Episode Book

EPISODE #5640

When Going to the Gym Meant Saving Your Soul

PUBLISHED	29 September 2026 at 16:04 UTC
DURATION	36:08
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/asceticism-nazirite-world-religions/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

The Greek root of "asceticism" is áskēsis — the training an athlete does before a race. So how did self-denial become a spiritual path across so many traditions, and why does Judaism largely reject it? This episode traces the word from the wrestling floor to the desert pillar, then digs into the Nazirite vow of Numbers 6: a person the Torah calls holy who nonetheless has to bring a sin offering when his term ends. The rabbis fought over that contradiction for centuries and never settled it. We look at Maimonides' golden mean, Rav's warning that we'll answer for every permitted pleasure we refused, and the one Nazirite case Simeon the Just made an exception for.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Quick question before we start. If I told you the word asceticism originally meant going to the gym, would you believe me?



Herman

I would ask which gym, because the Greek original is áskēsis, and it meant training. Athletic training. The word for what Simeon Stylites was doing on top of a pillar started out as the word for what you do before a footrace.



Corn

So the vocabulary of self-denial is borrowed from sport.



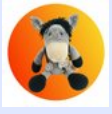
Herman

Borrowed, then stretched, then stretched again until it broke. By the time the church fathers got hold of it, it meant something closer to what we'd call a regimen. By the time the desert hermits got hold of it, it meant suffering on purpose.



Corn

Which is a long way from a discus. Alright. Daniel sent us a prompt about exactly this. He wants to know how asceticism has been applied across world religions as a pathway to enlightenment. And he's noticed something specific: Judaism seems to reject the whole idea. The closest thing in the primary sources is the Nazir, the person who voluntarily abstains from wine and grape products and doesn't cut his hair, and Daniel points out that Jewish teachers often read the sacrifices that Nazir brings as almost a condemnation of what he did. So the guy who takes the vow is treated like he did something wrong.



Herman

And that's the puzzle.



Corn

That's the puzzle. Then Daniel contrasts it with everything else. Other philosophers and religions had a very different take on pleasure and on whether engaging with it distracts you from the purpose of your religion. Hedonism is the obvious counterpoint. And outside Judaism there are traditions that openly celebrate the people who reject pleasure for piety, monastic communities being the clearest case. So the question he wants us to take on: how have different world religions and major philosophical groups grappled with this as part of their dogma.



Herman

That's four questions wearing a trench coat.



Corn

It's a good trench coat. Let's start with the word itself, because it's already lying to us.



Herman

Asceticism, in the standard definition, is a lifestyle of abstinence from worldly pleasures through self-discipline, self-imposed poverty, simple living, typically for spiritual ends. Fasting, prayer, meditation, renouncing possessions. That's the modern shape. But áskēsis, the root, is training. Exercise. The physical preparation an athlete does before competition.



Corn

So the original ascetic was a wrestler.



Herman

The original ascetic was a wrestler, and the training was the point. You deny yourself certain things not because pleasure is evil but because the race is on Saturday and you want to win. That's the frame the Greeks had. Then it migrates into philosophy, then into religion, and somewhere along the way the goal changes from winning a race to saving your soul, and the training becomes an end in itself.



Corn

And once the training becomes an end in itself, you get people on pillars.



Herman

There's a useful distinction here, from the historian E. C. Butler. He separates natural asceticism from unnatural asceticism. Natural asceticism is reducing life to utmost simplicity. Minimal clothing, simple food, sleeping on the floor. No maiming. Unnatural asceticism is body mortification, self-inflicted pain, punishing the flesh. Beds of nails. That's the line.



Corn

And the paradox that runs through all of it is that the ascetic says the constraints bring freedom. Fewer possessions, fewer distractions, clearer thought, more ability to resist the things that would destroy you. Restriction as liberation.



Herman

That's the claim. And it's not crazy on its face. If you've ever done a hard physical regimen, you know the feeling. You cut things out and you feel less scattered, not more.



Corn

But there are traditions that looked at that and said no thanks. Zoroastrianism, ancient Egyptian religion, the Dionysian Mysteries, and vāmācāra, the left-handed Tantric path in Hinduism. All of them explicitly rejected asceticism and emphasized good deeds and family life instead.



Herman

The left-handed Tantrics are the interesting one there, because they're inside a tradition that has plenty of asceticism in it. They're not rejecting the framework, they're rejecting the method. And the method they choose is the opposite one.



Corn

So the question isn't whether anyone rejected asceticism. The question is who, and why. And Judaism, as Daniel suspected, is the great exception to almost all of this.



Herman

The dominant Jewish position is moderation, not total abstinence. Maimonides lays it out in the Mishneh Torah, in the laws on character traits. The golden middle way. Not sensual luxury on one side, not tortured self-deprivation on the other. The person who goes to either extreme has missed it.



Corn

And the reasoning behind that isn't just aesthetic. It's theological. The physical world is essentially good. The body is a servant of the spirit, not something corrupt that needs to be beaten down. The human being has dignity as something made in the image of God. Physical pleasures are God-given, and the right response to them is gratitude toward the giver.



Herman

Isaiah 45:18 is the verse the rabbis lean on. The Lord did not create the world for desolation, he formed it for human habitation. That's the proof text for the whole posture. The world is meant to be lived in.



Corn

And then there's Rav, in the Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin. Man in the life to come will have to account for every enjoyment offered him that was refused without sufficient cause.



Herman

That's a staggering line. It's not that indulgence is the danger. It's that refusal is the danger. You're going to be asked why you didn't eat the fruit.



Corn

Rabbi Yitzchak has a version of the same complaint. Is the number of things forbidden by the Law not enough that you venture to add of your own accord by your inconsiderate vow? Which is basically: we already have a list. Why are you writing your own?



Herman

Samuel of Nehardea goes further. He says one who refuses to partake of the material world is a sinner. Full stop. And he's basing that on the Nazirite's sin offering, which we'll get to.



Corn

And the body is protected in a way that's unusual for the ancient world. Judaism prohibits mutilation of the body for any purpose. That's a direct contrast to traditions that practice mortification of the flesh.



Herman

There's also the cheerfulness principle. The Shekhinah, the divine presence, rests on a person only amid the cheerfulness of performing a mitzvah. Shabbat 30b. There's a Talmudic story about jesters who cheer up the unhappy and get a place in the World to Come for it. The mood of the tradition is not somber.



Corn

And marriage and sexual fulfillment aren't concessions to weakness. They're obligations. The commandment of onah. It is not good for a man to be alone. Any man who has no wife is without happiness, without blessing, and without good. That's Yevamot 62b.



Herman

The Mishnah does something clever with the Shema. Love God with all your heart, it says, means with your two inclinations. Both of them. The good inclination and the evil inclination. You're supposed to serve with the whole apparatus, not amputate half of it.



Corn

So the principle is sanctify, don't suppress. Eating and drinking can be a form of service to God if the intention is to strengthen the body to serve God better.



Herman

Which is a very different move from the one the desert hermits make. They're not sanctifying the appetite, they're killing it.



Corn

Now. The Nazir. Numbers 6, verses 1 through 21. An Israelite man or woman voluntarily takes a vow. Three restrictions. No wine and no strong drink and no grape products at all, down to vinegar and raisins. No cutting the hair on the head. And no contact with corpses, no ritual impurity, even from your own family.



Herman

Typically for a set period. If you don't specify, the minimum is thirty days. At the end, you bring three offerings. A lamb as a burnt offering, a ewe as a sin offering, and a ram as a peace offering. Plus unleavened bread and grain and drink offerings. And you shave your head and burn the hair.



Corn

Here's the problem. The text calls the Nazir holy. Twice. Holy, and holy unto God, in verses 5 and 8. And then at the end of the term, he has to bring a sin offering.



Herman

A chatat. The offering you bring when you've done something wrong.



Corn

So the guy the text calls holy has to bring the sacrifice for sin. That contradiction is not a modern reader's confusion. The rabbis saw it, and they fought about it, and they never settled it.



Herman

Rabbi Eleazar ha-Kappar states the condemnation reading directly. Why must the Nazirite bring a sin offering at the end of his term? Because he sinned against his own person by his vow of abstaining from wine. That's in the Sifra, and it shows up in Nedarim and Taanit.



Corn

Sinned against his own person. Not against God. Against himself. The self-denial is the offense.



Herman

Maimonides takes that reading and runs with it. He calls the Nazirite a sinner, and he uses it to make the general case: a person should always be moderate and never go to extremes. That's in the same section of the Mishneh Torah where he lays out the middle way. So for Maimonides, the Nazir is a case study in what not to do.



Corn

And the logic extends past the Nazir. Samuel of Nehardea uses the Nazirite's sin offering to argue that anyone who chooses to fast is a sinner. Rabbi Jose ben Halafta prohibited individual fasting outright.



Herman

Jacob Neusner, looking across the halakhic and aggadic literature, found that the sages generally treated the Nazirite vow as shrouded in arrogance and weakness. Arrogance because you think you can improve on what God commanded. Weakness because you couldn't handle the world as given.



Corn

There's a wonderful detail with Rabbi Meir. He taught that the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was a grapevine. For nothing brings wailing upon a person like wine. So the original forbidden fruit was the vine, and the Nazir is avoiding the vine, and there's a whole symbolic layer there about whether avoiding it actually fixes anything.



Herman

And Simeon the Just, the High Priest, opposed the Nazirite vow. He ate of a Nazirite's sacrifice exactly once. One time in his whole career. And the reason he made the exception: a youth came to him and explained that he took the vow because he was beautiful, and he was afraid his own beauty would become an idol to him. So he grew his hair long and abstained, specifically to kill his own vanity.



Corn

That's the one case where the vow is doing something real. It's not performative piety. It's a man who identified a specific danger in himself and took a specific measure against it.



Herman

Which tells you the sages weren't against self-discipline. They were against self-discipline as a display, or as a general theory of how to live.



Corn

Now the other side. Because there is another side. Rabbi Elazar argued the opposite reading. Nazirites are called holy, and therefore becoming one is desirable. The holiness language in the text is doing real work for him.



Herman

Nachmanides, the Ramban, sides with Rabbi Elazar. His reading is that ideally a person should be a Nazirite his whole life. And therefore the sin offering isn't for taking the vow. It's for ending it. It's for ceasing to be a Nazirite and going back to normal life.



Corn

So the sin is the return to ordinary existence.



Herman

That's the Ramban. And Tosafot splits the difference. A Nazirite is both good and bad. They just leave the tension standing.



Corn

Which is, honestly, the most honest answer of the three.



Herman

And then there's Simon the Just's one exception, where he says: May there be many Nazirites like thee in Israel. Nazir 4b. So even the man who opposed the vow acknowledged the case where it was doing what it was supposed to do.



Corn

The Nazirite has a strange afterlife, too. Samson and Samuel were both lifelong Nazirites. Both born to previously barren mothers. Both entered the vow through their mothers rather than by their own choice, which is a wrinkle.



Herman

Queen Helena of Adiabene, around 48 CE, was a Nazirite for twenty-one years because of complications with her vow. Josephus notes that people often took the vow when they'd been afflicted with a disease or some other distress. So it functioned as a bargain in hard times.



Corn

Which is a very human thing. You're sick, you make a deal.



Herman

Amos, chapter 2, condemns the Israelites for failing to respect the Nazirite vow. Specifically for giving Nazirites wine to drink. So there's a prophetic anger about people undermining the vow, which cuts against the idea that the institution was purely suspect.



Corn

In modern Hebrew, nazir now means any monk or nun. The word migrated. And Rastafari picked up elements of the vow. Dreadlocks, abstention from alcohol.



Herman

Rabbi David Cohen, a leading disciple of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, was a Nazirite for much of his life. So it's not a dead category.



Corn

There's also a scholarly theory that the Nazirite restrictions only look ascetic. The argument is that wine and the crown of hair were sacred to Canaanite deities, so the Nazirite laws are really about rejecting Canaanite religion, not about rejecting pleasure as such.



Herman

That's a minority reading, but it's a useful one, because it reminds you that not every abstinence is asceticism. Sometimes it's boundary-drawing. Sometimes it's politics.



Corn

And then there's the uncomfortable fact that Judaism did produce real ascetics. Not many, and usually with an asterisk, but they existed. The Essenes, second century BCE to first century CE. A Second Temple sect living in communal asceticism, voluntary poverty, daily immersion, abstinence from worldly pleasures, and for some groups, no marriage. Associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls.



Herman

With the caveat that Rachel Elior has controversially questioned whether the Essenes existed at all as a distinct group. So even that one has an asterisk.



Corn

The Ashkenazi Hasidim. Chassidei Ashkenaz, twelfth and thirteenth century, France and Germany. They practiced extreme self-punishment. Immersing their legs in ice water for hours. Sitting in freezing snow. Self-torture by starvation. As penitence.



Herman

And Shimon Shokek attributes that to medieval Christian influence. Gershon Scholem noted that this system of punishments had little precedent in previous Jewish thought. So the scholars are pointing at the neighbors.



Corn

Lurianic Kabbalah. Sixteenth and seventeenth century Safed. The idea that voluntary acts of piety could bring tikkun, repair of a broken universe, and hasten the Messianic era. Extensive fasting, frequent mikveh immersion, even self-lashing.



Herman

And then the Hasidic counter-reaction in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The new movement abandoned many of the ascetic practices that had become common among eastern European Jews. The Mesillat Yesharim condemns ascetic practices that weakened the body.



Corn

So you get a wave of asceticism, and then a wave against it, and the wave against it wins.



Herman

Beta Israel, the Ethiopian Jewish community, maintained a genuine monastic order of celibate hermits as late as 1900. That's unique among Jewish communities. And it likely reflects non-Jewish influence.



Corn

And Shimon bar Yochai lived as an ascetic in a cave for a period. But his asceticism was instrumental. It was about avoiding distractions from Torah study. Not about the world being worthless. He was also among those who called the Nazirite a sinner, which is a nice bit of consistency.



Herman

The pattern across all of it: Jewish asceticism, where it appears, is limited to a spiritual elite, it's instrumental, and it's often attributed to outside influence. That's not a tradition that celebrates self-denial. That's a tradition that tolerates it in specific people for specific reasons.



Corn

So Judaism says no. But what happens when a tradition says yes?



Herman

Monasticism. From the Greek monakhós, solitary. A religious way of life where you renounce worldly pursuits to devote yourself fully to spiritual activity. It's a major feature of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.



Corn

And notably forbidden in Islam, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism. Marginal in modern Judaism. So the map is not clean.



Herman

Christianity first. Anthony the Great, fourth century Egyptian hermit, called the father of Christian monasticism. The Monastery of Saint Anthony in Egypt is among the oldest Christian monasteries in the world. The Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers, thousands of male and female ascetics, hermits, anchorites, once inhabited the Middle Eastern deserts. Mary of Egypt. Simeon Stylites, who prayed seated on top of a pillar in the elements.



Corn

The pillar is the detail everyone remembers. It's also the detail that makes the whole thing legible. Because you can't do anything on a pillar. You can't farm, you can't trade, you can't raise a family. You can only be visible.



Herman

Extreme practices are documented from the second century onward. Chaining the body to rocks, eating only grass, solitary confinement, abandoning personal hygiene, mortification of the flesh, voluntary suffering. But here's the part that gets left out: these were often rejected as beyond acceptable by other ascetics. Barsanuphius of Gaza and John the Prophet both pushed back on them.



Corn

So even inside the ascetic tradition, there's a line.



Herman

Francis of Assisi and his followers practiced extreme mortification. Mount Athos, from 963, became the most important center of Orthodox Christian asceticism. Meteora too. And on the Protestant side, the Anabaptist churches, Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, along with Quakers and Shakers, espoused simple living, plain dress, separation from the world.



Corn

The Amish are interesting because they're the ones most people have actually seen. You drive through Pennsylvania and there's the whole thing, operating in plain view.



Herman

And there's a piece of this that doesn't get enough attention. In the fourth and fifth centuries, monasticism allowed women to be removed from traditional marriage and childbearing roles and live lives devoted to God. It afforded what one historian calls great spiritual autonomy. Women also played a crucial role in promoting and financing the movement. Saint Melania the Elder founded the first monastery for women in Jerusalem in 379.



Corn

So the convent was one of the few institutional escape hatches available.



Herman

It was. Not a modern escape hatch, but an escape hatch.



Corn

Buddhism now, because Buddhism is the one that surprises people. The historical Buddha initially adopted an extreme ascetic life. The art depicts him emaciated, fasting, the whole thing. And then after enlightenment, he rejected extreme asceticism in favor of the Middle Way.



Herman

Majjhimāpaipadā. The reasoning is specific and it's worth stating carefully. The Buddha realized the mind was embodied and causally dependent on the body. Therefore a malnourished body could not allow the mind to be trained and developed. The instrument was broken, so the training couldn't proceed.



Corn

Which is a remarkably empirical argument. He didn't reject asceticism on moral grounds. He rejected it because it didn't work.



Herman

It didn't work. The Middle Way steers between asceticism and bodily denial on one side, as practiced by the Jains and other śramaa groups, and sensual hedonism on the other. And the framing line is: Buddhism's main concern is not with luxury or poverty, but with the human response to circumstances.



Corn

So the question shifts from what you have to how you hold it.



Herman

Monastic discipline in Buddhism is intended to create a life that's simple and focused rather than one of deprivation or severe asceticism. Though celibacy and chastity are fundamental. Theravada bhikkhus follow around two hundred and twenty-seven rules in the Vinaya.



Corn

Two hundred and twenty-seven. That's a lot of rules for a middle way.



Herman

It's a lot of rules. And there are forest-dwelling ascetic monks, the thudong, in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, who pursue their own version and resist the institutionalized hierarchy. So the extreme impulse didn't disappear. It just moved to the forest.



Corn

And on the Mahayana side you get the extreme practices. Japanese sokushinbutsu, self-mummification while alive, eating only pine needles and resins and seeds. Chinese Buddhist self-immolation, shaoshen, zifen, with the earliest documented case being a monk named Fayu in 396.



Herman

So Buddhism contains both the rejection of extreme asceticism and some of the most extreme asceticism on record. Both things are true.



Corn

Hinduism. The renunciation is called Sannyasa, and it's not identical to asceticism, which connotes severe self-denial. Sannyasa is a simple life with minimal possessions, study, meditation, ethical living. The term closer to asceticism is Tapas. Inner heat,



Corn (continued)

self-mortification, penance, meditation, self-discipline.



Herman

A sādhu's vow of renunciation typically forbids owning property beyond a bowl, a cup, two sets of clothing, and medical aids. Eating for pleasure is forbidden. Touching money is forbidden. Maintaining personal relationships is forbidden. Sādhus are expected to be indifferent to praise, blame, pleasure, and pain.



Corn

Indifferent to praise and blame is the one that would be hardest for me.



Herman

Jainism is the most extreme. Monasticism is encouraged and respected, with very strict rules. A Jain ascetic has no permanent home and no possessions. Wanders barefoot, never uses vehicles, doesn't use phones or electricity, doesn't prepare food, lives only on what is offered. Digambara monks renounce all clothing.



Corn

The Digambara detail is the one that stops people. Full renunciation, including of clothing.



Herman

Jainism and the now-extinct Ajivikas practiced the most severe austerities and self-mortification in pursuit of salvation. That's the far end of the spectrum.



Corn

And then Islam, which is the fascinating middle case.



Herman

Islam forbids monasticism. The Qur'an, Surah Al-Hadid, verse 27: But monasticism they invented, We ordained it not for them, only seeking Allah's pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance. So it's not just absent. It's explicitly rejected.



Corn

And Muhammad's teaching against excess is very much in the Jewish moderation mode. There's the story of companions who wanted to end their sexual lives, pray all night, fast continuously. And he says: Do not do that. Fast on some days and eat on others. Sleep part of the night and stand in prayer another part. For your body has rights upon you, your eyes have a right upon you, your wife has a right upon you, your guest has a right upon you.



Herman

He exclaimed three times: Woe to those who exaggerate. And: Moderation, moderation, for only with moderation will you succeed.



Corn

Body has rights upon you. That's the same move as Rav saying you'll be asked why you refused the enjoyment. The body is a party with a claim.



Herman

And yet Sufism developed a rich ascetic tradition. Zuhd. Celibacy, fasting, self-mortification. Fakirs, dervishes. Though early Sufis condemned ascetic practices as unnecessary public displays of what amounted to false piety. And ascetic Sufis were persecuted by both Sunni and Shia rulers.



Corn

The same pattern as Judaism. The mainstream forbids it, a minority does it anyway, the minority gets in trouble, and the scholars say the public version is fake piety.



Herman

There's a hadith that supplies the substitute: Every Prophet has Rahbaniyyah, monasticism. Jihad in the cause of Allah is the Rahbaniyyah of this Ummah. So the energy gets redirected into a different channel.



Corn

Sikhism. Which is a direct rejection of outward asceticism. Sikhism treats lust as a sin but insists man must share moral responsibility by leading the life of a householder. Being God-centered while being a householder is better than being an ascetic.



Herman

Guru Nanak's verse is the one to quote. Asceticism doesn't lie in ascetic robes, or in walking staff, nor in the ashes. Asceticism doesn't lie in the earring, nor in the shaven head, nor blowing a conch. Asceticism lies in remaining pure amidst impurities. Asceticism doesn't lie in mere words. He is an ascetic who treats everyone alike. Asceticism is to remain pure amidst impurities.



Corn

That's a redefinition, not a rejection. He's keeping the word and moving it inside.



Herman

Same move the rabbis make with the two inclinations. Don't amputate, redirect.



Corn

Taoism. The Quanzhen school developed extensive monastic traditions. The White Cloud Monastery in Beijing is a notable center.



Herman

The map is not clean at all. Some traditions forbid it, some celebrate it, some redefine it, some do all three at different points in their history.



Corn

Which brings us to hedonism, because Daniel flagged it as the obvious counterpoint and it deserves more than a nod.



Herman

Hedonism is the view that pleasure is the highest good. But it's not one thing. Epicurean hedonism is about moderation. Pleasure understood as the absence of pain, which means the wise person avoids the things that produce more pain than pleasure. Cyrenaic hedonism is about indulgence. Pleasure as the highest good, full stop, and the present moment is what matters.



Corn

The two hedonisms disagree with each other as much as they disagree with the ascetics.



Herman

They do. And that maps onto the religious debates in a way that's useful. The Epicurean is closer to Maimonides than to the Cyrenaic. Both of them are arguing for a measured relationship with pleasure. The Cyrenaic is the one the ascetic is actually arguing against.



Corn

Which means the real question across all of these traditions isn't pleasure versus no pleasure. It's what pleasure is for.



Herman

Judaism says pleasure is for sanctification and service. Enjoy the wine, but as part of serving God, not as the point. Buddhism says the response to circumstances matters more than the circumstances themselves. Islam says moderation is the path, and the body has rights. Sikhism says purity amidst impurities is the real asceticism. Jainism says the body must be conquered. Christianity says the body can be a site of redemptive suffering.



Corn

Are those different answers, or are they different vocabularies for the same human problem?



Herman

I don't know. Honestly, I don't know. And I think that's the right place to leave it.



Corn

There's one more thing I want to put on the table. The etymology. Asceticism began as training. Athletic exercise. And so many traditions turned training into suffering. Is the athlete's discipline the same as the monk's?



Herman

The athlete's discipline has a finish line and a reward. The monk's discipline, in the extreme versions, has neither. It's just the discipline. And I think that's the difference that matters. The athlete trains to win. The pillar-sitter sits because sitting is the point.



Corn

Which is either the deepest thing anyone has ever done or the most circular.



Herman

Those aren't mutually exclusive.



Corn

There's a detail about the practicalities of the Nazirite vow that I keep thinking about. The hair. You don't cut it for the whole term, and then at the end you shave it and burn it on the altar. So the physical record of the vow gets destroyed at the moment the vow ends.



Herman

That's right. The hair is the only visible marker. Once it's gone, there's no evidence.



Corn

Except the offerings. Which is where the sin offering comes in.



Herman

The ewe. The chatat.



Corn

The one that says something went wrong. I had a neighbor in Jerusalem, years ago. Not a religious guy, not observant, but he got sick, and while he was sick he made a deal. He's not a Nazirite, nothing like that, but he stopped drinking for a year. Told me about it afterward, over coffee. He said the strangest part wasn't the not-drinking. It was the day the year ended, and he realized he didn't want to start again, and he didn't know what that meant.



Herman

That's a real thing. The vow outlives the reason for it.



Corn

He said it felt less like a sacrifice and more like a habit that had gotten a promotion.



Herman

Which is where the sin offering starts to make sense. Not because the abstaining was wrong, but because the abstaining had stopped being about anything.



Corn

Then he started drinking again, and it was fine, and he never thought about it again.



Herman

The vow ended, and the record of it ended, and the man went back to his life.



Corn

Which is the whole structure of the Nazirite. You take the vow, you keep it, you bring the offering, you shave the head, you go home.



Herman

The tradition built in the exit.



Corn

That's the thing the pillar-sitter doesn't have.



Hilbert

The thing about the hair is that it's the only part of the vow you can't fake. Wine you can pour out when nobody's looking. Corpses you can avoid by staying home. But hair grows on its own, and everybody can count the months on your head. That's why the vow had a minimum of thirty days, by the way. Thirty days is exactly long enough for the hair to be obvious. Shorter than that and nobody would believe you.



Corn

The thirty days isn't arbitrary.



Hilbert

It's a receipt. You show the receipt, then you burn it. I used to keep receipts in a shoebox, back when receipts were paper. Then I threw the shoebox out, and I couldn't tell you what was in it.



Herman

Which is the shaving.



Corn

Did you ever take a vow like that?



Hilbert

No. But my brother-in-law did, sort of. Not a Nazirite vow, he wasn't religious that way. He just decided he wasn't going to talk for a month. Wrote everything on a notepad. His wife hated it. Said it was the most attention he'd ever paid her and she still couldn't stand it. He made it twenty-two days.



Herman

What broke it?



Hilbert

The dog. The dog got out, and he had to yell, and once he'd yelled he figured the month was over. He was fine about it. She wasn't.



Corn

Twenty-two days of silence, undone by a dog.



Hilbert

The dog didn't know. That's the thing about vows. The world doesn't cooperate with them. You can decide not to talk, but you can't decide that nothing will happen that requires you to talk.



Herman

Which is the argument against the extreme ascetic practices, actually. The ones the other ascetics rejected. The world keeps interrupting.



Hilbert

The ones who lasted, the ones who actually did it for years, they built a structure around themselves. The pillar. The cave. The monastery wall. Something that would keep the interruptions out. That's not piety, that's engineering.



Corn

The pillar is a piece of infrastructure.



Hilbert

Once you've built the infrastructure, you're not really renouncing the world. You're just living in a smaller one.



Herman

That's a sharp way to put it.



Hilbert

Anyway. Your levels are drifting on the left channel. I'll fix it in the edit.



Corn

The Beta Israel detail is the one I keep coming back to. Ethiopian Jews with a genuine monastic order of celibate hermits, surviving as late as 1900. Unique among Jewish communities.



Herman

Likely reflecting non-Jewish influence. That's the standard scholarly read.



Corn

Which is the escape hatch that the pattern always provides. Every time Judaism produces ascetics, someone says it came from the neighbors.



Herman

The Ashkenazi Hasidim, medieval Christian influence. Lurianic Kabbalah, the influence of the surrounding mystical culture. Beta Israel, the Ethiopian Christian monastic tradition next door. The Essenes, possibly Hellenistic.



Corn

Either Judaism is uniquely resistant to asceticism, or Judaism is normal and the ascetic movements within it are the exceptions that prove the rule.



Herman

Those are the same claim with different emphasis.



Corn

They are. And the Beta Israel case is the one that makes it hard to say the rejection is purely theological. Because if the theology made asceticism impossible, you wouldn't get a monastic order. You'd get nothing.



Herman

Unless the theology makes it possible but discouraged. Which is where I'd land. Possible, discouraged, and usually explained away after the fact.



Corn

Which is a much messier picture than the clean one. And I think the messy one is the true one.



Herman

The clean version is: Judaism says the world is good, so asceticism is wrong. The messy version is: Judaism says the world is good, and therefore asceticism is discouraged, except when it isn't, and when it isn't, it's usually because someone nearby was doing it first.



Corn

The same messiness shows up everywhere else. Islam forbids monasticism and produced the Sufis. Buddhism rejected extreme asceticism and produced sokushinbutsu. Christianity had ascetics telling other ascetics they'd gone too far.



Herman

Every tradition has a mainstream position and a minority that ignores it. The mainstream position is what gets written down. The minority is what actually happens.



Corn

The question Daniel asked, how different religions have grappled with this as part of their dogma, has a two-part answer. The dogma is usually clear. The practice is usually messier.



Herman

The dogma is usually clear in the direction of moderation. Which is the surprising finding. You'd expect the religious traditions to be the ascetic ones and the philosophers to be the moderate ones. It's closer to the opposite.



Corn

The philosophers are the ones who invented the word.



Herman

The philosophers invented the word, and then the religious traditions picked it up and did things with it the philosophers wouldn't have recognized. The athlete became the monk. The training became the suffering. And the exit got built in, or it didn't.



Corn

Which is where I want to leave it. Because the interesting question isn't whether asceticism is good or bad. It's whether the tradition that builds in an exit is doing something wiser than the tradition that doesn't.



Herman

The Nazirite shaves his head and goes home. The pillar-sitter stays on the pillar until he dies.



Corn

The tradition that says go home is the one that got accused of being soft.



Herman

It got accused of being soft by people who never had to go home.



Corn

One more thing, and then we're done. The review pitch.



Herman

If you enjoyed this cross-tradition look at asceticism, leave us a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Corn

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

The human-AI collaboration podcast. Email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. We'll be back soon.