

SAMSON AND SAMUEL: TWO STYLES OF LEADERSHIP

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The stories of the lives of Samson and Samuel and their accomplishments are preceded by the stories of events immediately before their birth. Both are the sons of a mother who heretofore had been deprived of children, and who had apparently suffered great emotional pain because of her infertility. However, their reactions to this deprivation differ sharply, as do the personalities of their offspring, and the type of leadership they offered to their people.

The birth of Samson was dramatically announced to his mother. The message was conveyed by an angel, appearing in the form of an ordinary human being, who imparted the instructions that this son was to become a Nazirite, who was not permitted to drink any wine nor cut his hair during his entire life. This special status was ordained to commence pre-natally.

She, the mother, was commanded to abstain from wine and "unclean" food during the time of her pregnancy. His special status, so the messenger informed the mother, would destine him to become a national leader, one who would initiate Israel's victory over the Philistines. The mother felt inadequate to absorb these instructions, although they appear to have been quite clearly expressed. She excitedly searched for her husband, but by the time she found him the heavenly messenger had already departed.

The prayer of the couple for a repeat appearance was granted. The same angel visited once more. What appears mysterious at this point is the fact that he showed himself, once again, to the prospective mother at a time when she was all alone, in spite of the fact that she had so clearly demonstrated her feeling of inadequacy to receive and understand the commands without her husband's presence; an action that cries out for an explanation. This time, however, he waited until the appearance of the prospective father, Manoah, to whom he almost verbatim repeated the original instructions.

In contrast to the messengers who had visited Abraham with a similar prediction about an heir to be born, the angel visiting Manoah and his wife refused the hospitality offered by the prospective parents. He disappeared in the
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rising smoke of a hastily prepared sacrifice, outside the sanctuary which should have been the proper place for offering it.

We must also try to explain how the heavenly messenger could impose the status of a Nazarite upon an unborn child. The commandments in the Torah on this subject imply a personal vow, an attempt of a person to move closer to God and to lead a more devoted, pure life. No other instance is known in biblical history where the status of a Nazarite is initiated by an outsider, not even by a parent. Neither can we find an instance where the vow of a Nazarite produced superior physical strength as in this story.

Last but not least, it remains a mystery how the life and accomplishments of Samson warranted such a dramatic announcement to his parents. His life and accomplishments were, after all, not crowned with success. He fought the Philistines single-handedly and instilled fear amongst them; but he totally failed to create an army which could have utilized his victories and eliminated the opposing forces forever. His deeds did not bring about a lasting military success, but, rather, were a string of actions demonstrating personal strength, courage and prowess, which seem to have brought about only temporary improvement for his people. Why, then, would his birth be so miraculously predicted, when much greater biblical heroes did not have similar prenatal announcements? Not even the birth of Moses was predicted in a similar ceremony.

One approach for answering all the above questions would be a less literal reading of these events. The mother, who felt the first signs of pregnancy after so long a period of infertility, was transformed into a state of vastly exaggerated emotions and expectations. To her, this child soon to be born is not just a normal procreation. Her joy and excitement, combined with a strong religious devotion, creates expectations of a national heroic leader to grow within her. The appearance and predictions of the angel are a vision which "confirm" her inner hyperbolic expectations. She feels, she hears, and she sees the hand of the Creator. So strong is her belief in the miraculous event that she can impart it to her husband, who eventually joins her in this belief. The text, in an unusual expression, draws this to the reader's attention by the words *And Manoah walked behind his wife* (Jud. 13:11).¹

The narrator of Samson's birth and life has masterfully translated the mother's effusive feelings into an event of a supernatural messenger bringing this

information to the parents. The narrator has simultaneously woven into the story the poignant questions, posed above, to alert the reader to its intended meaning.

The exuberance of the mother's emotions and her hyperbolic expectations are transferred to the son, be it genetically or through the environmental influence or a combination of both. The superhuman strength with which Samson is endowed and the courage and devotion to his people which is described make him a hero, but also sow the seeds of what later defeats him. He can tear apart a lion with his bare hands, he can kill hundreds of Philistines when the spirit of God comes upon him. But the same exuberance of emotions prompts him to surrender to Delilah the power which enables her to destroy him, after she had so clearly demonstrated her total lack of loyalty to him. Obviously, his exuberance of emotions won out over clear thinking.

The detailed description of his defeat by the enemy and his sufferings at their hands seems to symbolize a rejection of Samson's type of leadership by the author of the Book of Judges.

During the same era, a short time later, we encounter, in the Book of I Samuel, another woman who had been childless for a long time and, like Samson's mother, conceived later in life. She is the one who bore Samuel. In contrast to Samson's mother, she is identified by name: Hannah. This is the earliest indication that her actions and attitude are given greater approval. In the Bible, anonymity is sometimes a rejection of a person's action.² Samson's father is named, but in Samuel's case not only is the name of the father given but also the names of his forebears for several generations, another sign of approval.

Hannah did not meet with any supernatural messenger. She applied herself, thoughtfully, to the task of reaching out to God with prayer and devotion in order to obtain the blessing of offspring. Her silent, innovative approach to her Creator was destined to become the standard form of prayer among Jews to this day.

Samuel, son of this great woman, was similar to Samson in that he mirrored the characteristics of his mother. He became an acknowledged religious leader of his people, and was the one who began the unification of the tribes under a king. He was the one who later was privileged to anoint David as the second king of the Israelites; a king whose role in the history of Israel needs

no elaboration. It was the leadership of Samuel that initiated the period of David and Solomon. It was the child of Hannah whose religious leadership guided his people to the greatest success of this era.

Of Samuel, when he reached the distinction of being a prophet, we read that he traveled among his people to teach and promulgate the word of God with religious fervor (I Sam. 7:16). We read of Samuel's reaction when the Philistines threatened the Judean population (Ch. 7). Verses 8 and 9 describe the prayer and sacrifices which he initiated to promote successfully the defense of his people. Could there be a greater distinction between this and Samson's reaction under similar circumstances? Where one smote the enemy single-handedly, the other used prayer and sacrifices to increase his countrymen's confidence. In Verse 13 we are told that for the remainder of Samuel's life the Israelites maintained a superiority in their old rivalry against the same foe. He earned his countrymen's respect and love, as shown in the report of his retirement in Chapter 12. He differed from Samson's spectacular actions by his thoughtful and spiritual leadership.

In his article "The Book of Samuel: A Literary Masterpiece" (*JBQ* Vol. XXIX:1, January-March 2001), Shimon Bakon describes the masterful manner in which the author of the Book of Samuel uses the art of symbolic presentations. The comparison between Samuel and Samson fits well into this pattern. After Samuel had anointed David quietly in the home of David's family, the first act which the future king performs in public is his confrontation with and defeat of Goliath, the Philistine counterpart to Samson. No longer, so this victory proclaims, does brutal strength rule. Samson has been superseded by Samuel, who has expressed his confidence in David.

The Samuel Strategy is quite naturally the one which religion would favor. Samson's strength was in his body, even when *the spirit of the Lord came upon him* (Jud. 14:19). Samuel, in contrast, taught, judged and prayed, as his mother had done. The Samuel Strategy is heralded by the prophet Zechariah, when he proclaims: *Not by armed might nor by strength, but through My spirit, says the Lord of Hosts* (Zech. 4:7). It is also repeatedly affirmed by David in his Psalms.³

The inclusion of Samson's life story in the Book of Judges contains a lesson of its own. There are times in history when a Samson and his kind of leader-

ship is needed, be it for survival or for the conquest of the Promised Land. In the Book of Judges a number of such leaders are therefore included.

However, by drawing our attention to the similarity of the births of Samson and Samuel, both of which occurred after so many years of frustration for their mothers, the biblical text compares their respective leadership. It is unquestionably Samuel, the one who succeeds in bringing about the kingdom of David, for whom greater approval is expressed.

NOTES

1. Compare TB Berachot 61a, where Manoah is given an inferior status.
 2. For example: in the Book of Ruth, the relative who refused to marry Ruth is not identified by name. The daughters of Lot are called *the elder* and *the younger*; no names are recorded.
 3. Most prominently in Psalms 20, 8/9, 33, 16ff.
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QUESTIONS from Rabbi Hayyim Halpern's book **TORAH DIALOGUES**

1. **What important general principle of Jewish law do you think the Talmud derives from Leviticus 18:5 "You shall keep My laws . . . by the pursuit of which man shall live"?**
2. **A military intelligence report should be factual and objective. At what pivotal point in the Israelite scouts' majority report (Num. 13) does it turn from objectivity to a subjective evaluation? How does the minority respond?**

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