Parshat Naso contains the law of the Nazirite – the individual who undertook 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 (Num. 6:1–21). Such a state was usually undertaken for a limited period; the standard length was thirty days. There were exceptions, most famously Samson and Samuel who, because of the miraculous nature of their birth, were consecrated before their birth as Nazirites for life.

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 Nazirite “holy to God” (Num. 6:8). On the other, it requires him, at the end of the period of his vow, to bring a sin offering (Num. 6:13–14).

This led to an ongoing disagreement between the Rabbis in Mishnaic, Talmudic, and medieval times. According to R. Elazar, and later to Nahmanides, the Nazirite is praiseworthy. He has voluntarily undertaken a higher level of holiness. The prophet Amos (2:11) said, “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. His sin lay in ceasing to be a Nazirite.

R. Eliezer HaKappar and Shmuel held the opposite opinion. For them the sin lay in becoming a Nazirite in the first place and thereby denying 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.”
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 kinds of self-denial – among them the Chasidei 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 Chasidei 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 towards 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. Therefore God – the true God – is not to be found in the physical world and its enjoyments but rather in disengagement from them.

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. Judaism strongly believes that God is to be found in the midst of the physical world that He created that is, in the first chapter of Genesis, seven times pronounced “good.” It believes not in renouncing pleasure but in sanctifying it.

What is much 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 Hilchot Deot, 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 he 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 Maimonides?

“Judaism believes not in renouncing pleasure but in sanctifying it.”
The answer lies in a remarkable insight of Maimonides into the nature of the moral life as understood by
Judaism. What Maimonides 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. Maimonides 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, prodigality 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 Maimonides 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. I know no moral philosopher who makes this point as clearly as Maimonides – not Plato or
Aristotle, not Descartes or Kant.

It was this deep insight that 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 chassid. He has
adopted the path of personal perfection. That is noble, commendable, and exemplary. That is why Maimonides
calls him “praiseworthy” and “the equal of a prophet.”

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 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 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 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 halachist and sage. He worked to exhaustion.

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 is a profound and moving judgement, and one that still has the power to inspire today.

Shabbat Shalom.

“We are called on by God to live in the world, not escape from it; in society not seclusion...”