

**AMIR MASHIACH**

**THE JEWISH NAZIRITE AND THE HINDU SANYASIN:  
CHALLENGE, SOCIOLOGY, AND THEOLOGY**

**Amir Mashiach**

Ariel University of Samaria, Orot Israel College, Israel.

**Email:** amirma@ariel.ac.il

**Abstract:** The present article sets out to introduce and to compare abstinent and renunciant practices in Judaism and Hinduism. In the Jewish sources, the abstinent individual is referred to as a “Nazirite,” while in Hinduism the widely used term is “Sanyasin.” In what follows, I describe the actual practices associated with renunciation in each of the two religions; what brings someone to take vows of the renouncing kind, and the objective which the renouncer aspires to achieve. Parallel with these considerations, I also study the social attitude toward the abstainer among the Jews and among Hindus; is the practice seen in a positive, or – perhaps – in a negative light? Is the renunciant a hero, a righteous individual, an exemplary figure – or, possibly, a transgressor treading an iniquitous path, so that criticism should be leveled at the way of life he or she has chosen? The conclusion of the article is that the Nazirite and the Sanyasin has very little in common, in their reasons to become a renunciant, in their goals they both try to achieve, in their ways to achieve them and in the attitude of the communities towards them.

**Key words:** Nazir (Nazirite); Sanyasin; Judaism; Hinduism; Rabbinic Literature; Chazal; Bhagavad Gita

The present article sets out to introduce and to compare abstinent and renunciant practices in Judaism and Hinduism. In the Jewish sources, the abstinent individual is referred to as a “Nazirite,” while in Hinduism the widely used term is “Sanyasin.” In what follows, I describe the actual practices associated with renunciation in each of the two religions; what brings someone to take vows of the renouncing kind, and the objective which the renouncer aspires to achieve. Parallel with these considerations, I also study the social attitude toward the abstainer among the Jews and among Hindus; is the practice seen in a positive, or – perhaps – in a negative light? Is the renunciant a hero, a righteous individual, an exemplary figure – or, possibly, a transgressor treading an iniquitous path, so that criticism should be leveled at the way of life he or she has chosen?

It needs to be pointed out from the outset that Judaism and Hinduism are both ancient traditions dating back thousands of years. Naturally enough, a plethora of approaches obtains in each. This forms a special reason why I have opted to focus on the Hebrew Biblical description of the Nazirite, and the description preserved in the Rabbinic sources, as well as to provide a sample of the statements made on the topic in medieval Jewish thought.

The Hindu approach is not homogeneous and is more complicated than the Jewish one; it reflects a gamut of views and practices. The discussion involves a great number of believers and beliefs; some approaches tend to physicalize while others concentrate on the intangible; some notions of the Divine are personal, and others generalized and abstract. The diversity is so great that it becomes an insurmountable challenge to define the complex as a single whole. In what follows I elaborate on the approach I have chosen, which seems to me the best suited for shedding light on the Hindu notion of renunciant separation from the commonly accepted way of human life. It should also be pointed out that renunciant practices take their origin from theological foundations of a kind that obtains in every religion. These associations, which have had an impact on both the insights and the practices of the Nazirite and the Sanyasin, are demonstrated in what follows.

## **1. The Jewish Nazirite**

The Jewish ascetic is referred to as a Nazirite. The possibility of an individual’s becoming a Nazirite according to the Jewish tradition first comes up in the Pentateuch, in the Book of Numbers (6:1-21; Weissman, 1967): „...either man or woman who should make a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to consecrate himself to the Lord, must abstain from wine and other fermented drink... must not eat grapes or raisins... all the days of the vow of his Naziriteship no razor shall come upon his head; until the days

which he dedicates to the Lord are complete; he shall be holy, letting his hair grow long. All the days of his Naziriteship to the Lord, he shall not come near a dead body...for the consecration [*nezzer*, crown] to his God is upon his head. All the days of his Naziriteship is he holy unto the Lord... he will make atonement for him, for that he sinned” (Numbers, 6:1-11).

The Biblical verses make it clear that the Jewish Nazirite is not required to segregate himself from the world or give up contact with society; nor is he obligated to renounce various bodily needs, such as by separating himself from women (Chepey, 2005). All he is commanded to do is observe three types of abstinence: the prohibition against shaving his head; the prohibition against partaking of grapes or anything made there from, including drinking wine; and the prohibition against becoming impure or defiling himself through contact with a dead body.

Let us take a look at some of the details. According to the Halakhah [Jewish Law], Naziriteship must last a minimum period of thirty days. There is no specification about the maximum period of time that it may extend for; meaning that Naziriteship can be taken upon oneself for an unlimited period of time (Maimonides, *Nezirut*, Chap. 3). As noted, a Nazirite is prohibited from defiling himself with any type of impurity incurred through contact with the body of a deceased person. Impurity of this kind can be incurred in three ways: touching a dead body; carrying it, such as carrying a dead man on a stretcher; and spending time under one roof with the body of a deceased person (Maimonides, *Nezirut*, Chap. 5-7).

The description provided by the Bible suggests equal opportunity: the Nazirite may be “either man or woman.” The Bible does not explain why anyone should accept the prescriptions of Naziriteship, yet overall it seems that the motivation is personal-religious; The focus of the texts is on Halakhic procedure. There is also no addressing the achievement of the individual who lives abiding by the precepts of Naziriteship or ascetic self-denial. The image of the Nazirite in the Bible is cast in a positive light; outstanding leaders in early Jewish history have been known to be Nazirites, such as Samson (Judges 13) and Samuel the Prophet (Samuel I 1). Similarly, the prophet Amos, to convey the former lofty spiritual condition of the Jewish People, proclaims, “I raised prophets from among your sons, and Nazirites from among your young men” (Amos 2:11). This implies that a Nazirite is a positive figure, seen as setting a religious example similar to that of a prophet.

Rabbinic literature preserves a wealth of discussion of Nazirite issues from the Halakhic point of view, but little from the point of view of values; most of these elaborations are to be found in tractate Nazir of the Talmud. As previously shown, there is no evaluative statement about the Nazirite in the Bible, just as there are no instructions as to when someone should become a Nazirite, or why. Conversely, there is no statement to be found which could be taken as an expression of interest in being granted any reward for taking – or fulfilling – Nazirite vows. Rabbinic literature, by

contrast, preserves a statement which specifies when one should become a Nazirite; the connection is to ethical-social degradation. “Whoever witnesses a suspected woman in her disgrace, should withhold himself from wine” (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah2b). That is, someone who encounters a woman suspected of adultery should become a Nazirite (Carmichael 2012). This is a statement meant to raise the level of religiosity or ethics; an outgrowth of social-moral lapse. No spiritual achievement or mystical cleaving is at issue here, but taking upon oneself a way of life with certain prohibitions, all on account of general social and moral unraveling which cannot even be ascribed to oneself in any particular way.

The Rabbis are ambivalent in their attitude toward the Nazirite. There are those who see him as a saint, and there are others who – surprising as this may be – see the Nazirite as a sinner: „Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappar Be'rabbi says: What does Scripture mean when It says [of the Nazirite], “and make atonement for him for that he sinned by reason of the soul”? Against what soul did this man sin? But [it must refer to the fact that] he denied himself wine. A necessary inference from minor to major follows: if this man, who denied himself wine only, is termed a sinner, one who denies himself the enjoyment of ever so many things, all the more so...” (Babylonian Talmud, Taanit 11a).

The verses devoted to the Nazirite voice a stance which takes the Nazirite to have transgressed against religious norms. Besides, the fact that he is required to bring a sin-offering at the conclusion of the period of his Naziriteship – an offering indicative of that a transgression has taken place, committed by the person bringing the sacrifice – shows that the Torah apparently sees the Nazirite as a violator of sacred law. But what does his transgression consist in? Precisely in that he sets himself apart, renouncing things which are permitted. As per this approach, any act of disconnecting from the tangible world is sinful. The Nazirite has forbidden himself wine; this very abstinence of his, like any other kind of abstinence, as such, is seen from a negative perspective and defined as a transgression.

An approach diametrically opposed to this critical view of the Nazirite is one that sees him as nothing less than a saint: “Rabbi Eleazar says, he is called a holy man, as it is said, ‘He shall be holy, letting his hair grow long.’ Now if such a man, who has not denied himself but one thing, is called holy, one who denies himself ever so many things, is that a fortiori.” According to this approach, abstinence is in itself a blessed thing, crowning the Nazirite as a holy man, as borne out by the fact that even the Torah contains a passage associating sanctity with people who take Naziriteship upon themselves. Elsewhere the Sages say that „“All the days of his Naziriteship is he holy unto God,” insofar as he has set himself apart through abstinence and purity, is he called holy; nothing less but that Scripture sees him as equal to a prophet, as it is said, “I raised prophets

from among your sons, and Nazirites from among your young men.”” (Sifre Zuta, Chapter 6, 8).

Here we are presented with a return of sorts to the positive view of the Nazirite, which had been characteristic of the Bible.

There are two ways to explain the polarization between these different approaches taken by the Sages. One is that there really are two distinct schools of thought expressing different, even mutually exclusive attitudes toward the Nazirite as one who abstains from the material world, even though what is at stake is a minor, very incomplete abstinence, which is also limited in time. The other explanation is that there is no debate between distinct schools of thought, but that the appropriate attitude depends on the individual in question: when a person achieves a spiritual status compatible with abstinence, he is holy and his action is pleasing to God. But if Naziriteship is not appropriate for his spiritual condition, or if it is not undertaken for the sake of Heaven, but rather so as to look down at other people, showing off merit which has not really been achieved, then the Nazirite is a transgressor. This explanation derives further support from the fact that Simeon the Righteous, High Priest in the second century BCE, refused to partake of the meat of sacrifices brought by Nazirites (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 9b; Nazir 4b), maintaining that most of them were not “true” Nazirites; the sacrifice brought by the youth from the South formed the notable exception (Vaknin 2010).

A noteworthy take on Naziriteship comes to the fore in the medieval period, when disconnecting from matter and the body was seen as a way to spiritual and religious ascent, even though no similar attitudes are to be found earlier in the Bible or in the Rabbinic Sages. An example is *Sefer ha-chinuch*, an anonymous composition from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Spain, which states that the aim of the prohibitions applying to Naziriteship is to lead man to serve his Creator better, without being distracted by earthly desires (Diamond 1997). This is why the Nazirite is commanded to abstain from wine, which is symbolic of worldly pleasures, as well to let his hair grow wild, to indicate the suppression of the inclination for beauty and aesthetic feeling (*ha-chinuch* #374, #375). Henceforth, disconnecting from matter serves as a means for ascending the ladder of the spirit, but on condition that there is no abandoning of the material world, only a circumscription of contact with it. Absolute disconnecting would also count as iniquity. To sum up: limiting contact with matter and the body, yes; absolute severing of ties, no.

Beginning of the Middle Ages, Kabbalistic works also see the Nazirite as a figure ascending the ladder of holiness, disconnecting from the material world as he strives for spirituality. Thus, Nachmanides sees the Nazirite in a very positive light, comparing him to a saint and a prophet (Nachmanides’ Numbers 6:14). He argues that this is why the Nazirite is required to bring a sin-offering at the conclusion of the period of his

Naziriteship, since, he was supposed to remain at the elevated level of spiritual being which he had attained – not to return to the mundane life of the average man. His descent into mundane routine considered a transgression. Another instance of the Kabbalists' view of the Nazirite as an individual of exceptionally elevated spiritual standing comes to the fore in R. Bahye ibn Asher who writes (Numbers 6:3; 13) that the status of the Nazirite is so high as to bind him to *Keter*, the highest of the ten *Sefirot*, and that this is why the Nazirite is described as bearing the “crown [*nezer*] of his God” upon his head, like the crown of the Almighty. Hence, when the Nazirite abandons this lofty condition, returning to worldly life, he must bring a sin-offering – not as a part of asking for forgiveness or atonement, but as an act embodying the desire to draw the loftiest of the sacrosanct into the mundane life where he has descended. The *Sefer Ha-Zohar* is a towering giant among the texts voicing a positive appreciation of the Nazirite as a spiritual achiever (*Zohar* Numbers, *Nasso*, 127). In the Nazirite it sees a human being who anticipates the future, donning Divine sacredness even in this world and thus abandoning material concerns for the sake of the spirit and of what is holy (Sforno, Numbers 6:2).

It bears stressing that seeing the Nazirite as a saint insofar as he has given up the world of matter is a vision which first appears in the Middle Ages. Earlier religious literature does not contain any indication of such an approach.

## 2. The Hindu Sanyasin

The Hindu notion of abstinence or asceticism is entirely different (Ghurye 1953; Olivelle 1992; Olivelle 2008, *II*, 271-292). According to the laws of Manu, life is divided into four stages (*Manu's Laws*, Chap. 6):

1. Brahmacharya: apprentice ascetic. This period is devoted to studying traditional writings.
2. Grihasthya: head of household; a time of responsibility for raising a family, livelihood, marriage, and bringing up children.
3. Vanaprastha: forest dweller. This is the time when one prepares for what is metaphorically referred to as “retiring into the forest,” which is really the fourth period. Family duties become less strenuous during this time, which is devoted to study and thought.
4. Sanyasin: the ultimate ascetic, wandering self-flagellator. This is the time when one severs ties to property or material objects (*Bhagavad Gita* 18:2; sometimes two distinct terms are used to describe the ascetic renunciant: “Sanyasin” and “Sadhu.”)

Clearly, not everyone can embark on this demanding path; this is a ladder to be climbed only by the Hindu who has attained liberation. One

who wants to become a Sadhu must first find a Guru capable of guiding him along the way. The word “guru” is itself comprised of two parts: GU for darkness, and RU, or light. The idea of the compound word is that a guru is one who eliminates darkness and provides light for his student and follower; having achieved liberation himself, the guru is the spiritual mentor who now leads others to the same state.

In order to remove the bodily material membrane – and, alternatively, as a test of acceptance and sincerity of one’s desire to become the follower of a certain guru – Sadhus go through trials incomprehensible to the uninitiated. For instance: never sitting or lying down, only standing on one’s feet for years on end; not using one’s legs for walking, but wandering by rolling on the ground, wallowing in the dust; or crossing the whole of India from the southernmost to the northernmost end twelve times. Many Sadhus become lifelong itinerants, never sleeping in any one place for more than a single night (Olivelle, 2008, II, 11-26; 63-70; 101-126).

Before the Sadhu sets out on the new path, he gives up all bonds with his past. He even gives up his name, family ties, and most of his possessions. He also shaves his face and head (*Manu’s Laws*, Chaps. 6, 33, 52). As far as he is concerned, he enters the ultimate life stage; as a sign of complete severance with his former life, he burns an image of himself, as if to say that his life up until the present moment has expired completely. The Sadhu essentially takes up his own funeral march in his lifetime, moving toward a reality radically different from his former existence (Olivelle, 2008 II, 249-262). The same is also true of his family, who part from him forever as from someone who has passed away. Members of the family even observe rituals of mourning, such as bringing meal offerings on the anniversary of the “death” of their departed relative. Not only the Sadhu himself, but society in general, including the authorities, also treats him as demised. His status becomes identical to that of a deceased person: he has no rights and no obligations.

Henceforth the Sadhu sets out to achieve the goal of Moksha or liberation. His life is devoted to spiritual pursuits and meditation, study and cleaving to the gods (Bhaskarananda 1994 112). Some Sadhus live in monasteries with a guru, while others lead a nomadic kind of life, relying on the gods to provide for their physical needs, miniscule as these may be (Michaels 1998 316). A variety of ascetic sects exist in Hinduism; Vaishnavism, worshiping the god Vishnu, is one of the most prominent, its followers shaving their heads and leaving a single lock of hair in the back; another is Shaivism, which worships the god Shiva. This sect’s adherents let their hair grow wild (Rig Veda, 10, Chap. 136). Despite some differences in the vows, the common denominator underlying these different approaches is ascetic renunciation of possession of any property or even any physical contact with valuables, except a plate, mug, two sets of clothing and medical appliances such as eyeglasses (Sannyasa Upanishad,

1.4); there are many Sadhus who are so remote from the material life that they walk around stark naked, in a kind of absolute negation of norms accepted among those who are still bound to this world. The sects also all share a prohibition against pleasure derivable from food. Eating is allowed for the purpose of survival only; in addition, any contact, glance, thought, or even presence among women is forbidden (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:10).

The Sadhu must also attain a state of equanimity, or absolute insensitivity to stimuli that may provoke bitterness or pleasure, joy or sadness. The Sadhu must not react in any way – the manner is reminiscent of the Stoic norm of indifference – to either compliments or insults; if he attains this condition, he has risen to a great height (*Ibid.*, 14:22).

India treats Sadhus with pious reverence. On holidays such as the *Kumbh Mela*, when Sadhus are on their way to immerse themselves in the waters of the Ganges, people throng to wait by the side of the road to pay homage, *Namaste*, to those who have renounced the familiar way of living in order to devote themselves entirely to the spirit and liberation. They thus as if say, “I, the simple man whose life is bound up with matter and the daily round, confirm that this life is not the most important thing; but I am not capable of the ascetic life. So I bow and honor him who can do it, the Sadhu.” Everywhere the Sadhus walk, pilgrims prostrate themselves, touching, kissing the blessed ground the renunciants have tread upon, and taking some of it home as a talisman. The ascetic Sadhu becomes a sort of indicator for the world, a silent example to teach humanity that life is not only about material pursuits, but really about the spirit. It is hardly surprising that the little bit of food or supplies that the Sadhu needs in order to survive the day is readily come up with by the simple folk who see the opportunity to provide for him as a great merit.

As has already been noted, the Sadhu’s goal is liberation, or Moksha (*Organ* 1980 chap. 5). An ancient Indian poem describes prayer and profound desire to attain liberation, and to be led from illusion to the true reality; from ignorance to knowledge, and from finitude to immortality. This is in effect the principle of Hinduism: “Lead me from delusion to truth; / From darkness to light; / From mortality to immortality” (*Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28).

The Vedas are ancient holy writ. The principal worldview they express is grounded in the idea that human nature is divine. God, or Brahman, exists within every living creature: “I dwell within all (*Bhagavad Gita* 15:15).” Religion is the search for self-knowledge, the search for the divine within the “I.” The Vedas proclaim humanity not to be in need of “salvation”; humanity is never lost. At the very worst, people can live unaware of their true nature. They should therefore disconnect from this world as much as possible, even from clothing.

To elucidate the objective of Moksha, let us first take a look at Hindu epistemology, trying to understand the world as it is, as opposed to the way it appears to us, simple people who have not yet attained liberation.

Sankhya is the oldest school of orthodox philosophical thought in Hinduism (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987 vol. IV), offering a form of dualistic teaching. In the West, dualism means a split between intellect and the body, while in Sankhya it involves the divide between the self and matter. The notion of the self roughly parallels the Western one of the intellect. Sankhya dualism does not pit good and evil against each other, the real against the non-real, but points to the opposition between the changeless and the ever changing. Sankhya teaches that everything that exists is made up of Purusha, the substance or soul, and the Prakrti, or matter, energy, or creative force. The Purusha is by nature free, but it is held captive in the body, or so at least it appears; hence suffering. The Prakrti is divided into 24 parts, of which the three Gunas are the most important, comparable to the three strands which compose a rope. They are the ones responsible for the tendency to evolve and to change which manifests itself in the features of the Prakrti. The three Gunas are: first, Sattva or stability, potential awareness, good pleasure, pain, and wonder. Even though this can be seen as a good, it chains the Purusha to such things as wisdom or happiness, thus seemingly depriving it of freedom. Rajas is the second strand, the passion causing desire and lust; and finally, Tamas, darkness and opacity, crude otherness which spawns ignorance, is the third. Due to the relationship between the soul and these qualities, imbalance among the qualities provokes the growth and the development of the world. Freedom is attained when the Purusha is liberated from the bonds of the Guna trailing about it like a rope or chaining it. Moksha, liberation, is achieved once there is understanding that the soul and these qualities are different from each other.

To make this clear, a distinction needs to be drawn between the Brahman and the Atman. The Brahman is the highest spirit; it is present in every human being. However, ignorance prevents us from understanding or even being aware of this. The Atman is the life-sustaining energy in every living creature, usually referred to as the soul. The Brahman, which is the highest, infinite god, is essentially identical to the Atman, or the I, the self, the breath of life, internal introspection. The experience of internalizing the identicalness of the Brahman and Atman and concretizing it in practice is itself Moksha, or liberation.

This principle is illustrated in a dialogue between Aruni and Svetaketu, a learned father and his son (Olivelle 2008 I, 13-52). The father asks the son to put some salt in a cup of water; the son obeys. The next morning the father asks the son to give the salt back to him, but the salt, not surprisingly, is not available, having dissolved in the water the previous night. The project of retrieving the salt proves impossible. The father tells the son to drink from the water and to describe the taste. The water is salty. The father then again asks the son to taste some of the water from the bottom of the cup, and some from the middle. The water has a salty taste everywhere. Says the father to the son, "Just as you

cannot pick out the salt from the water, and yet it is still there everywhere, so, too, the Brahman, the One, is there in the body, even though it cannot be distinguished from anything else. 'This' is the hidden essence of all things... You are 'this, 'Svetaketu.'" The words "you are this" (*tat tvam asi*) recur in a number of other passages in the dialogue, reasserting the identicalness of the Atman and the Brahman (*Chandugya Upanishad*, Chap. 6; *Bhagavata Purana*. 7.15.37; Sharma 1987 180).

Shankara (788-820), one of the greatest Hindu thinkers, uses this as the basis for developing his philosophy of non-dualism, called the Advaita Vedanta (Chatterjee 1988 158-169; Sharma 1987 114-131; Isayeva 1993). The words "you are 'this,'" which provide the foundation for identifying the Brahman with the Atman, point the way to understanding that everything is one. According to Shankara, we live under an illusion, Maya, which is based on ignorance. The ignorance causes us to take everything that glitters for gold, and to think – mistakenly – that a straight stick inserted halfway into water is really bent. Sometimes a man will cry out, convinced that the rope twisting on the ground in front of him is actually a snake. Overcoming ignorance will bring redemption. That is, internalizing the difference between what is eternal and what only hides behind a mask will enable liberation from the non-real. Following this, the identity of the self, the Atman, and the Brahman can be contemplated. As long as this is not adequately understood, one will continue a captive of misguided notions of the real, cleaving to error and ignorance, wallowing in the Samsara, eternal cycle of birth-death.

The illusion invoked here needs to be explained. Primary sources stating that the world is an illusion go as far back as the Upanishads: "The world in its entirety is a projection from the self of the maker of illusions (*Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad* 2.5.19)." The Upanishads do put forth the claim that humanity can be led astray; but they do not teach that the world is a game of shadows, absolute illusion or non-truth. It was Shankara who claimed that everything is an illusion and a reverie of sorts.

Shankara needs to be understood in his own right. The world overall is an illusion, Maya, and the individual self is an illusion, Maya, but they are not the same. The world is like a snake that seems to be a rope when looked at closely. A simple error of identification; but the Maya of the self is like the piece of paper which looks red even though it's really white looking red in the red neon lighting. This is an issue of the subject's senses, not of the reality of the object. When Shankara deals with the Maya of the world, he addresses the question of the world's existence, and when treating the Maya of the substantial or the self, he notes the problem of substantial individuality, not the existence of the substantial. In other words, Moksha, or liberation, is my looking at the world. It is not the disappearance of the world, for if the self is really an illusion, who is actually undergoing liberation?! The world is not true, but it is no illusion (Bhattacharyya 2008 I, 95-96). There is no acosmism deployed here in the

sense of negating the world as such as a real existent, but an alteration in my awareness of the world, with the “my” made emphatically prominent in this statement.

One cannot be liberated from existents; the only thing one can in fact be liberated from is one’s own self and personality, and one’s judgment about those things to which people normally ascribe value, whether positive or negative. But even though such things do need to lose their meaning and significance, this does not mean that they will disappear or become as naught, or be deprived of existence; what disappears is their meaningfulness as far as the human being is concerned. This is Moksha, the liberation much aspired to. (Here I do not address the less extreme ways of achieving liberation; my focus in this part of the article is on the Sanyasin, not liberation per se).

Moksha involves being set free from a number of things: Samsara, the wheel of birth-death, change, the senses, feelings, fear, desires, suffering and pain, ignorance; from the illusion of the existence of the world, law, sin, doubt, destiny, and even the gods themselves (*Brhad-Aranyaka Upanishad* 4.3.21, 4.4.23; *Chandogya Upanishad* 4.13.2, 8.4.3k; *Kaushitaki Upanishad* 1.4). The notion of liberation in the Advaita also involves liberation from egotism, individuality, and the finite and limited I; liberation from loneliness and isolation.

The renouncer Sanyasins use a variety of means to seek liberation from ongoing Samsara, hoping to put an end to the eternal cycle by isolating themselves from society, by fasting and self-flagellation. Detaching oneself from the world of the senses and sensuality extends inner freedom, increasing the ability to devote oneself to other matters.

The Sanyasins are, inter alia, devotees of yoga (Any Sanyasin is a yogi, but not every yogi is a Sanyasin. Yogananda, 1998). Yoga, too, is supposed to lead the Sanyasin to liberation. Yoga aims to dissolve the rigid boundary between erroneous human self-perception and understanding the truth about the human condition; it shows the way to salvation from the confusion rampant in the world between the object (Prakrti) and the subject (Purusha). “When a discerning man no longer sees different identities due to different material bodies, but sees how entities are in all, that is when he has achieved a notion of the Brahman (*Bhagavad Gita* 13:31; 6:29).” The Supreme, the Brahman, is in all things; its identicalness with the Atman is simple, everything being one. As has already been pointed out, there is no acosmism at work here, no denial of the existing world by relegating it to the status of an illusion, but one’s own developing individual epistemic awareness, an awakening from the illusion which is Maya (Ibid., 5:18).

### 3. Summary

Comparing the Jewish Nazirite and the Hindu Sanyasin makes it clear that the differences between the two are greater than anything they may share in common. This is true both of the way of life chosen by each of these types of renunciant, of the intensity of the renunciation, the time period, the objective, the theology which gives rise to the renunciation – and finally, of the social attitude toward the abstinent individual.

In Judaism, the central concern in addressing the nature of Naziriteship is to elucidate the numerous Halakhic details. The question of why the Nazirite has chosen his temporary way of life is never broached in the Hebrew Bible. It is raised briefly in Rabbinic literature (“He who sees a suspected adulteress should renounce wine”), in a statement which aims to raise the level of religiosity or morals in response to social-ethical degradation which the Nazirite himself is not a part of.

Any discussion of motivation indicative of spiritual or mystical achievement to be sought through Naziriteship is especially striking in its absence; there is no addressing the question of what a Nazirite “gets” by means of his abstinence. I have also shown that Jewish Naziriteship does not require severing bonds with the material world or giving up contact with women. True enough, during the medieval period we do come across sayings about disconnecting from matter so as to cleave to the spirit, yet even then this approach encounters opposition and special limitations aiming to prevent total disconnectedness, which forms a transgression in its own right.

But these limitations should be taken together with the positive assessment of the Nazirite in Kabbalistic literature, where severing ties with the world of matter is seen as an attempt to brave ascent along the hierarchical ladder of the spirit and of holiness.

The time period of permissible Naziriteship is limited. The required minimum is thirty days, during which the Nazirite does not leave his family, work, or society as a whole.

Another point to make a note of is that Nazirites in the Biblical period were apparently seen in a positive light, and even considered on a par with prophets. But beginning in the Rabbinic period and on, they are treated with ambivalence. Some authorities see them as saints, while others consider them sinners. This is probably the reason why Naziriteship has practically disappeared among the Jews. In brief, the objective of Jewish Naziriteship is ethical-social; Naziriteship is not considered an individual’s religious achievement. On the contrary, it may be a transgression.

The attitude towards the renunciant Sanyasin in Hinduism is entirely different. Renunciation forms the fourth stage in the life of the believer. Hindu sources do not provide any detailed accounts of the Sanyasin’s practical life, considering that the Sannyasa is a matter of individual

achievement reached by a person entirely on his own through liberation from all extant frameworks, including life itself. There are obviously rules the renunciant must follow, but these rules are themselves also part of the mighty effort to reach the same Moksha. For this reason, the main concern is not the nitty-gritty of practice or the “Halakhah,” but the mystical purpose. By contrast, in Judaism – in the Bible and in the Rabbinic Sages – there is a focus on Halakhah, leaving the objective or the reason why a person should be a Nazirite out of the scope of consideration. Albeit there is a change of direction in the Middle Ages, where statements are to be found focusing on the spiritual purpose of the Nazirite; even so, it would appear that in Judaism, observance of the Halakhah is a telos unto itself.

A Sadhu must accept a number of severe limitations, beginning with total disconnectedness from his life as lived prior to renunciation. He goes through a ceremony of his own funeral, henceforth to be considered as deceased in all respects, even vis-à-vis the authorities. He severs all ties to the material and bodily world, inflicting severe and painful practices on himself so as to remove any remaining bodily membrane which may still attach to him. Many Sadhus walk around stark naked, their disconnectedness from the material world implying a rejection of the need to cover the body. They aim for equanimity and indifference toward all things happy or sad, flattering or offensive; the time period during which they live in this way continues until death, which takes place far from family or acquaintances. Their one and only objective is to attain Moksha, desired liberation from the birth-death cycle of Samsara.

As opposed to the Jewish attitude toward the Nazirite, which remains ambiguous, with the most widespread opinion tending toward a negative view of Naziriteship and its implied renunciation of the world, Hinduism holds the Sanyasin in the highest esteem.

## References:

- Babylonian Talmud*. 2006. Jerusalem: Masoret Hashas.
- Ben Yokhay, R. Shimon. 1998. *Sefer Ha-Zohar*. Bney Brak: M. Klar.
- Bhagavad Gita*. 2000. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Bhattacharyya, K.C. 2008. *Studies in Philosophy*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Carmichael, Calum M. 2012. “The Suspected Adulteress and the Nazirite (Numbers 5:11-6:21),” *Jewish Law Association Studies* 23, 49-62.
- Chatterjee, D. 1988. “Karma and Liberation in Sankara’s Advaita Vedanta” in: S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, ed., *Perspectives on Vedanta: Essays in Honor of Professor P.T. Raju*. New York: Brill Leiden.
- Chepey, Stuart Douglas. 2005. *Nazirites in Late Second Temple Judaism*. Boston: Brill.

- Diamond, Eliezer 1997. "An Israelite Self-Offering in the Priestly Code: A New Perspective on the Nazirite," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 88, 1-2, 1-18.
- Ghurye, G. S. 1953. *Indian Sadhus*. Bombay: Popular Book Depot.
- Ibn Asher, R. Bahye. 1994. *Commentary on the Torah*. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Isayeva, Natalia. 1993. *Shankara and Indian Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Larson, Gerald James and Bhattacharya, Ram Shankar. (eds.) 1987. *Sāmkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*, vol. IV of *The Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Maimonides, R. Moshe Ben Maimon. 1970. *Mishneh Torah*. Jerusalem: Vaad Hayeshivot.
- Michaels, Alex. 1998. *Hinduism: Past and Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nachmanides, R. Moshe Ben Nachman. 1971. *Commentary on the Torah*. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Olivelle, Patrick. 1992. *The Samnyasa Upanishads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Olivelle, Patrick. 2008. *Collected Essays I-II*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Organ, Troy Wilson. 1980. *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man*. Ohio: Wipf & Stock.
- Sefer ha-chinuch*. 1981. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Sforno, R. Ovadya. 1986. *Commentary on the Torah*. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- Sharma, Gurumayum Ranjit. 1987. *The Idealistic Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. Atlantic: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors.
- The Bible*. 1989. Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook.
- The Upanishads*. 1963. New York: Harper & Row.
- Vaknin, Refael. 2010. "Ha-nazir min ha-darom: Keriah psikho-pedagogit" ["The Nazirite from the South: A Psycho-Pedagogical Reading"], *Mikhlol* 26, 45-50 [Heb].
- Weissman, Ze'ev. 1967. "Ha-nezirut ba-mikra, tippuseha ve-shorasheha" ["Biblical Nazariteship: Types and Origins"], *Tarbiz* 36, 220-227 [Heb].
- Yogananda, Paramahansa. 1998. *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship.