

"SAMSON"
The Pathetic Hero

The Haftorah of this morning affords us an opportunity to return and re-investigate the figure of one of the most fascinating Biblical personalities, Samson. I am intrigued by the paradox he poses: the vulnerability of an apparently invincible hero, the weakness of a man so strong, the moral frailty of a Nazir -- one dedicated to abstemiousness and saintliness, and all that this has to say to us about the character and pretensions of both men and nations.

The Rabbis of the Talmud, the tradition of the Midrash, and Bible commentators from ancient times to contemporary, are all of two minds about Samson. Some are sympathetic, despite his failings. Others are antagonistic despite his virtues.

An example of the favorable attitude to Samson is a statement by the Talmud (Sotah 10a) that
אין אדם כדמותו של שמשון
Samson ruled over Israel even as their Father in Heaven does -- he was an eminently just man. Or, in the same Talmudic passage, we are told that in addition to his last words recorded in the Bible, Samson offered up a prayer before the Holy One, and said:
יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ
"Remember unto me, O Lord, the twenty-two years that I ruled over Israel, and not once during this time did I say to a single one of my people: 'move this cane for me from one place to another.'" He was considerate, compassionate, and never overbearing. He was, after all, one of the galaxy of שופטים (Judges), the great leaders of Israel, during the formative period of our people's history.

However, there is also a tradition that is quite critical of Samson. The hostility to him focuses largely on his lack of moral restraint. Thus, the Midrash tells us that
אין אדם כדמותו של שמשון
usually be found amongst the women. The several chapters of the Bible that speak of him tell us of three entanglements with Philistine women. Ralbag maintains that it was foreordained that Samson be a Nazirite so that at least there be some restraint on the powerful passions that raged in his breast. But this restraint failed. The seductiveness of Delilah prove more powerful than the prohibitions of his Nazirite vows. The Rabbis interpreted the name of Delilah as meaning

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

she dildelah -- attenuated his strength, diminished his heart, corrupted his conduct, so that the divine Presence left Samson.

As for myself, my own views have changed over the years, and I suppose they shall continue to do so. As of now, I would say that I am inclined more to the latter or less favorable view of Samson, although not without a good deal of sympathy.

Samson died a heroic death, but his life was not really heroic at all. It was, rather, what one might call a Scriptural tragedy, one that begins even before his birth with visions, with וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, with devotion -- and ends with an illicit love affair and moral bankruptcy. Like his father Manoah, Samson was dominated by a woman. But what a difference there was! Whereas Manoah was helped by his wife, for without her perceptiveness and wisdom and strength his name would never have been entered into the chronicles of Biblical history, Samson was destroyed by Delilah, the woman who dominated him. The figure of Samson emerges from the pages of the Bible as more pathetic than sympathetic.

His hair, which he did not cut because of his Nazirite status, is to me an important symbol of his personal charisma. I can imagine the effect of his appearance when he pounced upon the Philistines, and even as he moved among his fellow Israelites. Here was this giant, with his great muscles, and his flowing mane of wild hair. How awesome, how leonine, how overwhelming must have been the impression of this man of וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (power). Yet, like hair, this charisma was attached to Samson but not really part of his intrinsic being. It was an aspect of his personality, perhaps, but it never became an element of his character, his soul.

With all this charisma, Samson failed to become a true leader. He was a Danite who operated by himself. Unlike other judges, he was not even the leader of his own tribe. And certainly unlike such people as Samuel and David, he never even aspired to unify all the tribes into one nation. The Rabbis, perhaps somewhat whimsically, said that Samson was a loner -- like God himself! Thus, וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"Samson was like the truly One of the world-God; even as the One needs or seeks no help from others but does all by Himself,

so Samson the son of Manoah."

Samson was a man of power and charisma. While he used them for the service of his people, they never contributed to his own growth. He had a long list of achievement of saving Jews; he was a **גיבור**. But he hardly qualifies as a wise man. The gestalt of Samson as he emerges from the pages of the Bible is not that of a truly religious personality or a man of Torah.

Samson trivializes his **חיות** (power) for petty affairs, for shallow love and illicit romance. He allowed Delilah to abuse his special qualities -- his hair, his **אִתְּנָתוֹ**, his power, his charisma -- and so he lost it. Samson remained, at the end of his life, exposed: all the world was there to see that his unique qualities were not really part of him, they were external to him. Just as the scissors snipped off his crown of Nazirite hair, so was the cunning of a woman enough to reduce his power and diminish his charm to nought.

The Israeli writer and poet Abraham Kariv may be overstating the case, but certainly he has a point when he maintains that Samson gave **חַיִּיתוֹ** (strength) a bad name. His life, Kariv maintains, was a kind of divine experiment in joining **חַיִּיתוֹ** and **קִדְּשׁוֹ**, strength and holiness. But somehow the synthesis was not successful. Samson contained elements of both, but the gears did not mesh, the combination was never completed. And therefore **חַיִּיתוֹ** never became a distinctive Jewish virtue. Yes, Jews may have **חַיִּיתוֹ**, and sometimes they must possess power and utilize it -- it is through the exercise of power that we have a State of Israel today. But it never became part of the catalogue of great Jewish characteristics such that you would hold them forth as a model for future generations. Perhaps we can put it this way: Samson remains a Biblical Moshe Dayan.

An appropriate metaphor for Samson's type of charisma can be taken from one of his most famous riddles. The Bible tells us that he ripped apart a lion with his bare hands, and in the carcass of the lion honeybees gathered and Samson ate the honey they produced. Thereupon a riddle occurred to him and he tried it out as a bet upon his Philistine friends. The riddle was **מִן הַחֲזָקִים יָצָא הַדָּבָר הַחֲדָשׁ**, "from the strong there came forth the sweet." By this he meant that from the lion there came forth honey.

Samson indeed had both: the power and strength of a lion, and the personality and attractiveness that might be associated with sweetness. And his charisma came from his strength. But there is a curious tinniness to his life. He never becomes real. What is wrong is that the lion is -- dead. The sweetness

is lifeless. Even Samson's sense of humor leaves me cold. His is a charm that issues from the strength of illusion, from fundamental emptiness. Samson remains a man more to be pitied than admired or condemned.

Added to all this, he was a proud and vain man. The great historian of the Second Commonwealth, Josephus, in his Antiquities of the Jews, reminds us that Samson boasted that he smote a thousand men with a jawbone of an ass. At the moment of his triumph he did not attribute his success to God. Only later when he was vexed and thirsty and dejected did he appeal to God. But at the moment of his greatness he spoke only of his own victories.

But wherefrom this arrogance, so uncharacteristic of other Judges and other Jewish leaders?

The answer, I submit, is somewhat in the spirit of the Yiddish expression *וועלכע זיך אים און און* -- the bride is so beautiful that it becomes a defect. Samson's problem was that he was too successful. Everything went his way. His life was an unbroken string of triumphs and he received the adulation of his grateful but not too perceptive people. And all this made him think that he is invincible.

His egocentricity was not of the repulsive, adult kind. Unlike a Goliath who boasts when he confronts David, you cannot feel antagonistic and angry with him. Samson's vanity is childish and childlike. He strikes you as one who experienced arrested development: his infantile myth of omnipotence always remained with him. Since Samson never experienced defeat, he simply grew up with that same feeling of superiority. And it was this that brought about his downfall.

As an aside, read this psychological process on a larger scale, and you understand part of the problem of the United States in Vietnam. Leader after leader of this country has been afraid to pull us out and "call it quits," because he did not want to be the first President to preside over an American defeat. Our difficulty is that we are a country who for 200 years never lost a war -- and therefore we are bleeding ourselves and a little country to death in the present involvement in Vietnam. Some time ago a distinguished Senator, Mr. Aiken of Vermont, suggested to the Senate that the United States proclaim that it won the war, so that now we can all pull out and go home and have peace. What he was doing was indulging this childish quality in the American psychology -- since we never lost, we dare not lose for the first time. It is Samson's problem on an international scale.

Compare Samson with two other Biblical heroes and see how the point comes out more clearly. Joseph was also charming, attractive, and politically powerful. But at the climax of his life, at the great test, he did not rule over his brothers or tell them how important he is. Instead, he said

אני לא אדם , it is not my doing but God's doing. Where did he get this sensible attitude, despite his success? From the years that he sat in prison. His failures made him a success. He had enough insecurity to temper him into realism. Whereas Samson never had the good fortune to fail.

Similarly, compare Samson with David. David, facing Goliath, speaks not of himself and his own power, but rather of the God of Israel. He was wise enough to do so because he was the youngest and least prominent in the family. He was overlooked and, fortunately, studiously ignored.

David suffered exile, hunger, and misery. And so, when at the height of his career he commits the moral blunder with Bathsheba and is reproached by the Prophet Nathan, he has the courage and the moral strength to repent, to do תשובה . Contrast this with Samson, from whom we hear not a single word of regret or sorrow or contrition or apology. Samson was not able to do so because never before in his life did he have to say, "I am sorry." (Perhaps our current generation, raised on a certain kind of novel and movie, might explain this by saying that Samson was in love with himself, and "being in love means never having to say I'm sorry"...) And so, when Samson was confronted by the great crises of his life, he crumbled morally as well as physically. At his moment of truth, he was found wanting. And at the end of his days, he lost his vision much before he lost his sight as the Philistines plucked out his eyes.

It is for this reason that I find his end dramatic -- when he pulls down the whole palace killing the Philistines with himself and crying out אלהים אלהים , "let me die with the Philistines" -- but not quite as inspiring as I used to find it in the past. There were times when I returned to the story that I read this passage with great admiration. I still find it dramatic, but no longer admirable. Yes, Samson killed his enemies, bringing his world crashing down around him, and perhaps he had no choice and it was better that he did it. But now I realize something else: he left his own people a defeated people, all because of his vanity and his weakness.

So I feel sorry for Samson, but I can neither respect him

nor truly like him. He is a hero, but a pathetic and pitiful one.

There are Biblical and Talmudical figures whom I recognize in contemporary life. With all necessary changes being made, I can respond to the contours of the personality of an Aaron or a Solomon or a David or a Rabbi Akiva reincarnated, as it were, in some living figure. A Samson, however, is a non-repetitive character. I have never quite met a replica of Samson the son of Manoah, but there are aspects of his personality that I recognize all about me -- and even in me. It is for this reason that this story is so very important. We must all search out within ourselves these particular qualities and reactions. This holds true especially for those who are more endowed with talent and potentiality; such people should be doubly alert to his particular problem. And most of all, those of us who are parents, whom God has given the responsibility for a future generation and who normally feel inclined to indulge our children and spare them from pain, we ought to look back at the personality and history of Samson and learn our lesson.

The Rabbis told us (Sotah 10a) that Samson was one of five Biblical figures created בְּיָמֵינוּ, with a divine, superhuman talent. Samson's was his חַיָּת, his חַיָּת, his strength. But he abused it. At a critical moment in his life, his power and his charisma failed him. Better yet, he failed them. He won all the battles, but he lost the war. So, in the Samson story, the Bible is not merely recording history. It is teaching us something -- about ourselves.