There is a beautiful place in the Ayalon Valley - west of Jerusalem - just 25 km away. It is called Latrun. The name Latrun may have been derived from “Le Toron des Chevaliers,” the name of a Crusader castle that once stood there. In modern times the hill is best known as the site of an important battle during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence.

But its history goes further back. In 1890 a group of French monks was sent to establish a contemplative monastery at Latrun. The monks bought 200 hectares on the hilltop and built the monastery dedicated to Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows - which is still active today. At the end of the Ottoman era, the Turks expelled the monistic community, and the buildings stood empty from 1914 to 1918. In 1926 the monks returned and began rebuilding the monastery. In 1937 it was awarded the status of an Abbey. The community thrived, they worked the land and established a vineyard.

Today the monks at Latrun Monastery produce and sell a range of wines, soap, religious souvenirs, olives, jams, honey, and olive oil at the Abbey store. The monastery is also known as the Silent Monastery as the monks have taken a vow of silence.

I visited Latrun a few times while living in Israel. I walked around its beautiful premises, imagining what it must feel like to live here and never utter a word.

I mean, if you know me well, you can appreciate how hard it is for me to keep quiet.

Of course, there are other ways to communicate besides through speech.

For example, do you remember the game “charades”? In it, players explain an entire sentence or theme or even just one word through pantomime.

There is also a silent language for those who are deaf.

But would you voluntarily give up the ability to speak as the main means to express your feelings and thoughts. What about singing? I could never give that up!

Yet this group of monks has taken the vow of silence. Why? Because they believe that in this way they serve God on a more significant level - not only physically secluding themselves from people - but also abstaining from things that are second nature to us.

The monks of Latrun are not the first one to invent the practice of abstaining from common practices in the name of serving God.

In fact, in this week’s Torah portion Naso, we read about the Nazaraites, (described in the Torah as men or women) who voluntarily took a vow to abstain from - you ready? - drinking wine, cutting hair and touching a corpse or a grave.

Which one do you think is the hardest one to give up?

Upon completion of the “consecration” period, their head was shaved and they were anointed by the Cohen (priest) after bringing a sin offering (to make sure they are completely pure before God). Then the Nazarite would be “holy unto God”.

This sounds very similar to the way the monks and nuns take their vows before God, doesn’t it? As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word for a monk is “nazir”.

One may say that the *Nazirim* were God’s professional servants. Today of course, there are no *Nazirim*, but there are many people

in Judaism who choose to “serve” God on a “professional” level. While they (myself included) don’t take vows of abstinence, there are plenty of things that we - rabbis, cantors and educators - have to sacrifice.

For me, the biggest sacrifice is my time. For example, there are many nights in the week when I cannot have dinner with my family. Tony often complains that he feels lonely. Just yesterday I wanted to go to the Book Club at Shongum Lake but ended up staying home, knowing that it would result in yet another night that he will have to have dinner without me. As much as I wanted to go, I recognized that I also want to keep my husband happy.

When it comes to the weekends, there is rarely an opportunity to get away for the entire weekend, like many of you do. This means that leisure time spent with my family is limited due to my “career” sacrifices.

I can go on and on. But like Nazarites, I accept my vows happily because I am honored to serve our community and God.

Shelly, you too are now “joining the club, ” because serving in the position of educator - the principal of our religious school - means making personal sacrifices as well.

Are you ready to give up your Sunday mornings?

I hope you knew what you were getting into.

I am joking of course!

Even before your official acceptance of the role, you immersed yourself in learning about your new position by meeting with Jen and myself regularly, cleaning the art supply room, figuring out curriculum and so much more. Most importantly though, is that you are already a staple in our community. You attend our events, Torah Study and Shabbat and holiday services as well as offering your home to host the first “summer Friday Night in the

house”. And I am so happy to see how supportive you are of the students – I know you didn’t miss a single B’nai Mitzvah and you also attended confirmation.

Shelly, I am so happy that you will be stepping into the position of the Principal of our religious school. I am looking forward working with you and collaborating to make it even more vibrant, fun and rewarding for our wonderful children. You are a great addition to our team and our community.

And now, I would like to bestow a priestly benediction upon you. Coincidently, it is in this week’s Torah portion.

(Step over here please)

“May the Eternal bless you and keep you” (Numbers 6:24).

“May the Eternal cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you” (Numbers 6:25).

“May the Eternal show you favor and grant you peace” (Numbers 6:26).

Amen!