



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

נשא תשע"ט
Naso 5779

**Sages and
Saints**

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks for 5779*. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT NASO IN A NUTSHELL

Naso continues describing the preparations for the Israelites' journey from Sinai to the holy land. It contains a mix of laws, ranging from: the roles of two of the Levitical clans, Gershon and Merari, the census of the Levites as a

group, rules about the purity of the camp, the law of the *sotah*, the Nazir, and the Priestly blessing. The parsha concludes with a detailed account of the *korbanot* brought by the tribes at the dedication of the Mishkan.



THE CORE IDEA

Parshat Naso contains the law of the Nazir – the individual who undertakes the special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink alcohol (or anything made from grapes), not to have their hair cut, and to avoid contact with the dead (Bamidbar 6:1–21). Living as a Nazir was usually undertaken for a limited time period; the standard length was thirty days.

What the Torah does not make clear, though is firstly why a person might wish to undertake this form of abstinence, and secondly whether it considers this choice to be commendable, or merely permissible. On the one hand the Torah calls the Nazir “holy to God” (Bamidbar 6:8). On the other, it requires him, at the end of the period of his vow, to bring a sin offering (Bamidbar 6:13–14).

The rabbis of future generations would disagree on these questions. According to R. Elazar, and later to Ramban, the Nazir is praiseworthy. He has voluntarily undertaken a higher level of holiness. The Nazir, like the prophet, is a person especially close to God. The reason he had to bring a sin offering was that he was now returning to ordinary life. His sin was when he stopped being a Nazir.

R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. For them the sin was in becoming a Nazir in the first place,

because the Nazir denied himself some of the pleasures of the world God created and declared good. R. Eliezer added: “From this we may infer that if one who denies himself the enjoyment of wine is called a sinner, all the more so one who denies himself the enjoyment of other pleasures of life.”

The contradiction is this: Judaism strongly believes that God can be found in the physical world that He created. We are humans, earthly beings, but we can elevate our physical lives through the Torah laws. For instance, we can drink wine, but we do so with a special blessing, and to sanctify holy occasions. Judaism believes not in refusing pleasure but in sanctifying it. But the holy Nazir is careful to avoid indulging in the physical pleasures of this world.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think a person might wish to voluntarily abstain from these things and become a Nazir?
2. Do you connect more with the position of R. Elazar and Ramban or the opinion of R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel?
3. Do you see any Jews today living a life similar or inspired by that of the Nazir?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

Rambam lived a life of contrasts. We know from his writings that he longed for solitude, and there were years when he worked day and night to write his Commentary to the Mishna, and later the Mishneh Torah. But he also recognised his responsibilities to his family and to the community, and worked as a physician. His medical advice was in great demand. In his famous letter to the translator Ibn Tibbon, he gives an account of his typical day and week. Here is an excerpt:

I live in Fostat and the Sultan lives in Cairo; these two places are about one and a half miles from each other. My duties to the Sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning; and when he or any of his children, or members of the royal household are ill, I dare not leave Cairo, but must stay for most of the day in the palace. It also frequently happens that one or two of the royal officers fall sick, and I must see to their healing. So I generally arrive in Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon. Then I am almost faint with hunger. I find the waiting room filled with people, both Jews and Gentiles, nobles and common people, friends and strangers - a mixed mass, waiting for me.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, enter, and ask my patients to bear with me while I briefly eat, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I see to my patients, write prescriptions for their various illnesses. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even until two hours and more in the night. I talk to them while lying down from sheer fatigue, and when night falls, I am so exhausted that I can hardly speak.

Because of this no Israelite can have any private interview with me, except on Shabbat. Then the whole congregation visit me after the morning service. We study together a little until noon, and then they leave. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Rambam longed for solitude? Why do you think he gave up on his dream in this way?
2. In *Thinking More Deeply* below we see that Rambam had both a positive and negative view of the Nazir. Can you see these reflected in his lifestyle?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

In his book on law code, the Mishneh Torah, Rambam seems to take both a positive and negative approach to the Nazir. In the Hilchot Deot section, he adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer HaKappar: "A person may say: "Desire, honour, and the like are bad paths to follow and remove a person from the world; therefore I will completely separate myself from them and go to the other extreme." As a result, he does not eat meat or drink wine or take a wife or live in a decent house or wear decent clothing.... This too is bad, and it is forbidden to choose this way".

Yet in Hilchot Nezirut, Rambam rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of R. Elazar: "Whoever vows to God [to become a Nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy.... Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet."

How does any writer come to adopt contradictory positions in a single book, let alone one as resolutely logical as Rambam? The answer lies in a remarkable insight of Rambam into the nature of the moral life as understood by Judaism. What he saw is that there is not a single model of the virtuous life. He identifies two, calling them respectively the way of the saint (*Chassid*) and the way of the sage (*Chacham*).

The saint is a person of extremes. Rambam defines *chessed* as extreme behaviour – good behaviour, to be sure, but conduct in excess of what strict justice requires. So, for example, "If one avoids haughtiness to the utmost extent and becomes exceedingly humble, he is termed a saint [*chassid*]."

The sage is a different kind of person altogether. He or she follows the "golden mean," the "middle way," the way of moderation and balance. He or she avoids the extremes of cowardice on the one hand, recklessness on the other, and thus acquires the virtue of courage. He or she avoids miserliness in one direction, and excessive spending in the other, and instead chooses the middle way of generosity. The sage knows the twin dangers of too much and too little, excess and deficiency. He or she weighs the conflicting pressures and avoids the extremes.

These are not just two types of person but two ways of understanding the moral life itself. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create gracious relationships and a decent, just, compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. What makes Rambam so acute a thinker is that he realises that you cannot have both – that they are in fact different enterprises.

A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But what about the members of the saint's own family? They may suffer because of his extreme self-denial. A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint's country and its defence? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what then about the rule of law, and justice? Saints are supremely virtuous people, considered as individuals. Yet you cannot build a society out of saints alone. Indeed, saints are not really interested in society. They have chosen a different, lonely, self-segregating path.

It was this deep insight that led Rambam to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the Nazir. The Nazir has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. Much like a saint, a *chassid*, they have adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, and exemplary. That is why Rambam calls the Nazir "praiseworthy" and "the equal of a prophet."

But it is not the way of the sage – and you need sages if you seek to balance and perfect society. The sage is not an extremist –

because he or she realises that there are other people at stake. There are the members of one's own family as well as the others within one's community. There are colleagues at work. There is a country to defend and a society to help build. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. In a strange way, saintliness is a form of self-indulgence. We are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; in society not seclusion; to strive to create a balance among the conflicting pressures on us, not to focus on some while neglecting the others.

Hence, while from a personal perspective the Nazir is a saint, from a societal perspective he is, at least figuratively, a "sinner" who has to bring an atonement offering.

Now let us look again at Rambam, and the life he led. He often longed to be a saint, secluded in study and writing, but he knew he needed to honour his daily responsibilities to others, as a physician, a teacher and a leader. So he lived as a sage, and contributed vastly. That is a profound and moving choice, and one that still has the power to inspire us today.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

Dualism comes in many forms, not all of them dangerous. There is the Platonic dualism that differentiates sharply between mind and body, the spiritual and the physical. There is the theological dualism that sees two different supernatural forces at work in the universe. There is the moral dualism that sees good and evil as instincts within us between which we must choose. But there is also what I will call pathological dualism where people see humanity itself as radically, ontologically divided into the unimpeachably good and the irredeemably bad. According to this view, you are either one or the other: either one of the saved, the redeemed, the chosen, or the devil's disciple ...

In the light of this we begin to understand the moral force of monotheism. The belief in one God meant that all the conflicting forces operative in the universe were

encompassed by a single personality, the God of righteousness, who was sometimes just, sometimes forgiving, who spoke at times of law and at others of love. It was the refusal to split these things apart that made monotheism the humanising, civilising influence that, in the good times, it has been.

Not in God's Name, p. 54-67

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Is it possible to argue that the Nazir was someone that believed in a form of dualism?
2. How does monotheism combat dualism? How can this explain the opinion of R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel towards the Nazir?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Is being a Nazir a good or a bad thing?
2. What was Rambam's opinion on this?
3. Rambam introduces us to two models of moral life: the saint and the sage. Which one is better?
4. In Rambam's own life, did he demonstrate a tendency toward being a saint or a sage?
5. Which of these two models do you most connect with?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. The Nazir wishes to find a greater spiritual state through achieving a higher level of spiritual purity. He or she believes that the material world is a distraction to reaching this goal and so seeks to limit exposure to these sources of materialism. Nazirites ensure they do not become spiritually contaminated by coming into contact with death, they ignore their own physical appearance and do not tend to their hair, and they avoid wine which represents the potential for physical enjoyment to become hedonistic, focused only on physical enjoyment.
2. Each of these approaches are legitimate, and hence represented in the Talmudic debate and in Rambam's writings and the way he lived his life (see *It Once Happened* and *Thinking More Deeply*).
3. Using the language that Rambam gives us (see *Thinking More Deeply*) the pious saint who wishes to seclude himself from society in order to achieve greater levels of holiness and spirituality can be seen in the Ultra-Orthodox community for example. However, it is important to reflect on the statement "you cannot build a society out of saints alone".

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. Rambam was arguably one of the greatest Jewish thinkers in history. He was a philosopher and an expert in Jewish Law. He longed to have time and tranquility to think and write, and impact the Jewish (and non-Jewish world) through his writings. But he felt a deep responsibility to his community, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Perhaps he also understood the danger that philosophy and Jewish law can become too abstract when not grounded in the experience of real people and real life.
2. While he longed for solitude (like the Saint, or the Nazir) to think and write and about Jewish philosophy and Jewish law he led a life firmly grounded in the real world as he used every available moment in his day and week to serve his community and live among the people (like a true Sage).

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Dualism is the division of something conceptually into two opposed or contrasted aspects. In this respect the Nazir does seem to find the material world in a stark and opposed contrast to the spiritual world. However, this is not quite the same as considering these as good and evil, each with its own independent force. This approach is dangerously close to idolatry of some sort, and no one is claiming that of the Nazir. However there are many that would argue that not seeing any good, or potential good, in the physical world, is an antithetical position to Judaism.
2. Monotheism asserts that everything was created by only one God, and therefore has inherent goodness, or at the very least potential goodness. The only source of evil in the world is when humans exercise his freewill to that end, and even then we can say our freewill also comes from God, and does not exist independently of Him. Perhaps we can suggest that the opinion of R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel is that the sin of the Nazir is the rejection of the physical world, which has come from an inability, or refusal, to see the potential good in all things.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
2. We see two different approaches in the Talmudic discussion. R. Elazar and later Ramban felt the Nazir is praiseworthy for voluntarily undertaking a higher level of holiness. R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel held the opposite position; the Nazir denied himself some of the pleasures of the world God created and declared good and for this was chastised.
3. Rambam seems to hold both viewpoints on the Nazir, taking both a positive and negative approach in his law code the Mishneh Torah. We can conclude from this that both approaches are legitimate, and represent ideals in Judaism.
4. The fact that he takes both a negative and positive approach to the Nazir leads us to believe that he sanctions both the sage and the saint as two legitimate paths to a fulfilled Jewish life. Which one to choose will depend on the needs of the individual and his community.
5. See *It Once Happened* answers 1 and 2.