Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Naso

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Naso:

The Nazir — Restraint or Crown?

The Torah's presentation of the Nazir (Numbers 6:1–21) invites a fundamental question: is *nezirut* primarily a discipline of restraint, or an ascent to a higher, crowned sanctity? The answer emerges from the Torah's own language, which points simultaneously in two directions.

On the one hand, as Ibn Ezra observes, *nazir* is cognate with *neder*—a vow of abstention. The Nazir is one who refrains, most prominently from wine (Numbers 6:3–4). This aligns with a broader biblical pattern in which separation functions as a boundary against excess or impurity (cf. Leviticus 15:31). From this perspective, the Nazir is defined by deliberate restraint.

On the other hand, the very same root yields a different meaning. In Deuteronomy 33:16, *nezir ehav* refers to one "set apart," even "elect," among his brothers. Likewise, the Torah describes the Nazir's hair as a *nezer*, a "crown" (Numbers 6:7–8). As Jacob Milgrom notes, the term also appears in the laws of the sabbatical year to describe an untrimmed vine (Leviticus 25:5, 11), suggesting that the Nazir's uncut hair is not incidental but central. It is a visible, organic sign of consecration. Indeed, in Jeremiah 7:29, the term *nezer* itself denotes hair,

reinforcing the centrality of the Nazir's uncut growth. The Nazir, then, is not only one who abstains, but one who is "crowned" through that abstention.

These two meanings—withdrawal and elevation—generate two distinct perspectives on *nezirut*.

I. The Nazir as a Discipline of Restraint

Rambam, in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III:48), emphasizes the dimension of restraint. For Rambam, the prohibition of wine is the primary feature of *nezirut*. The Torah introduces wine first (Numbers 6:3) and then extends the prohibition to all grape products (6:4), before turning to hair and corpse impurity. The structure suggests that wine is the axis around which the institution revolves.

This reading is reinforced by the rabbinic linkage between Nazir and Sotah, the suspected adulteress whose laws immediately precede this passage (Numbers 5:11–31). One who witnesses the degradation of the Sotah is moved to accept *nezirut*, abstaining from wine (Sotah 2a). Wine, in this view, leads to loosened inhibitions and potential moral failure; *nezirut* serves as a corrective discipline. It is a framework for regaining control.

From this vantage point, the Nazir is not primarily ascending to a new level of sanctity, but rather guarding against human weakness. *Nezirut* is temporary, reactive, and therapeutic. It addresses a moral danger by imposing structured limits. The Nazir withdraws in order to stabilize.

II. The Nazir as a Crowned Figure of Holiness

In contrast, Ibn Ezra and Abarbanel emphasize the *nezer*—the crown. Here, the Nazir is not merely avoiding sin, but entering a heightened state of sanctity, one

that parallels the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest.

The textual parallels are striking. Like the High Priest, the Nazir may not become impure even for close relatives (Numbers 6:7–8; cf. Leviticus 21:11). The Torah explains this prohibition with the phrase, “for the crown of his God is upon his head” (Numbers 6:7), echoing the language of the High Priest’s consecration (Leviticus 21:12). Even the High Priest’s golden frontlet, the *tzitz*, is called a *nezer* (Exodus 29:6–7).

In this light, *nezirut* emerges as a voluntary assumption of priestly-like holiness. The Nazir becomes, for a limited time, a kind of private High Priest. His uncut hair serves as his crown, marking him as consecrated. He lives in a state of continuous sanctity, not merely during moments of ritual service.

This perspective also sheds light on a halakhic nuance. The Mishnah (Nazir 6:5) teaches that violations of corpse impurity or hair restrictions disrupt the Nazir’s status, whereas drinking wine, though prohibited, does not terminate the *nezirut* in the same way. This suggests that the defining core of *nezirut* lies not only in abstention from wine, but in the sustained state of consecration symbolized by the *nezer*.

III. Institution and Spontaneity

The comparison to the Kohen Gadol highlights a deeper distinction. The High Priest’s sanctity is institutional: it derives from his role, is regulated by precise norms, and serves the entire nation. The Nazir’s sanctity, by contrast, is voluntary and personal. It is an individual’s decision to enter a heightened religious state.

This contrast is reflected in their respective treatments of hair. The High Priest must remain meticulously groomed; the Talmud even prescribes a regular haircut schedule to maintain an appearance appropriate for Temple service (Ta’anit 17a). His sanctity is expressed through order and formality.

The Nazir, however, grows his hair *pera*, untrimmed and natural (Numbers 6:5). His sanctity is not institutional but organic. It emerges from within, through an act of personal commitment. As Rabbi Avia HaCohen suggests, *nezirut* represents a form of religious spontaneity—where an individual reaches beyond the baseline obligations of halakhah toward a self-chosen ideal.

IV. The Nazir Between Sotah and the Priestly Blessing

The placement of the Nazir passage sharpens its meaning. It appears immediately after the laws of Sotah (Numbers 5:11-31) and before the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:22–27).

In the Sotah ritual, the woman's hair is loosened (*u-para et rosh ha-ishah*, Numbers 5:18), symbolizing disgrace and moral breakdown. Hair here becomes a sign of degradation. The Nazir, by contrast, grows his hair as a sign of sanctity. The same physical feature—hair—can express either degradation or elevation. The Nazir transforms wild hair into a crown.

Immediately following, the Priests are commanded to bless the people. Their holiness is institutional, conferred from above. The Nazir stands between these two poles: he shares with the Sotah the centrality of hair, but redirects it toward sanctity; he shares with the Priests the quality of holiness, but achieves it through personal initiative rather than office.

As Ibn Ezra notes, the juxtaposition underscores that the Nazir, too, participates in holiness. But his path is distinct: it is chosen, not assigned.

V. Toward a Synthesis

These two perspectives—restraint and crown—need not be mutually exclusive. They may instead describe a progression.

Nezirut may begin as an act of restraint, a withdrawal from excess and a safeguard against moral failure. Yet that very withdrawal creates the conditions for transformation. The individual who separates from indulgence may come to experience a new form of sanctity. What begins as discipline becomes consecration.

In this sense, the Nazir embodies a broader religious possibility. Not everyone is called to the institutional holiness of the Kohen Gadol, and not everyone requires the corrective discipline of *nezirut*. Yet the Torah introduces *nezirut* to suggest that beyond the baseline demands of halakhah lies a space for voluntary ascent.

The Nazir is one who, for a time, lives as if crowned—set apart not only from what is forbidden, but for what is holy.