



Parasha Naso
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Maimonides on Nezirut

Parashat Naso introduces the concept of *nezirut*, the vow made by an individual forbidding upon himself to partake of wine, come in contact with a human corpse, and cut his hair. Different passages in the Midrash and Talmud reflect different attitudes toward *nezirut* and, more generally, toward the voluntary abstention from worldly delights. In one particularly famous Talmudic passage (Nazir 3a, Nedarim 10a), the Gemara cites Rabbi Elazar Ha-kapar as going so far as describing voluntary abstention a sin. The Torah (6:14) requires a *nazir* to bring a sin-offering upon completing his term of *nezirut*, and Rabbi Elazar explains that the *nazir* needs atonement for abstaining from wine. Rabbi Elazar then adds, “If this [person], who denied himself only wine, is called a sinner, then all the more so [this is true of] somebody who denies himself all things!” According to Rabbi Elazar, the “sinful” nature of *nezirut* demonstrates the Torah’s disdain for voluntary measures that one undertakes to deny himself the delights the world has to offer.

Maimonides, in a famous chapter in his *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Dei’ot, chapter 3), cites Rabbi Elazar’s comments as an ancient rabbinic source for the value of moderate conduct. He writes:

A person might say: Since envy, desire, honor and the like are negative modes of conduct and remove a person from the world, I shall withdraw from them in the extreme and move away to the opposite end, to the point where I will not eat meat, drink wine, marry a woman, live in a nice residence or wear nice clothing – but I shall rather wear sackcloth and stiff wool and the like, similar to the pagan priests. This, too, is a negative mode of conduct and it is forbidden to adopt it. One who follows this path is called a sinner, for it says regarding a *nazir*, “he shall atone for him for having sinned regarding his soul” (6:11). The Sages said: If a *nazir*, who abstained only from wine, requires atonement, then all the more so [is this true of] somebody who denies himself all things.

Maimonides thus views Rabbi Elazar’s admonition within the broader context of the “value of the mean,” the requirement to conduct oneself with moderation and not resort to extreme measures.

It is interesting to note that Maimonides introduces his comments with a reference to the Mishna’s comment in Masekhet Avot (4:21), “Envy, desire and honor remove a person from the world” (“*Ha-kin’a ve-ha-ta’ava ve-ha-kavod motzi’in et ha-adam min ha-olam*”). This Mishna establishes the dangers of these three human tendencies, each of which threatens to consume a person and become his life’s obsession. Not coincidentally, perhaps, the Mishna attributes this statement to none other than Rabbi

Elazar Ha-kapar – the same scholar who condemns the *nazir* for voluntarily abstaining from wine. (This observation was made by Rabbi Dr. Ephraim Kanarfogel, in an article published in the journal *Hadarom*, vol. 59, p. 79.) Specifically Rabbi Elazar, who emphasized the dangers of preoccupation with pleasure and vanity, also warned against excessive self-denial. The same rabbi who alerted us to the hazards of lust discourages asceticism in the strongest of terms.

It was perhaps this pair of comments made by Rabbi Elazar Ha-kapar that led Maimonides to this conclusion that despite the fact that, in his words, “envy, desire, honor and the like are negative modes of conduct and remove a person from the world,” moderation is nevertheless the ideal model of behavior. The dangers of indulgence do not justify resorting to extreme measures of abstinence, and the dangers of honor do not warrant self-humiliation. The way to ensure that envy, desire, honor do not “remove a person from the world” is not to resort to the opposite extremes, but rather by living a life of moderation and conducting oneself in a calculated, balanced manner at all times.

Maimonides likely observed that the same Rabbi Elazar who perceptively recognized the ills of preoccupation with vanity also opposed self-imposed abstention. Rabbi Elazar’s two remarks thus represent the ideal of moderation that Maimonides so strongly championed and saw as the ideal mode of conduct one should follow.