’t hide your face with too much gunk,
Especially if it’s old and lined.
Don’t answer e-mails when you’re drunk.

Don’t live with thirty years of junk—
Those precious things you’ll never find.
Stop, if the car is going “clunk.”

Don’t fall for an amusing hunk,
However rich, unless he’s kind.
Don’t answer e-mails when you’re drunk.

In this respect, I’m like a monk:
I need some rules to bear in mind.
Stop, if the car is going “clunk.”
Don’t answer e-mails when you’re drunk.

A. O. Scott, the author of the *Times* article, correctly points out, “At first, we’re being lectured, told in no uncertain terms what not to do.” The repetition of “Stop” and “Don’t” remind us of the Ten Commandments or any number of other rules designed to curtail behavior. Maybe this is advice we don’t need, but we can appreciate its candor and wit.

And then we see, as Scott puts it, “this poem really isn’t about us. The first person pronoun shows up at the last possible moment — that tiny window in the concluding stanza before the final appearance of the repeating lines.”

In this respect, **I**m like a monk:
I need some rules to bear in mind.
Stop, if the car is going “clunk.”
Don’t answer e-mails when you’re drunk.

We see, in the end, as A. O. Scott says, “The speaker is making rules for *herself*.” This isn’t advice but rather confession. The speaker needs to remind herself of her limits, to put boundaries around her own behavior, particularly — and likely with considerable regret — around alcohol.

And this pivots perfectly into this week’s Torah portion. In *Parashat Naso*, we meet the nazir, the woman or man who takes the nazirite vow.³ The terms of the vow require abstaining from all intoxicants, especially wine and including all grapes and anything made from them. Nazirites also refrain from cutting their hair and may not come in contact with the dead.

³ See Numbers 6:1-21.

All the limitations incumbent on the nazirite are completely voluntary. Why take on these unnecessary restrictions? According to Ibn Ezra in 12th-century Spain, “They take the nazirite vow to distance themselves from appetites and urges, doing this in service of God.”⁴ In other words, the nazirite acts with profound self-understanding, adopting, as Wendy Cope calls them “Some Rules.”

And this, I suggest, is a model for us all. We may not embrace the stringencies of a nazirite, and we may not adopt the discipline expressed by a villanelle, but we can set boundaries for ourselves, boundaries that aren’t strictly necessary but that take into account our own proclivities and wants. The world is awash with people doing what they *can* whether or not they *should*, demanding that until others enforce restraint, they will act with abandon. But our tradition urges us to look inward, to identify the parts of ourselves that might push us too far in a bad direction, and to hold ourselves accountable for not crossing an internal line.

During the nazirite’s term of service, קדש הוא ליהוה, “They are holy to the Eternal” (Num. 6:8). May we find our own path to holiness, mindful of trying to do the right thing, and willing to take on the sacred boundaries of some rules.

⁴ וינזרו שירחיק מהתאות ועשה זה לעבודת השם