



Parashat Naso

Parashat Naso features the obligation of *viduy*, to verbally confess to one's wrongdoing as part of the process of repentance. This section begins with the verse, "A man or woman who commits any of the sins of man, in betrayal of the Lord, and that soul bears guilt..." (5:6). The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 8) understands this verse as referring to not only one who actually commits a transgression, but also one who merely contemplates sin: "...who considered committing [a sin] but did not commit; this teaches you that from the moment a person considers sinning [he is deemed as though] he betrays God."

At first glance, this Midrashic passage stands in contrast to a more familiar comment in the Talmud (Masekhet Kiddushin 40a), which distinguishes between *mitzvot* and transgressions with respect to the status of *machashava* – intent that does not materialize. The Talmud states that if a person sincerely intends to perform a *mitzva* but fails to do so due to circumstances beyond his control, he is nevertheless credited with a *mitzva*. An attempted sinner, by contrast, is not held accountable unless his intent materializes; even if he fails to commit the given transgressions by force of circumstances beyond his control, he nevertheless does not face the consequences of committing a sin.

How might we reconcile the Gemara's comment with the aforementioned passage in the Midrash, which speaks of even the intent to commit a sin as a "betrayal" (*me'ila*) against God?

Rav Yehuda Ginsburg, in his work *Yalkut Yehuda* (Denver, 1934), notes that the two passages are easily reconciled in light of Maimonides' discussion in the sixth chapter of his introduction to Masekhet Avot (known as *Shemona Perakim*). Maimonides there addresses a basic question concerning the proper attitude towards the Torah's laws. Should a person strive to reach the point where he experiences no desire whatsoever to transgress the Torah, where Torah observance poses no emotional challenge or struggle? Or, is it more admirable for a person to experience temptation, to feel driven to violate the Torah, but to suppress his desires and inclinations in submission to divine authority? On the one hand, one might argue that one far more clearly demonstrates his loyalty to God and acceptance of divine authority if he is instinctively drawn after sin but restrains this instinct. On the other hand, if the Torah's laws represent important religious values, we should perhaps work towards making these laws an inherent part of our characters, to the point where we could not even conceive of acting any differently.

Maimonides answers this question by distinguishing between intuitive laws, which mankind would legislate even without a Torah, and those laws that people would not have intuitively concluded upon had it not been for the Torah. When it comes to issues such as murder, theft and deception, it is far nobler for a person to not experience any desire for such crimes, and to rather act naturally with compassion and sensitivity. Regarding, however, the laws that mankind could not have been expected to intuit without the Torah – such as the restrictions of *kashrut*, for example – it is commendable for a person to feel the need to restrain his natural instincts. With regard to these laws, a person demonstrates his fealty to God specifically by feeling inclined to commit the given transgression and suppressing this inclination in submission to God's authority.

This distinction can easily be applied to the two passages cited above. When the Gemara asserts that God does not hold one accountable for the mere intention to commit a violation, it perhaps refers only to the second category of sins – those which one is expected to be driven to commit. But the Midrash in Parashat Naso refers to the area of intuitive laws; indeed, *Chazal* explain this section in Parashat Naso as speaking specifically as a case of theft. Regarding such crimes, a person is said to "betray" God the moment he even conceives of this act, which a person should never look upon as approaching the realm of possible conduct.