

# ONEG SHABBAS

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Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

## A Return to Normalcy: The Case of the *Nazir*

In this week's Torah portion, we have the intriguing section about the *nazir* (or Nazirite, as it is often translated into English). This person is someone who seeks to elevate in holiness to the Lord by refraining from a few activities. One of these activities is abstaining from alcoholic beverages (Num. 6:2-3):

Speak to the Israelites and say to them: "If any man or woman explicitly utters a nazirite's vow, to set themselves apart for The LORD, they shall abstain from wine and beer; they shall drink neither wine vinegar nor beer vinegar, neither shall they drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried."

דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם איש או אשה כי יפלא לנדב נדר נזיר להזיר לה: מין ושכר יזיר תמץ יין וחסמץ שכר לא ישתה וכל משרת ענבים לא ישתה וענבים לחים ויבשים לא יאכל



### Distancing

One of the most fascinating aspects of this section is that this refraining begins with the beverages (beer & wine), to abstaining from drinking their respective vinegars, to even not eating grapes. While we might have expected the avoidance of drinking wine or beer, the verse does not even feel the need to state that a *nazir* will not drink these beverages, since there is this huge aversion to them. Indeed, as Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (1040-1105) describes this huge separation (ד"ה נדר נזיר):

The term נזיר wherever it occurs denotes "keeping aloof from something"; here, too, it means that he separates away from wine.

Going beyond this separation is that a *nazir* is to abstain from drinking even their vinegars, as Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (1089-1167) writes (אבן עזרא על במדבר ו"ג, ד"ה חומץ יין):

In order to place a barrier to distance oneself from wine entirely.

So this seeking to distance from drinking does not even stop with their vinegars, as we read of even abstaining from drinking anything in which grapes have been steeped, which is even another layer of a drinking prohibition(!).

And ultimately even abstaining from eating grapes, which is far removed from even drinking wine or beer, is off-limits. Clearly, there is a great deal of seeking quite the distancing, not only from drinking such beverages, but even from coming into contact with wine, as it is meant to be drunk, but even in both its raw and spoiled states.

### Motivation

Perhaps one of the most well-known insights on the topic of *nazir* is that of Rabbi Yehudah, the Prince (135-217), who stated (*Berakhot* 63a & *Sotah* 2a):

It was taught: Rabbi says: "Why was the portion of a *nazir* placed adjacent to the portion of a *sotah*? To tell you that anyone who sees a *sotah* in her disgrace should renounce wine."

In expanding upon Rabbi's statement here, Rabbi Menahem ben Solomon HaMeiri (1249-1315) commented (מאירי על ברכות סג, ד"ה לעולם יזהר אדם):



A person should always be careful not to pursue desires excessively. And, if one has become drawn into them, they should strive to correct themselves by leaning toward the opposite extreme, as is known from the words of the sages. Even one who sees others who, because of their excessive pursuit of desires, were led to disgraceful behavior, should be cautious of the things that brought their companions to such disgraceful acts. This is what Rabbi meant when he said: "Whoever sees a woman suspected of adultery in her disgrace should vow to abstain from wine."

שלא להמשך אחר התאוות יותר מדאי ואם נמשך בהם ישתדל ברפואתו על דרך נטייה אל הקצה האחרון כמו שנודע מדברי החכמים ואף הרואה באחרים שמרוב המשכם אחר תאוותם הביאים לידי דברים מגונים ראוי לו להזהר מן הדברים שסבבו לחבריו אותן הדברים המגונים והוא שאמרנו כל הרואה סוטה בקלקולה יזיר עצמו מן היין

This is certainly a fascinating consideration. As pointed out by Dr. Isaac Gottlieb, there is a clever wisdom here ("Why the Nazirite Laws Follow those of Sotah", *TheTorah.com* (26 May 2015)):

As in most midrashic juxtaposition, the end result is a moral teaching: if one is intoxicated, his or her chance to be involved in illicit sex is much greater. If people abstain from wine, as nazirite men and women are commanded to do, they stand a better chance of avoiding such temptation. This is the reason the two laws are juxtaposed.

However, Rabbi ibn Ezra is not entirely happy with this approach, as he suggests an alternative (אבן עזרא על במדבר ה'ל"א, ד"ה ונקה האיש מעון):

In my opinion, this was juxtaposed on account of the naziritess is the better opposite of the unfaithful wife, since most transgressions are found to have been caused by wine.

ולפי דעתי כי נסמכה בעבור נזירת האשה שהיא הפך המועלת כי רובי העבירות סבתם היין

Whereas we often consider the *nazir* to be a man who abstains from wine, considering this woman as abstaining from wine, keeping her from straying is certainly a clever insight.

Moreover, Rabbi ibn Ezra provides a simple reason for becoming a *nazir* (אבן עזרא על במדבר ו"ב, ד"ה נזיר):

To distance himself from lust. He does this in order to serve God, for wine destroys reason and the proper service of God.

מגירת וינדרו שירחיק מהתאוות ועשה זה לעבודת השם כי היין משחית הדעת ועבודת השם

In addition to abstaining from wine, as it causes many transgressions, Rabbi ibn Ezra points out that it both distances one from sexual transgressions, as well as wine destroys both reason and serving God.

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## A Positive Perspective: The Case of Maimonides

A more positive description of the *nazir* is that of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204) (popularly known as either Rambam and/or Maimonides), who wrote (*Guide to the Perplexed* Part III, ch. 48 (adapted from Lieberman's 2024 translation)):

The reason for Nazirship is quite clear - to promote abstinence from wine, the ruin of many a man in modern times as in ancient times. "Many...and mighty are those laid low by it" (Prov. 7:26), "They, too, stagger with wine" (Is. 28:7). The well-known ban on anything derived from the vine expands the rules of Nazirship, encouraging folk to use as little wine as possible. The one who abstains is called holy and ranked in sanctity next to the High Priest.	ואמא עלה אלניזרות פבינה ג'דא ויהי אלתייהידי פי שרב אלכ'מר אלד'י קד אהלך אלאלוין ואלאכ'רין רבים ועצומים כל הרגיו וגם אלה ביין שגו וגו' פג'א מן חכם אלניזרות מא תראה מן תחרים מכל אשר יצא מגפן היין אבעאדא זאידא חתי יקתצר אלנאס מנה עלי אלצ'רורי לאן אלד'י יל'תבה סמי קדוש ואלחק בדרג'ה הכן גדול
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Reading all of these seems to point to one seeking to abstain from wine as a nazirite or as a naziritess would be in order to refrain from sexual transgression, to serve God properly, and/or to seek holiness. These are certainly laudatory reasons.

## Sin-Offering

Despite having read of these positive approaches to a nazir abstaining from drinking, we also read that, at the end of the nazirite's term (Num. 6:13), this person brings, amongst other aspects of offerings, an unblemished one-year old ewe lamb for a sin-offering (Num. 6:14). This is quite startling, since one would expect there to be no sinning taking place for such a person who has sought a greater holiness. Yet, there is a sin-offering taking place.

A Talmudic teaching on this sin-offering that may resonate with readers of this publication is that of a late second century rabbi (*Ta'anit* 11a & *Nedarim* 10a (and cf. unattributed: ל"א"י: (ספרי במדבר ל"א"י)):

It was taught: Rabbi Elazar HaKappar the Great says: "What is to be learned from the verse, 'And he will atone for him for that he sinned by the soul' (Num. 6:11)? But with what soul did this sin? Rather, that he distressed himself [when he abstained] from wine."	תניא: רבי אלעזר הקפר ברבי אומר, מה תלמוד לומר: "וְיָכַפֵּר עָלָיו מִאֲשֶׁר חָטָא עַל הַנַּפְשׁוֹ, וְכִי בְאִיזָה נִפְשׁוֹ חָטָא זֶה? אֵלָּא שֶׁצִּיעֵר עַצְמוֹ מִן הַיַּיִן."
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This is certainly a very resonant approach to many, if not most, readers of this publication. However, another approach found in our tradition is that espoused by Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270), who argued (רמב"ן על במדבר ו"י"א):

The reason why a Nazirite must bring a sin-offering when the days of his Naziritehood are fulfilled has not been explained. In accordance with the plain meaning of Scripture, [it is because] this man sins against his soul on the day of completion of his Naziritehood; for, until now, he was separated in sanctity and the service of God, and he should, therefore, have remained separated forever, continuing all his life consecrated and sanctified to his God, as it is said, "And I raised up of your sons for prophets, and of your young men for Nazirites" (Amos 2:11), where Scripture compares the Nazirite to a	וטעם החטאת שיקריב הנזיר ביום מלאת ימי נדרו לא נתפרש. ועל דרך הפשט כי האיש הזה חוטא נפשו במלאת הנזירות כי הוא עתה נזור מקדושתו ועבודת השם וראוי היה לו שיוזר לעולם ויעמוד כל ימיו נזיר וקדוש לאלהיו כענין שאמר (עמוס ב יא) ואקים מבניכם לנביאים ומבחורכם לנזירים. השוה אותו
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prophet, and as it is written, "All the days of his Naziritehood he is holy unto the Eternal" (Num. 6:8). Thus [when he completes his Naziritehood and returns to his normal life], he requires atonement, since he goes back to be defiled by the desires of the world.	הכתוב לנביא וכדכתיב (במדבר ו'ח'): כל ימי נדרו קדוש הוא ל'ה' והנה הוא צריך כפרה בשובו להטמא בתאוות העולם
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Clearly, these are two very opposite approaches, yet both within our tradition.

## Ritualizing a Return to Normal Life

As part of the process for this person concluding their term of naziritehood, in addition to bringing a variety of offerings (Num. 6:13-15), this person takes part in doing the three things he/she vowed to not do, beginning with cutting their hair, which is also included in the offering (Num. 6:18). While one of the abstentions of the nazirite and naziritess is avoiding human corpses, there is clearly no way to offer up a human as a sacrifice; however, seemingly in lieu of a human corpse, these animal offerings are certainly a fitting stand-in for such an interaction. Finally, in addition to the wine that is used for libating to God (Num. 6:17), the nazirite/naziritess now drinks wine (Num. 6:20):

... after that, the nazirite drinks wine. וְאַתֵּר יִשְׁתֶּה הַנְּזִיר יַיִן

What seems striking is that this clear, direct statement should seem to be a prescriptive mitzvah, which is to say that this person now needs to consume wine at this point in the ritual in order to fully fulfill the ritual, perhaps demonstrating a finality to this entire process.

## ...Or Just a Possibility?

While this seems to be the way to read the verse, our sages decided not to understand this activity this way. In fact, they merely understood this verse as describing the ability for this person coming out of their naziritehood in this way (*Mishnah Nazir* 6:9):

...and, afterward, the nazirite is permitted to drink wine... וְאַתֵּר כִּךְ הֵתֵר הַנְּזִיר לְשִׁתוֹת יַיִן

How does a clear act of doing something become merely a possibility? In the book of Numbers, we previously read of the *sotah* being given water to drink - וְאַתֵּר יִשְׁקֶה אֶת הָאִשָּׁה אֶת הַמַּיִם - (Num. 5:26) - and there is no mere possibility of her being given that water to drink, it is actually part of the step-by-step procedure for her. Furthermore, we find three further instances of the use of וְאַתֵּר in this book, all happening to involve water, whether marking the exact moment Miriam can be readmitted to the camp after her seven days of isolation (Num. 12:14), dictating that priests (Num. 19:7) and returning soldiers (Num. 31:24) must wash their garments and bodies before stepping back into communal spaces, וְאַתֵּר is part of any of these processes. It would seem to be that, despite the literary context of the book of Numbers laying out this person procedurally consuming wine at this point of the process, the rabbis innovated that this wine-drinking was merely a possibility, but not a necessity. Nowadays, when one reads an English translation, one encounters the translation that the nazirite/naziritess merely may drink wine.

## Conclusion

While one who vows to abstain from wine and may achieve a higher holiness to God, they also miss out on wine. Ultimately, when their term concludes, no matter how holy they were during their time as a nazirite or naziritess, they are obligated to offer - amongst other offerings - a sin-offering, either because of their having caused them the distress of missing out on wine or on account of coming back down to a material level. And this period of refraining from wine is not meant to be forever, as there is an end in sight, for which this person is expected to drink wine as part of this ritual, although it may also be seen as merely the ability to drink wine following this period's conclusion, ultimately returning them to regular life (including drinking).

L'chaim 

