# Nazirites

## Medieval Judaism

The positions of Jewish sages in the Middle Ages can be described in relation to the Naziriteship according to their division into three groups; Commentators, halakhists and thinkers. In general, commentators saw the Naziriteship in a positive eye, while the halakhic authorities treated the Naziriteship with reservations and limited it. The views of the medieval thinkers in relation to the Naziriteship were generally determined in accordance with their principled approach to asceticism in general. It is difficult to find a correlation between the positions of these sages and their time and place, although some of them must have been influenced.

The Torah commentators in the Middle Ages saw the Naziriteship as a positive phenomenon that was intended to dislodge the person from his desires, so that he could devote himself to the worship of God. It is difficult to find any hints of criticism of the naziriteship. Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno is exceptional in that he emphasizes the restriction of Naziriteship specifically for drinking wine, raising hair and impurity, and not asceticism, fasting and revoking sex in opposition to Christianity. They disagreed about the semantics of the word `Nazirite`. Does it mean abstention (Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Sforno) or a crown (*Nezer*) (Bahya Ben-Asher), and some suggested the two interpretations together (Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor). The second interpretation seems to express a more positive attitude toward the Naziriteship than the first.

The halachic authorities in the Middle Ages treated the Naziriteship with a broader perspective that also weighed the sources of the Oral Torah and other halachic obligations that are in tension with the Naziriteship. Therefore, they tried to strike a balance between the Naziriteship and other duties imposed on man, such as: the obligation to work, to study Torah in moderation and more. They generally did not reject the Naziriteship completely, but found a limited place in the repair of the individual.

From an interpretive perspective these disputes focused on two texts that require the Nazirite to bring a sin offering. The first verse that requires the Nazirite to bring a sin offering "for that he sinned through the corpse (*HaNeffesh*)" (Num. 6:10) refers literally in case the Nazirite unintentionally defiled by the dead. This is what most of the commentators interpreted (Saadia Gaon, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Bekhor Shor, Gersonides and Hezekiah ben Manoah). On the other hand, the halakhic authorities noted Rabbi Eleazar HaKappar's teaching that a Nazirite was called a sinner because he "abstained himself from wine" (Ta'anit 11a). So there are those who have totally rejected the Naziriteship, and some rejected it as a way of life but gave it room as a temporary-limited measure to correct the deviation from the balance.

These positions raise the question why the Nazirite must bring a sin offering at the end of his Nazirite. Who reject the Naziriteship sees this as a proof to the negative aspect of the Naziriteship. On the other hand, who see the Naziriteship positively, explained that the Nazirite should bring this offering precisely because he stopped his Naziriteship and descended from his sanctity (Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora*, Nahmanides, and Abarbanel). Rabbi Bahya Ben-Asher explained in a Kabbalistic way that the Nazirite who is associated with the *Sefirah* of crown (*Keter)* must fix the *Sefirot* when he descents from his position and returns to normal life.

The thinkers of the Middle Ages were divided according to their intellectual inclinations. Who hold the philosophical view of balancing the proper way of life, explained the Naziriteship as a temporary way of helping a person cope with his weaknesses and desires (Saadia Gaon and Maimonides). Gersonides saw the laying of the Nazirite's hair on fire under the flesh of the sacrifice symbolizing the need to harness the "luxury of matter" for the worship of God. And Yehuda Halevy saw in the Naziriteship an incomprehensible commandment, intended in a mysterious way to connect the "divine order" to man. On the other hand, those who hold asceticism (Sufism) as a favored way of life (Bahya Ibn Paquda, Abraham Maimonides) viewed the Naziriteship as a partial expression of this ascetic ideal.