

SAMSON: A TRAGEDY IN THREE ACTS

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In contrast to Greek tragedy, which has a "disastrous ending brought about by a central character impelled by fate" (Webster's definition), biblical tragedy traces the unhappy ending to a flaw in the characteristics of the central character. Thus biblical tragedy is close to Shakespearean tragedy, where the disastrous ending is caused by "mortal weakness, psychological maladjustment or social pressures" (Webster). King Saul is a classic tragic figure, and so is Samson. Groomed by Providence to greatness, Samson by his own weakness destroys his chances to attain greatness and also destroys himself.

The story of Samson, with his daring exploits and his foibles, leads to his tragic end, while his life unfolds against the background of growing Philistine mastery of territory allotted to the tribe of Dan. As an individual, selected by God to be the first to *deliver Israel from the Philistines* Samson is equipped with supernatural strength and fatal weaknesses for Philistine women. He is a nazir from the womb on, who does not understand the very nature of being a nazir, and is enmeshed in the tension between forces he did not understand. His life has a plethora of contradictions.

As a "judge" he differs from the other judges. They engage in struggle to restore freedom to Israel, but Samson's actions against the Philistines are personal vendettas for "wrongs" done to him. Neither does he display any leadership, nor is it recorded that he inspires any religious renaissance.

The great 17th-century English poet John Milton wrote the tragic poetic drama *Samson Agonistes* which presents Samson as "the type and precursor of the Christian hero. He suffered for his people; in the very pit of despair, he was rendered suddenly capable of God's revivifying grace."¹ However, the story of Samson related in Chapters 13–16 of the Book of Judges can be presented as a biblical tragedy in three acts: Promising Youth, As a Driven Leaf, Downfall. It deals with the unique personality of Samson as an individual torn between Providence and freedom of choice.

ACT I: PROMISING YOUTH

Even informed readers of the Hebrew Bible may be surprised to learn that Samson is the only biblical personality burdened prenatally with the nazirite code of conduct and a sacred task.

Abraham bursts upon the scene of history at the age of 75. Moses has reached the ripe age of 80 before, at the Burning Bush, he most reluctantly accepts the task of liberator. Samuel receives a Divine call as a youngster whom his mother had dedicated to the service of the Lord. Of Samson it is told that a messenger of God appears to the barren wife of Manoah, a woman whose name is not even mentioned, and announces that she will bear a son. She is told that she must abstain from drinking wine or any other intoxicant, and from eating anything ritually unclean. The boy will be a nazir to God from the womb on, and no razor shall touch his hair. Above all, he shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines (Jud. 13:2-5).

Nothing is recorded of his youth. All we are told is: *The boy grew up and the Lord blessed him. And the spirit of the Lord began to move him in the encampments of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol* (13:24-25). Here is the place to fill in two lacunae in the narration. Scripture is strangely silent, giving no indication in what ways the spirit of the Lord moved him. Yet, there may be some hint in the singularity of the Samson narration.

Throughout the Book of Judges we meet the following refrain: Israel does evil before the Lord and in His anger He delivers them to an enemy. Israel repents and appeals for the Lord's help and He sends them a savior. The exception to this formula is the seeming lack of response in the Samson narration when, falling back to evil ways, Israel is delivered by God into the hands of the Philistines. Perhaps we can give some credit to Samson that in his youth, *gripped by the spirit of the Lord*, he initiated some religious revival in Israel and wreaked havoc on the Philistine invaders. It must be assumed that he did something that prompted his elevation to the position of judge.

The second lacuna that should be addressed refers to Samson as a nazir. Was he bound to all the terms of a nazir, as was his mother, or only the one about his hair? Traditional commentators, such as Radak (David Kimchi), followed by Yehezkiel Kaufman, each for his own reasons inclined to the second alternative. Logic, however, would suggest that if his mother had

been commanded, in preparation for his future calling, that before his birth she must abstain from intoxicants – a prime condition of nazirism – and from defiling foods, this code of behavior should apply even more to Samson himself.

ACT II: AS A DRIVEN LEAF

TIMNAH

Without transition, Act II begins with the seemingly innocuous report that Samson went down to Timnah, where he noticed a Philistine girl whom he wished to marry. To his parents' protest *Is there none among the daughters . . . among all our people . . . ?* Samson replies: *'Get me that one, for she is the one who pleases me [literally: is right in my eyes]*'. There follows a significant editorial comment: *His father and mother did not realize that this was the Lord's doing. He was seeking a pretext against the Philistines (14: 3-4).*

This episode has prompted an insightful rabbinical comment: "Samson rebelled (against God) through his eyes, but is it not written: 'His father and mother did not realize that this was the Lord's doing?' When he went . . . he nevertheless followed his own inclination" (Sotah 9b).

What we have here is a magnificent paradox. Providence decrees for a certain purpose that Samson choose a Philistine wife, yet the fact that he follows his own inclination is considered a rebellion against God. Both Providence and freedom of choice are fundamental beliefs in the Torah logically excluding each other. But Scripture cuts the Gordian knot and, undeterred by the logical difficulty, overrides it by having both act upon Samson. One may perhaps sense a subtle censure of Samson. Three times it is stated that *he went down* to Timnah (14: 1, 5, 10). *Went down* may be only a topographical term, but may also have a certain pejorative overtone; namely, that he came down from promising heights.

OUT OF THE STRONG CAME SOMETHING SWEET

On the journey to Timnah, Samson was attacked by a young lion which, gripped by the spirit of the Lord, *he tore asunder with his bare hands* (14:6). A year later, returning to marry that girl from Timnah, he found the lion's carcass now populated by a swarm of bees. He scraped out the honey, eating

it as he went on. At the wedding festivities, that lasted for seven days, Samson chose 30 Philistine companions and posed to them this riddle: '*Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet*' (14:14).

Unable to solve this riddle, the Philistines threatened to set fire to Samson's wife and to her father's household if she did not disclose the solution to them. This started a chain of events related in Chapter 14. What is of interest to us is the accurate portrayal of Samson in this incident; a slayer of a lion yet unable to control his appetite. Malbim in his commentary states: "Because he [Samson] went to take a Philistine woman he stumbled to eat 'unclean' honey [from a carcass] because he lusted after unclean things." It should be recalled that Samson's mother was told to keep away from "unclean" food when she was carrying a child who was to become a nazir. Samson betrayed this trust when he ate the unclean honey with abandonment *as he went on as he ate*.

It is puzzling that none of the sages or traditional commentators censures Samson for making a feast [*mishteh*] in Timnah to celebrate his wedding. The Hebrew term *mishteh* implies consumption of alcoholic drinks (see Est. 1:5, Dan. 1:5), thus breaking another nazirite prohibition.

LEHI

The contrast of strength and weakness in Samson's personality come to the fore in the incident at Lehi (15:4-19). The Philistines, provoked by the destructive pranks wrought upon them by Samson, deliver an ultimatum demanding that the men of Judah deliver him to them. Three thousand Judeans come to Samson in order to hand him over as a prisoner to the Philistines. When they promise not to slay him, he permits them to take him, heavily bound. Again, *gripped by the spirit of the Lord*, he easily tears the ropes that bound him and with a donkey's jawbone as a weapon slays 1,000 Philistines.

Let us note the irony of the situation: 3,000 Judeans come to take their "judge" as prisoner. Instead of inspiring them to take a stand, rebel, and shake off the tyranny of the Philistines, he lets himself be bound by them. One is reminded of what Gideon achieved with a mere 300 men, and how Barak's foot soldiers faced the overwhelming forces of the Canaanite coalition under Sisera. We have already seen the weakness of Samson unable to resist the

honey scraped from a carcass or to abstain from participating in a *mishteh*. Now we see him as slayer of 1,000 Philistines with just a crude weapon, but unable or unwilling to assume the leadership demanded of a judge.

ACT III – DOWNFALL AND TRAGEDY

SAMSON AND THE HARLOT OF GAZA

Chapter 16 informs us that *once Samson went to Gaza, where he met a harlot and slept with her*. To extricate himself from an attempted ambush by the Philistines, Samson, by sheer physical strength, removed the two gateposts of Gaza. The rabbis comment on this episode as follows: "The beginning of his [Samson's] degeneration occurred in Gaza . . . as it is written . . . and Samson went to Gaza, where he met a harlot" (T. Sotah 9b). This is quite perceptive on the part of the rabbis, and is based on three considerations. First, the only redeeming feature of this sorry incident is the fact that he is still alive and will engage in the crowning feat of his career, his encounter with Delilah and the consequences of her treachery. Second, outside of wreaking some damage to the gates of Gaza and making fools of its inhabitants, we see Samson engaged in the satisfaction of his base inclination, without any benefit to Israel. In this episode his feat of strength is not accomplished by the usual *gripped by the spirit of the Lord*, as if to indicate the Lord's disappointment with him. Third, prior to this event, we are told that *he led Israel in the days of the Philistines for twenty years* (15:20), possibly hinting that until the incident in Gaza Samson was considered a judge, and what he did in Gaza was entirely irrelevant to his function and purpose to be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines.

SAMSON AND DELILAH

The story of Samson and Delilah is well known. It has been set to music as an opera, made into a film, and the redoubtable statesman Jabotinsky wrote a book *Philistines Over You*. However appealing, such treatment of the fateful encounter between Samson and Delilah does not penetrate to the core of this story. The alienation of Samson from his calling and from God, already discernable in the episode of the harlot of Gaza, is now exacerbated in his fateful liaison with Delilah. After repeated urgings on the part of Delilah, Samson reveals his "secret": *No razor has ever touched my head, for I have*

been a nazir to God If my hair were cut, my strength would leave me' (16:17).

Two questions should be raised. Did Samson ever understand the true significance of being a nazir? Did he believe that it was his hair he had arranged in seven locks, that gave him his supernatural strength? Scripture sets the record straight by informing us that Samson, overcome by weakness after his hair was cut, *did not know that the Lord has departed from him* (16:20).

OUT OF THE DEPTH I CALL YOU

This first verse of Psalm 130 is an apt description of the depth to which the mighty Samson has descended. Captured by the Philistines, his eyes gouged, bound and shackled with fetters of brass, Samson has become a mill slave in prison. He reaches the nadir of humiliation when 3,000 men and women gather in the temple of the Philistine idol Dagon to celebrate the capture of their enemy. In their merriment they call for him "*le-sahek lanu,*" variously translated as "to make us sport," or "to dance." In short, to amuse them. Samson, led by a boy to stand between two pillars that support the building, offers this prayer: '*O Lord, please remember and give me strength just this once, O God, to take revenge on the Philistines'* (16:19). With the cry '*Let me die with the Philistines,*' he shakes the pillars and causes the collapse of the temple with its 3,000 occupants.

In his last moments, Samson has achieved reconciliation with God, finally recognizing that He is the source of his strength, and reconciliation with his basic calling *to begin to save Israel from the hands of the Philistines.*

CONCLUSION

Samson's career, which began prenatally and ended in tragedy, is pervaded by Providence that entrusted him with a double task; to be a nazir and to help Israel against the Philistines. While Providence, Divine rule in human affairs, is a characteristic feature of biblical religion, so is free will, without which there is no moral decision-making. Samson is like a leaf driven between these two forces. He does not seem to comprehend the purpose and nature of being a nazir, which was both a symbol and a reminder of his calling, as well as a brake for his uncontrollable inner drives. He freely indulges his predilections

for Philistine women, who provide the *casus belli* with the Philistines on one hand, and are the cause of his downfall on the other. He cannot resist defilement as a nazir by scraping the honey from a carcass, or participating in a *mishteh*.

In his last two adventures, with the harlot of Gaza and with Delilah, he seems oblivious of his true calling, resulting in total alienation from God. Only *de profundis* does he achieve reconciliation with God, when he recognizes that He is the source of his strength, and with his calling, when he destroys the temple of the Philistines and its 3,000 inhabitants, dying himself in the process.

Superficial reading of the story seems to indicate a series of unconnected episodes, strung together around the personality of Samson. However, on a deeper level, the stories reveal dynamic movement of a man endowed with great physical strength and daring but handicapped by spiritual weakness. They culminate in the tragedy of being blinded by the Philistines as a punishment for rebelling against God through his eyes and by his own folly, blending in supreme irony Providence and free will.

And, finally, the story begins with Samson being burdened with the task of initiating the struggle against the Philistines, hinting that this task will be completed by King David.

NOTES

1. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 2nd Revised Ed*, Vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968) p. 1141.



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