

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



Two Versions of the Moral Life

Naso - 30 May 2015 / 12 Sivan 5775

The parsha of Naso contains the laws relating to the nazirite – an individual who undertook, usually for a limited period of time, to observe special rules of holiness and abstinence: not to drink wine or other intoxicants (including anything made from grapes), not to have his hair cut and not to defile himself by contact with the dead.

The Torah does not make a direct evaluation of the nazirite. On the one hand it calls him “holy to God” (Num. 6: 8). On the other, it rules that when the period comes to an end the nazirite has to bring a sin offering (Num. 6: 13-14), as if he had done something wrong.

This led to a fundamental disagreement between the rabbis in Mishnaic, Talmudic and medieval times. According to Rabbi Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the nazirite is worthy of praise. He has voluntarily chosen a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos (2: 11) says, “I raised up some of your sons for prophets, and your young men for nazirites,” suggesting that the nazirite, 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. The sin lay in *ceasing to be* a nazirite.

Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. The sin lay in *becoming* a nazirite in the first place, thereby denying himself some of the pleasures of the world God created and declared good. Rabbi 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.”¹

¹ Taanit 11a; Nedarim 10a.

Clearly the argument is not merely textual. It is substantive. It is about asceticism, the life of self-denial. Almost every religion knows the phenomenon of people who, in pursuit of spiritual purity, withdraw from the pleasures and temptations of the world. They live in caves, retreats, hermitages, monasteries. The Qumran sect known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls may have been such a movement.

In the Middle Ages there were Jews who adopted similar self-denial – among them the Hassidei Ashkenaz, the Pietists of Northern Europe, as well as many Jews in Islamic lands. In retrospect it is hard not to see in these patterns of behaviour at least some influence from the non-Jewish environment. The Hassidei Ashkenaz who flourished during the time of the Crusades lived among self-mortifying Christians. Their southern counterparts may have been familiar with Sufism, the mystical movement in Islam.

The ambivalence of Jews toward the life of self-denial may therefore lie in the suspicion that it entered Judaism from the outside. There were ascetic movements in the first centuries of the Common Era in both the West (Greece) and the East (Iran) that saw the physical world as a place of corruption and strife. They were, in fact, dualists, holding that the true God was not the creator of the universe. The physical world was the work of a lesser, and evil, deity. The two best known movements to hold this view were Gnosticism in the West and Manichaeism in the East. So at least some of the negative evaluation of the nazirite may have been driven by a desire to discourage Jews from imitating non-Jewish practices.

What is more puzzling is the position of Maimonides, who holds *both* views, positive and negative, in the same book, his law code the *Mishneh Torah*. In *The Laws of Ethical Character*, he adopts the negative position of R. Eliezer ha-Kappari: “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.”²

Yet in *The Laws of the Nazirite* he rules in accordance with the positive evaluation of Rabbi Elazar: “Whoever vows to G-d [to become a nazirite] by way of holiness, does well and is praiseworthy . . . Indeed Scripture considers him the equal of a prophet.”³ How does any writer come to adopt contradictory positions in a single book, let alone one as resolutely logical as Maimonides?

The answer lies in one of Maimonides’ most original insights. He holds that there are two quite different ways of living the moral life. He calls them respectively the way of the saint (*hassid*) and the sage (*hakham*).

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The sage follows the “golden mean,” the “middle way.” The moral life is a matter of moderation and balance, charting a course between too much and too little. Courage, for example, lies midway between cowardice and recklessness. Generosity lies between profligacy and miserliness. This is very similar to the vision of the moral life as set out by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

² Hilkhot Deot 3:1.

³ Hilkhot Nezirut 10: 14.

The saint, by contrast, does not follow the middle way. He or she tends to extremes, fasting rather than simply eating in moderation, embracing poverty rather than acquiring modest wealth, and so on.

At various points in his writings, Maimonides explains why people might embrace extremes. One reason is repentance and character transformation.⁴ So a person might cure himself of pride by practicing, for a while, extreme self-abasement. Another is the asymmetry of the human personality. The extremes do not exert an equal pull. Cowardice is more common than recklessness, and miserliness than over-generosity, which is why the *hassid* leans in the opposite direction. A third reason is the lure of the surrounding culture. This may be so opposed to religious values that pious people choose to separate themselves from the wider society, “clothing themselves in woollen and hairy garments, dwelling in the mountains and wandering about in the wilderness,” differentiating themselves by their extreme behaviour.

This is a very nuanced presentation. There are times, for Maimonides, when self-denial is therapeutic, others when it is factored into Torah law itself, and yet others when it is a response to an excessively hedonistic age. In general, though, Maimonides rules that we are *commanded* to follow the middle way, whereas the way of the saint is *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*, beyond the strict requirement of the law.⁵

Moshe Halbertal, in his recent, impressive study of Maimonides,⁶ sees him as finessing the fundamental tension between the civic ideal of the Greek political tradition and the spiritual ideal of the religious radical for whom, as the Kotzker Rebbe said, “The middle of the road is for horses.” To the *hassid*, Maimonides’ sage can look like a “self-satisfied bourgeois.”

Essentially, these are *two ways of understanding the moral life itself*. Is the aim of the moral life to achieve personal perfection? Or is it to create a decent, just and compassionate society? The intuitive answer of most people would be to say: both. That is what makes Maimonides so acute a thinker. He realises that you can’t have both. They are in fact different enterprises.

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A saint may give all his money away to the poor. But what about the members of the saint’s own family? A saint may refuse to fight in battle. But what about the saint’s own country? A saint may forgive all crimes committed against him. But what 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. Ultimately, saints are not really interested in society. Their concern is the salvation of the soul.

This deep insight is what led Maimonides to his seemingly contradictory evaluations of the nazirite. The nazirite has chosen, at least for a period, to adopt a life of extreme self-denial. He is a saint, a *hassid*. He has adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable and exemplary.

⁴ See his *Eight Chapters* (the introduction to his commentary on Mishnah, Avot), ch. 4, and *Hilkhot Deot*, chapters 1, 2, 5 and 6.

⁵ *Hilkhot Deot* 1: 5.

⁶ Moshe Halbertal, *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, Princeton University Press, 2014, 154-163.

But it is not the way of the sage – and *you need sages if you seek to 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 and the others within one's own community. There is a country to defend and an economy to sustain. The sage knows he or she cannot leave all these commitments behind to pursue a life of solitary virtue. For 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.

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

Maimonides lived the life he preached. We know from his writings that he longed for seclusion. There were years when he worked day and night to write his Commentary to the Mishnah, and later the Mishneh Torah. Yet he also recognised his responsibilities to his family and to the community. In his famous letter to his would-be translator Ibn Tibbon, he gives him an account of his typical day and week, in which he had to carry a double burden as a world-renowned physician and an internationally sought halakhist and sage. He worked to exhaustion. There were times when he was almost too busy to study from one week to the next. Maimonides was a sage who longed to be a saint – but knew he could not be, if he was to honour his responsibilities to his people. That seems to me a profound judgment, and one still relevant to Jewish life today.

Not In God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence

Rabbi Sacks' new book is published in the UK on 11th June, 2015. Order your copy now from Amazon.

Despite predictions of continuing secularization, the twenty-first century has witnessed a surge of religious extremism and violence in the name of God.

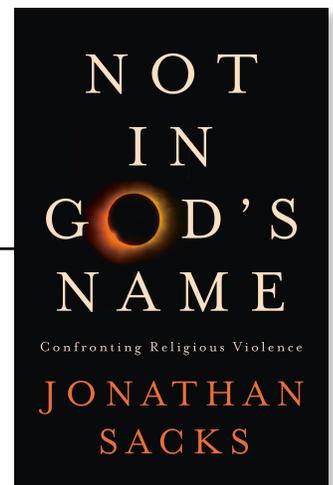
In this powerful and timely book, Jonathan Sacks explores the roots of violence and its relationship to religion, focusing on the historic tensions between the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Drawing on arguments from evolutionary psychology, game theory, history, philosophy, ethics and theology, Sacks shows how a tendency to violence can subvert even the most compassionate of religions.

Through a close reading of key biblical texts at the heart of the Abrahamic faiths, Sacks then challenges those who claim that religion is intrinsically a cause of violence, and argues that theology must become part of the solution if it is not to remain at the heart of the problem.

This book is a rebuke to all those who kill in the name of the God of life, wage war in the name of the God of peace, hate in the name of the God of love, and practise cruelty in the name of the God of compassion.

For the sake of humanity and the free world, the time has come for people of all faiths and none to stand together and declare: Not In God's Name.



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