Your Innards Are Holy: *Yerushalayim* and the Human Body as Vessels for Sanctity

The vow of abstinence declared by the *nazir* spawned a major hashkafic and halachik debate among *Chazal* and the *Rishonim* regarding ascetism and fasting. On the one hand, the Torah describes the *nazir* as קדוש הוא לה' – holy to *Hashem*. Yet upon successfully completing his vow, the *nazir* must bring a *korban chatat*, a sacrifice generally reserved for sinners. Why should someone who voluntarily embraces a higher degree of holiness be deemed sinful?

Building upon these conflicting indications, the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* debate whether *nezirut* is recommended or misguided. *Rebbe Elazar HaKfar* and *Shmuel* maintain that the *nasir* is considered a sinner for engaging in unnecessary abstinence and prohibiting upon himself that which the Torah permitted (*Ta'anit* 11a). *Rebbe Elazar ben Shamua*, however, disagrees, viewing the *nazir* as an inherently holy individual. Each opinion addresses the conflicting sources embedded in this week's *parshah*.

The *Gemara Ta'anit* expands this debate beyond the *nazir* alone. These same sages dispute the value of fasting generally. If voluntarily abstaining from wine is sinful, then certainly refraining from food entirely would be even more problematic. (Parenthetically, even *Shmuel* agrees that there are circumstances in which fasting or *nezirut* may be appropriate; This is much like medicine, which is harmful when taken unnecessarily but essential when addressing illness. See *Tosafot* to *Ta'anit* 11a and *Rambam* in *Shemona Perakim*.)

Conversely, if *Rebbe Elazar* views *nezirut* as commendable, then fasting would certainly be deemed a holy endeavor. However, the *Gemara* qualifies that even *Rebbe Elazar* only praises fasting when it does not weaken the body. Once a person's health deteriorates through fasting, he too agrees that the faster is deemed a sinner.

Rebbe Elazar's prooftext is strikingly unusual. He invokes the verse in *Hoshea* (11:9), in which *Hashem* declares that he will not enter the heavenly *Yerushalayim* until the earthly *Yerushalayim* is built below (see *Ta'anit* 5a, we discussed this *pasuk* two weeks ago). *Rebbe Elazar* homiletically interprets בקרבך קדוש as "your innards are holy": one should view his body and digestive system as sanctified, nourishing them properly so they remain healthy and vibrant. If fasting damages one's health, it is akin to destroying consecrated property.

At first glance, this *derasha* seems quite far-fetched. In a verse discussing *Yerushalayim*, where does *Rebbe Elazar* see a reference to the human body?

While initially perplexing, *Rebbe Elazar* is drawing upon a foundational principle: *Yerushalayim* serves as the ultimate model for how spirituality properly interfaces with

physicality. Rav Chayim Volozhiner teaches that the *Beit HaMikdash* and *Yerushalayim* provide a framework for understanding the Jewish soul (*Nefesh HaChayim* 1:4). The entire enterprise of *kodashim* – sanctified objects and *korbanot* brought to *Yerushalayim* and the *Mikdash* – rests upon the premise that physicality is not meant to be rejected but rather sanctified.

Physical *Yerushalayim* functions as a bridge between heaven and earth. *Hashem* declares that His Presence cannot dwell within the heavenly *Yerushalayim* until the earthly city is physically built below. Just as *Yerushalayim* must be beautiful, vibrant, and properly constructed in order to serve as a vessel for the *Shechinah*, the human body must likewise be healthy and well maintained in order to house the soul.

Even *Rebbe Elazar,* who praises ascetic practice, agrees holiness cannot come at the expense of destroying the vessel that houses it. A weakened vessel is not spiritually superior. Just the opposite; a strong body filled with vitality becomes sanctified to *Hashem* when used as a vehicle to bind heaven and earth together.

Just as the *Shechinah* descends only into a rebuilt *Yerushalayim* below, the *neshama* can only fully illuminate a body that is healthy, stable, and whole. The task is not to break the vessel, but to sanctify it.