

# SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE

Yael Shemesh

Suicide would seem to be a universal phenomenon, found in all ages and all societies. A particular society's attitude toward suicide, however, depends on the time and the culture. Many societies have barred any display of respect for suicides; some have even desecrated their corpses.<sup>1</sup> Tractate Semahot (2:1) prescribes various sanctions against suicide victims and limits mourning rites for them. So does the *Shulhan Arukh* (Y.D. 345:1). On the other hand, the norms of some cultures encourage suicide in specific cases: the Hindu custom of suttee, in which a widow is willingly cremated on her husband's funeral pyre, the Japanese Kamikaze pilots, who sacrificed themselves in suicide attacks on American ships during World War II, and the contemporary wave of suicide bombers in several Muslim societies, who are admired by many and seen as pursuing a martyr's death even though suicide is strictly prohibited by Islam.

In Jewish culture, by contrast, suicide is viewed sympathetically only in extreme cases, such as a threat to personal liberty as at Masada, or in attempts at forced conversion, as in Germany during the Crusades, in York in 1190, and other instances in medieval Europe.

## SUICIDE IN THE BIBLE

The Bible documents six cases of suicide:<sup>2</sup>

1. Abimelech son of Gideon (Jud. 9:54)
2. Samson (Jud. 16:25–31)
3. Saul (I Sam. 31:3–4; I Chr. 10:3–4)
4. Saul's squire (I Sam. 31:5; I Chr. 10:5)
5. Ahithophel (II Sam. 17:23)
6. Zimri (I Kg. 16:18–19)

The present article compares and contrasts these instances and surveys the biblical narrator's attitude toward suicide. In particular it examines the literary function of the suicide story in the broader context of what we know about the individuals who opted for this drastic measure.

## ABIMELECH (JUDGES 9:54)

After the woman from Thebez drops an upper millstone on Abimelech's head and breaks his skull, the gravely wounded Abimelech instructs his squire: *'Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, "A woman killed him!"'* Without delay, his attendant stabbed him, and he died (Jud. 9:54).

Abimelech opts for suicide out of pride, shame at his condition, and concern for his image. His wound is so severe that he cannot kill himself but must have his squire deliver the fatal blow. The literary function of the instruction emphasizes his humiliation; he has been brought low by a woman. His attempt to obscure this fact by having his squire deal the *coup-de-grâce* is unsuccessful, however, and he becomes a byword among future generations (II Sam. 11:21).

Abimelech's squire complies with his master's request, unlike Saul's squire (I Sam. 31:4). Also unlike Saul's squire, Abimelech's feels no solidarity with his master and does not kill himself after obeying his injunction. Some attribute their different reactions to the fact that because Saul, unlike Abimelech, is the anointed of the Lord, his squire dare not raise a hand against him. To this we may perhaps add a literary and theological motive: Abimelech's career ends with the civil war that broke out between him and his former allies the Shechemites, which the narrator explains as the result of Divine intervention (Jud. 9:23). Jotham's curse – *'may fire issue from Abimelech and consume the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo, and may fire issue from the citizens of Shechem and Beth-millo and consume Abimelech!'* (9:20) – is implemented in full, with its final cadence the fact that it is Abimelech's squire who kills him. Although the young man is obeying the command of his mortally-wounded master, on the symbolic plane Abimelech's death coincides with Jotham's curse, in that he is killed by one of his own henchmen.

As soon as he is dead, Abimelech vanishes from the stage. As befits his wicked character, we hear nothing about his burial or that any of his subjects or supporters mourned for him. Instead, the story concludes with the narrator's statement that Abimelech's fate was part of the Divine plan to punish him and the people of Shechem (9:56–57).

## SAMSON (JUDGES 16:25-31)

Samson's story is the only one in the Bible in which the overt motive for suicide is revenge: *'Give me strength just this once, O God, to take revenge of the Philistines, if only for one of my two eyes'* (16:28). Here the goal is not to kill oneself, but to use one's death to kill others (like the Japanese Kamikaze and the Muslim shahidim). In practice, Samson's end is of a piece with the entire history of his relations with the Philistines, which consists of a bloody cycle of revenge and counter-revenge. It is plausible, however, that the overt motive of revenge was supplemented by a desire to end the hopeless life of pain, helplessness, and humiliation endured by someone who has lost his freedom and eyesight.

The final scene presents a sharp and ironic contrast between the Philistines' celebration of Samson's downfall and capture, which they attribute to the assistance of their god Dagon, and the utter defeat they are dealt by Samson with the help of his Deity. There is also an inherent irony in the Philistines' hymn of triumph and thanksgiving, which concludes with a reference in the past tense to the losses they had suffered at Samson's hands *who slew so many of us* (v. 24). They do not imagine that their defeats by Samson are not all past history and that in a very short while they themselves will be added to the long list of Samson's Philistine victims. What is more, all of those earlier losses will be as nothing compared to the last one, as the narrator states: *Those who were slain by him as he died outnumbered those who had been slain by him when he lived* (v. 30).

Because of the special nature of Samson's suicide, which aims to kill others, it is the only case in which the suicide must plan his steps carefully and conceal his intentions from those around him. He explains his request to the boy to lead him to the supporting pillars of the temple as due to his weakness – he wants to lean against them (v. 26). There is some irony in the fact that Samson performs his last heroic deed, which requires super-human strength, by pretending to be weak and being seen as such by the Philistines.

In contrast to the Philistines' call, *when their hearts were merry*, to bring Samson to amuse them – *'Call Samson . . . So they called Samson* (v. 25), Samson calls in his bitterness to the Lord, an entreaty that will shortly put an end to the revels of the spectators who are enjoying his weakness and shame: *Then Samson called to the Lord* (v. 28).<sup>3</sup> Samson's story is also unusual in

that the hero needs Divine assistance to realize his suicide plan. Had the Lord not granted his prayer for strength, Samson could not have shattered the supporting pillars of the temple with his bare hands and brought down the building on himself and his enemies. But the Lord hears Samson's plea and restores his strength, thereby consenting to his idea of killing himself along with the Philistines.

It is no accident that Samson is the only hero in whose death the Lord is actively involved, given that the Lord was also involved in his miraculous birth (Jud. 13). Both instances of Divine intervention serve the same national goal: *'He shall be the first to deliver Israel from the Philistines'* (13:5). The Lord's direct participation in Samson's death also serves a theological motive: the Philistines' joy at vanquishing Samson plays on a religious chord, in that they attribute their victory to their god Dagon and their merrymaking takes place in Dagon's temple, where they are making sacrifices as thank-offerings. The Philistines' final discomfiture is also a defeat for their god, who is revealed to be powerless even in his own sacred precincts.

At first sight, Samson abandoned his religious and national vocation in favor of the company of the Philistines (or, more precisely, of Philistine women). Despite his preferences and proclivities, however, the Lord compels him, time after time, to fulfill his mission and strike at the Philistines, exploiting his human frailties to achieve the objectives of Providence, as the narrator states explicitly: *'His father and mother did not realize that this was the Lord's doing: He was seeking a pretext against the Philistines'* (14:4). All of Samson's blows against the Philistines stem from personal motives and not from national feeling and a sense of his vocation. In this respect, Samson's death is no different from his previous combats with the Philistines, given that the motive for his ultimate act of revenge is also personal rather than national: *'to take revenge of the Philistines, if only for one of my two eyes'* (16:28).

Nevertheless, Samson's suicide has become a national and cultural paradigm, to a large extent because of the hero's last words, a cry of revenge and victory: *'Let me die with the Philistines!'* (v. 30).<sup>4</sup> That the narrator does not disapprove of Samson's suicide and instead views it as a means by which he realized his vocation and mission is confirmed by the description of the final

honors he received and the note that he was buried in his ancestral tomb:

*His brothers and all his father's household came down and carried him up and buried him in the tomb of his father Manoah, between Zorah and Eshtaol (v. 31).*

SAUL (1 SAMUEL 31:3–4)

The story of Saul's suicide, at least in its framework, is reminiscent of Abimelech's; a king or ruler finds himself defeated on the battlefield and asks his squire to kill him. There is even a linguistic echo between their requests: Abimelech, '**Draw your sword and kill me**' (Jud. 9:54), and Saul, '**Draw your sword, and thrust me through with it**' (I Sam. 31:4). This echo is reinforced by the verb used to describe the action taken by Abimelech's squire – *he thrust him through* [vayidkerehu] (Jud. 9:54), and Saul's order to his squire '*thrust me through* [vedokreni].'

The circumstances that lead Abimelech to ask his squire to kill him are clear enough: he has been mortally wounded by the upper millstone that the woman of Thebez hurled on him and is afraid he will go down in history as having been vanquished by a woman. By contrast, it is difficult to fathom Saul's mental state when he asks his squire to kill him. The crux is how we interpret the word *vayyâhel* in verse 3. According to the vocalization it is a form of the root *het-yod-lamed*, with the sense of "terror" or "fear" (as in *libbi yahil be-kirbi* [Ps. 55:5]), a reading that is consistent with the great dread that struck Saul when he saw the Philistines arrayed in battle against Israel (I Sam. 28:5). Perhaps, though, we should understand it (with the Septuagint) as a form of the root *het-lamed-heh*, with the sense that he was wounded (vocalizing *vayyihal* or *vayyahal*).<sup>5</sup> This makes Saul's request more understandable and reinforces the parallel between him and Abimelech. In either case, Saul's stated motive is his fear that the Philistines will torture him before they kill him – for which there is a basis in reality, if we recall how the Philistines treated Samson. We could say, then, that Saul is asking his squire to perform a mercy killing.

Most rabbinical authorities rule that suicide is permissible in the circumstances in which Saul found himself: "A leader who commits suicide under compulsion, like King Saul, is not to be denied funeral honors" (*Shulhan*

*Arukh*, Y.D. 345:3). The Midrash, too, presents Saul's case as an exceptional one in which suicide is not prohibited (Genesis Rabbah 34:13).

What distinguishes Saul's case from the others is that he already knew that the Lord had decreed he would die that day. As the battle against the Philistines proceeds he can see the fulfillment of Samuel's ruthless prediction: his army has been routed by the Philistines and his sons are dead. Thus he knows, with cruel certainty, that his destiny too is sealed, just as the wrathful prophet had said: *'Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me'* (28:19). In his hopeless situation, it is no wonder that Saul elects to kill himself, taking an action that is merely anticipating the inevitable.

In the house of the medium, Saul reacts in total despair to Samuel's ominous prophecy: *Then Saul fell at once full length upon the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel; and there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night* (v. 20). But in response to the urgent pleas by his retainers and the medium he collects himself, gets up – first to regain his strength after his self-imposed fast (*So he arose from the earth, and sat upon the bed* [v. 23]), and then to go back to meet his doom (*Then they rose and went away that night* [v. 25]). The next day, on the battlefield at Gilboa, Saul falls for the last time, never to rise again: *Saul took his own sword, and fell upon it* (31:4).

The squire's refusal to do his master's bidding and kill him is, paradoxically, an indication of his loyalty (whereas Abimelech's squire did not hesitate to kill his master). This reading is reinforced by the fact that the squire falls on his own sword right after Saul falls on his and dies with him (31:5). The summary of events by the narrator – *Thus Saul and his three sons and his arms-bearer, as well as all his men, died together on that day* (31:6) – paints a solidarity between the king and his entourage, both in life and in death. This loyalty may be seen as making up for Saul's earlier feeling that he has been betrayed and abandoned by all of those close to him, including his first-born son (22:6–8). Note that the verse makes no distinction between those killed by the enemy (Saul's three sons and the army) and those who killed themselves (Saul and his squire).

Despite the sympathetic depiction of Saul in the account of his final battle on Mount Gilboa (Ch. 31), in the broader context his death is viewed as Divine punishment. In my opinion, the fact that he falls on his sword should

also be seen as an instance of the concept of reward and punishment and the principle of measure for measure. Saul repeatedly tried to kill David (on two occasions by hurling his other weapon – his spear – at him). In the end he kills himself by falling on his sword, in fulfillment of the principle that the weapon of an enemy or evil man is ultimately turned against himself.<sup>6</sup>

The Philistines do in fact desecrate the corpses of Saul and his sons, yet in the end he receives final honors from the men of Jabesh-Gilead (31:11–13). Their willingness to take this risk for the House of Saul brings to mind Saul's glory days as king, when he took a risk for them (Ch. 11). Saul and his sons receive a dignified burial and are publicly mourned, both in the seven-day fast by the people of Jabesh-Gilead and in David's lament for Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 1:17–27). David's lament praises Saul for his valor and military prowess and passes over in silence the fact that he took his own life. David's blessing and thanks to the people of Jabesh-Gilead for their last kindness to Saul (2:5–6) end the tale with a respectful and a positive attitude towards Saul.

There is another account of Saul's suicide in the report by the Amalekite lad (1:1–16). For brevity's sake we shall not relate to his testimony here; note only that I accept the view that the Amalekite is lying.

#### SAUL'S SQUIRE (I SAMUEL 31:5)

Saul's suicide leads to that of his squire: *When his arms-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him* (I Sam. 31:5). This is the only case in which the victim is not a prominent character or national leader. He remains mute and nameless; only his actions attest to his character – or, more precisely, to his feelings about his king: his refusal to kill his lord and his suicide after his master is dead prove his complete loyalty to Saul. The exceptional action by this supporting figure sheds light on the grave situation – the utter rout of Saul's forces – and also on the final grace enjoyed by Saul (the main character): the fidelity and solidarity, to the bitter end, of his retainers, and particularly the one closest to him of all, his squire. In ancient Japan, retainers killed themselves after the death of their lord (*Junshi*), as a demonstration of their loyalty to him. This remained a cultural obligation until the first century CE.<sup>7</sup> Clearly suicide by retainers and servants,

after their master's death, was not a norm of Israelite society; hence the extraordinary act by Saul's squire provides even stronger proof of his devotion to his master.

AHITHOPHEL (II SAMUEL 17:23)

Unlike the cases of Abimelech, Samson, and Saul, whose last words state the motives behind their suicide, and like that of Saul's squire, it is the narrator who reports the reason for Ahithophel's suicide: *When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been followed, he saddled his ass and went home to his native town. He set his affairs in order, and then he hanged himself. He was buried in his ancestral tomb* (II Sam. 17:23). Evidently, Ahithophel understood the strategic implications and perhaps also the theological significance of the rejection of his good advice in favor of Hushi's devious suggestion. Ahithophel, whose wisdom is praised to the skies by the narrator (16:23), sees that the rebellion he has supported is doomed to failure and realizes that such is the Divine will. Even if we grant this assumption, the reason for his suicide remains unclear. Is it because of disappointment that his lauded acumen went wrong when he bet on Absalom? Or, as seems more likely, that he assumed that David, when restored to power, would punish his treason, and accordingly preferred to take his own life?<sup>8</sup> Some note that there may have been utilitarian and economic considerations. If the property of executed criminals falls to the crown, as can be inferred from the story of Naboth's vineyard (I Kg. 21:15–16) – this is also the opinion of the Sages in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 48b) – Ahithophel may have preferred to take his own life to ensure that his family would inherit his estate.<sup>9</sup>

Ahithophel's suicide is the only one in the Bible in which the victim has time to arrange his affairs and give instructions to his household before he kills himself. Our impression from everything he does, intensified by the way in which the narrative lingers over them, is that this is the suicide of a person who anticipates future events and does what he does out of level-headed consideration, as befits a sage like Ahithophel.<sup>10</sup>

Because Ahithophel is not a warrior and his suicide does not take place in battle, his chosen instrument is not a weapon (unlike Abimelech, Saul, and Saul's squire, who were killed or killed themselves with a sword) but a noose. Ahithophel's suicide, as well as the means, also plays a literary role. It warns



readers that Absalom's rebellion is doomed and even foreshadows Absalom's own death, which comes while he is hanging helplessly from a tree (18:10).<sup>11</sup>

Ahithophel's return to his hometown closes a circle. The first reference to Ahithophel in the Bible relates to the growing strength of the rebellion: Absalom also sent [to fetch] *Ahithophel the Gilonite, David's counselor, from his town, Giloh . . . . The conspiracy gained strength, and the people supported Absalom in increasing numbers* (15:12). Ahithophel was summoned from his home by Absalom when the prince had the momentum and good prospects; at the end we find Ahithophel returning home, of his own accord, in an action that symbolizes the impending failure of the rebellion.

Just as with Abimelech in Shechem, here, too, the narrator adds that the Lord set in motion the event (the rejection of his advice) that led to Ahithophel's suicide: *The Lord had decreed that Ahithophel's sound advice be nullified, in order that the Lord might bring ruin upon Absalom* (17:14). The difference between the two cases is that the Divine plan for the war between the Shechemites and Abimelech was intended to bring about the destruction of Abimelech (as well as of the townspeople), whereas the Divine plan in the rejection of Ahithophel's council was meant to lead not to his own destruction but to Absalom's – or, more precisely, to David's restoration to power. Ahithophel is not painted in such negative colors as Abimelech is, whence another difference between them. Nothing is reported about Abimelech's burial or tomb, whereas (as with Samson and Saul) we are told that Ahithophel was buried in his ancestral tomb.

#### ZIMRI (1 KINGS 16:18–19)

Zimri, who conspired against his king, murdered him, and usurped his throne (I Kg. 16:9–10), unintentionally fulfilled the word of the Lord concerning the house of Baasha as spoken to Jehu son of Hanani (16:1–4, 7, 12–13). This did not endow him with the Lord's favor and protection, however; he achieved the inglorious record of the shortest reign in the history of the Northern Kingdom – seven days. After Omri was proclaimed king and led his army to lay siege to Tirzah, Zimri understood that the battle was lost and took suicidal action: *When Zimri saw that the town was taken, he went into the citadel of the royal palace and burned down the royal palace over*

*himself. And so he died* (16:18). Even though he was a soldier Zimri did not fall on his sword. Instead, he chose a method that included revenge – burning down the palace with himself inside. If he could not enjoy the royal palace himself, neither would his victorious rival Omri.

In this combination of suicide and revenge Zimri echoes Samson. The difference is that whereas Samson's suicide is motivated by his thirst for vengeance, Zimri (like Saul and Ahithophel) is evidently seeking to kill himself before his enemies can kill him; having reached this decision, he then chooses a method – burning down the palace – that strikes at his foe as well.

Like Saul's squire, Zimri's voice is never heard; only his actions speak for him. This form of characterization leaves us with the impression of Zimri as a marginal figure, a passing shadow in the history of Israel. The editor of the Book of Kings adds that his death was punishment for *the sins which he committed and caused Israel to commit, doing what was displeasing to the Lord and following the ways of Jeroboam* (16:19). Here we may think of Abimelech and Saul, whose deaths are described as condign punishment for their sins. In all three cases, however, the manner of their deaths – suicide – is their own choice and not a Divine decree.

#### CONCLUSION

All six cases of suicide in the Bible are represented as the result of extreme and generally hopeless circumstances.<sup>12</sup> The suicides of Abimelech, Saul, and his squire take place in battle. Samson's suicide caps his long and bitter career of resistance to the Philistines. Ahithophel kills himself before open warfare breaks out between the forces of Absalom and David. Abimelech, Samson, and Saul explicitly state why they have opted for suicide; in the cases of Saul's squire, Ahithophel, and Zimri, the narrator explains their motives, although he does so by penetrating their minds, using the verb "see" in the sense of "realize": *When his arms-bearer saw that Saul was dead* (I Sam. 31:5); *When Ahithophel saw that his advice had not been followed* (II Sam. 17:23); *When Zimri saw that the town was taken* (I Kg. 16:18).

The motives for suicide vary: Fear of being killed, tortured, or humiliated; loyalty to a dead master; a lust for revenge. The methods, too, are diverse: A sword, collapsing a building on oneself and one's enemies, hanging, and fire. In some cases the suicide's death is represented as punishment for his sins. In

all of them the events that led up to the suicide, whether it is viewed as punishment or not, are described as the fruit of a Divine plan. In Samson's case, suicide was possible only thanks to Divine assistance. Three cases (Samson, Saul, and Ahithophel) end with an account of the victim's honorable burial. In none of the cases is the act of suicide described as a transgression in and of itself, even when the victim is represented as a sinner on account of his previous misdeeds.

We can infer from these stories that suicide is a legitimate option in exceptional and extremely difficult situations and that a person who chooses that route is not to be condemned out of hand. In the case of Samson, the biblical narrator praises him for the manner of his death, which continues his mission of avenging the Israelites against the Philistines.

This study of the literary function of the suicide stories in the Bible has disclosed an intimate link between the account of the final deed and the broader context of the victim or those around him. For example, Samson's suicide, as an act of revenge against the Philistines, fits into the overall pattern of his relations with them; Saul's falling on his sword highlights the application to him of the principle of measure for measure; finally, the steps that Ahithophel takes before hanging himself are further evidence of the deliberation appropriate for such a wise man, while the method he chooses foreshadows Absalom's death.

#### NOTES

\* The present article is abridged from my "Suicide in the Bible, in the Light of the Attitude toward Suicide in Secular Culture and Jewish Tradition," *Jewish Studies – An Internet Journal* 2 (2003) pp. 1-24 (in Hebrew). I would like to thank the editors of *JSIJ* for their kind permission to publish an English version.

1. A. J. Droge and J. D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) p. 6.

2. I employ a broad definition of "suicide," including all cases in which human beings deliberately and knowingly end their lives, whether by their own hands or with the assistance of another person acting at their behest, what ever the cause and circumstances may be.

3. J. C. Exum, "Aspects of Symmetry and Balance in the Samson Saga," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19 (1981) pp. 3-29.

4. On Samson's suicide as a national and cultural paradigm – in children's literature, in dramatic works for adults, and even in decisions related to Israel's nuclear option – see D. Fishelov, *Samson's Locks: The Transformations of Biblical Samson* (Tel Aviv: University of Haifa Press & Zmora-Bitan, 2000) pp. 60-63 (in Hebrew).

5. Cf. Ahaziah fell through the lattice in his upper chamber at Samaria and was injured [vayyâhel] (II Kg. 1:2). The verb *het-lamed-heh* in the sense of "wound" is also found in I Kings 22:34, II Kings 8:29, and elsewhere.
6. On this principle see Y. Shemesh, "Measure for Measure in the David Stories," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 17 (2003) pp. 89-109 (92).
7. The custom was revived in the feudal age, but as a voluntary custom rather than a social imperative. It was outlawed in 1744.
8. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, VII 9,8; H. W. Herzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1964) p. 140.
9. See *Metzudat David* and Abravanel ad loc.
10. Cf. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. 1: *King David* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981) p. 230.
11. Cf. Herzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel*, p. 353.
12. On the other hand, in two of these cases – Saul and Samson – we can conceive of psychological motives for their suicides, as I tried to show in the Hebrew version of this article, pp. 20–23.