

Elie Wiesel Heroism in the Bible: Samson

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Elie Wiesel:

(applause) On the surface, this bizarre tale may sound like a suspense story. A man sways between his obligation toward God and his love for a woman. And so his heart is a battlefield. Polarized by two forces, which will win? The story is simple. One day, once upon a time, there was a man endowed with such physical strength that no army could resist him. The Greeks would have made him a god equal or superior of Hercules. Rome would have crowned him [00:01:00] emperor. As for Hollywood, (laughter) never mind. In Jewish history and legend his name is branded in fantasy. Samson or Shimshon, Shimshon Ha-Gibor, the strong man, the unique hero who prevails upon nature's laws over man and their silly aspirations to grandeur and conquest.

He laughed at his enemies whom he effortlessly defeated. Nothing frightened him. The most savage beasts feared him. With one hand he was capable of reducing an entire mountain to dust. With both, he used 300 foxes to bring fire to enemy fields. [00:02:00] His only weakness, women. He who could stand up to anything and anyone yielded quickly, too quickly to their beauty and their charm. And yet he was a Nazir, a

Nazarite, an ascetic, a man consecrated to God, one of God's chosen and predestined, a man whom God needed to avenge his honor and save his people. How can this be? How can a human being combine in oneself such contradictory tendencies?

On one hand, the text describes to us his astonishing record as a judge in Israel. He was a judge in Israel. On the other, we find him quite frequently with attractive, beautiful women [00:03:00] who, moreover, are not even Jewish. Samson or the ambiguity of sacred heroism, sometimes a conqueror, often a victim, Samson, or the man who eternally falls in love. Strong against the mighty but yielding to the mightier. Samson, powerless to master his roving eye, unable to control his instincts, and so we have in the text Samson young, Samson older, Samson and Delilah, Samson the prisoner, Samson courageous and fierce to the bitter end, dragging his haughty torturers and tormentors and executioners down with his own death.

More complex than complicated, the [00:04:00] character amazes and overwhelms us by the challenges he constantly and willingly sets himself. From one episode to the next we admire him, then we love him, then we pity him. And in the end, we do not understand him. Can't he be less blind even before becoming

blind? Isn't he aware of the mysterious links between Eros and Thanatos, between love and death? And then, there are so many questions about this story. Take his parents, good Jewish parents. Has he forgotten about them? Can't he guess, can't he imagine the grief he inflicts on his poor mother by his romantic adventures with pagans and with the femme fatale Delilah?

Oh yes, Samson [00:05:00] entertains us. He entertains us and worries us, enchants us by the mere fact of his existence. It is reassuring to know that when the people of Israel are in danger, one man alone is able to defend them. But then another question, or a series of questions, why alone? Doesn't he have companions, friends? Why doesn't he raise an army? Why doesn't he openly or secretly organize a popular resistance movement to the Philistines? Isn't he a chief, a commander? Or doesn't he believe in his people's will to fight for their own independence?

How can we answer the questions that his seemingly deceptive, primitive personality raises? Well, we know [00:06:00] very well that everything is in the text, and we shall read the text. But first, again, let's open our customary parentheses. This is our third biblical session of the season. We analyzed Miriam's indisputable greatness and possible downfall. We studied the

grandiose but somber adventure of the high priest Aaron's sons. We tried to understand the perils of slender and of excessive religious fervor. When we study ancient history we are also exploring modern times.

Samson worked, fought, loved, and died in Gaza. And yet we know that Gaza is more topical than ever. It's very much in the news. [00:07:00] Will the hatred of Jews ever subside in Gaza? Will peace prevail there? What is required to bring it about, violence or persuasion? Certainly social conditions have changed since the age of Samson but not human nature. People then didn't understand the strength of Samson, the secret of his strength, just as since Samson, our enemies never understood the strength of the Jewish people. To this day the enemies fail to understand what makes us strong, for they believe that we are strong.

What is it about the Jewish people that somehow maintains or assures its existence in spite of everything? What is it about Jewish survival? What is it about Jewish destiny? All these questions I am convinced already the [00:08:00] Philistines were raising and the descendants of the Philistines are still stumbling upon. But life being what it is, a person capable of blinding desire as well as daring clarity of mind may identify

himself today as yesterday, with ancient myth, if Samson is a myth. Freud's curiosity should have been directed at Samson. Is it possible that Samson had often accomplished as many physical feats also and perhaps mostly, after all, he was simple and human, to impress a beautiful woman?

The tale of Samson, a story of blood and sensuality, charged with a romantic and a patriotic has intrigued a great number of writers, painters, and composers from Milton to Voltaire, from Handel to Saint-Saëns. But the most striking literary treatment was by [00:09:00] the very great Vladimir Jabotinsky. If Milton addressed himself to Samson because he too had gone blind, Jabotinsky, in his fervor and his imagination, made him the hero of a novel because he personified Jewish resistance to the military power of a foreign occupier.

And Samson's advice to the Jewish people, according to Jabotinsky, arm yourselves. Be strong. And, as he said, *Limdu tzachok*, learn to laugh. Jews should learn how to laugh. But Samson is much more than the subject of a novel. He deals with ethos in Jewish history. Should we say that Samson, son of Manoah, one of the tribe of Judah, may be just that, a figment of imagination, a myth? Certainly [00:10:00] his name appears

only in our sacred texts and not at all for understandable reasons in the history of the Philistines, for example.

I wonder, what would be his destiny if he were alive today? Would he run for mayor? (laughter) At least we would know for whom to vote. (laughter) (applause) But Samson is not today. He is in the past. Although he doesn't appear in the history of the Philistines, but he is there in our history. Recently archeologists in Israel discovered the stone from the time of King Asa. Its inscription includes the expression Beit David, the house of David. And who knows? One day in excavations around Gaza [00:11:00] they will dig up a monument to the memory of Samson.

All we need is patience. But patience is a rare virtue. Samson had no patience. And we all know people for who waiting is an intolerable experience. You don't believe that? Ask your friends outside. (laughter) (applause) [00:12:00]

We more or less know when he lived, in the Iron Age I, which means about 1,000 -- 1,200 or 1,000 before the common era. The book of the Judges, which describes a story of Yiftach, we have met Yiftach years ago, and of Samson is precise. We know more or less what they did when and so forth. But a few words about

the image and concept of the hero in Jewish thought since we are dealing with Samson Hagibor, the hero. The word in Hebrew is gibor. *Eizeh gibor*, who is a gibor, a hero? Strange as it may sound, no fighter, no general, no victor have been granted that title. Shimshon Hagibor, Samson the hero, no trace of it in scripture, [00:13:00] Not even in Midrashic sources.

We speak about him as Shimshon or the son of Manoah or the Nazir. We don't believe in heroes. Yehuda Hamaccabi, Judah the Maccabee, his name wasn't even mentioned in the Talmud. The fact is that physical courage never impressed our sages, who actually had already tried to answer our need or eagerness to know the definition of heroism. In the Pirkei Avot, in the ethics of our fathers, we find the question *Eizeh gibor?*, who is a hero? And the answer is *hakovesh et yitzro*, he who resists his instincts.

In other words, heroism involves man's relationship not with others but with himself. To renounce something that is obtainable through force is heroic. [00:14:00] Physical force is disdained in Talmudic circles. When Reish Lakish, Shim'on Reish Lakish, Rabbi Shim'on ben Reish Lakish began studying Torah he lost his physical powers. *Ha-Torah machlishah* say our masters. The Torah weakens those who study it. Why do we say

at the end of the reading of one of the five books *chazak v'ematz*, be strong? Because having read the entire book, we became weak. (laughter)

But Samson doesn't appear to have studied. Is that why he was so strong and so unbeatable for so long? Let us read now the text. And, quote, "And the children *b'nei Yisrael la-asot ha-ra b'einei Adoshem*" and the children of Israel did [00:15:00] evil again in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Philistines for 40 years," end of quote. Thus opens chapter 13 of *Shoftim*, the book of Judges. And the story is now a series of intertwined episodes, a story which illustrate divine justice as it moves between rigor and pity.

Because the people of Israel sinned against God, God abandoned them into the hands of the Philistines. But subsequently the Jews underwent too many sufferings, too many humiliations, so Samson was sent into the world to help them. For nothing happens by chance. There is no coincidence in Jewish history. [00:16:00] The chapters narrate the sacred and more often the profane exploits of tonight's hero. To stress the fact that this is a real human being and not just a contrivance of the imagination, the text supplies abundant details, very few books in Scripture are so action packed with so many details.

We are told all that Shimshon does and all that he endures, even all that he dreams from his birth to his death. And we are witnessing his birth as we are witnessing his death. At the beginning, Divine providence and intervention dominate the tale. A mystical ambiance has set in. A supernatural [00:17:00] mood reigns from the very first verses. We feel that we are at the heart of a mystery. And so we read further. And there was a certain man of Tzorah of the family of the Danites, mitzevet Dan, and his name was Manoah. As happens often in biblical accounts, his wife, unnamed, was barren. Quote, "and bare not," unquote.

Why the repetition in this report? Maybe the text is clearing the way for an angel who will express himself in the same manner. Speaking to the woman, the angel says, and I quote him, "Thou are barren and have no children, but you shall conceive and bear a son," [00:18:00] unquote. Does he hope to convince her by repetition? Does he expect her to be incredulous like Sarah before her? He continues, "Now, therefore, beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing. For lo, thou shall conceive and bare a son. And no razor shall come on his head. For the child shall be a

Nazarite unto God from the womb. And he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines," end of quote.

We can learn a first lesson from this passage. Angels apparently prefer to talk to wives rather than to husbands.

(laughter) Also, they appear [00:19:00] when the latter are not around. Manoah wasn't there when he came to speak to his wife. What does she do? She drops everything and rushes to tell her husband the thrilling news. And she says to him, and again we quote the text, "A man of God came to me, and his countenance was like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible. But I didn't ask him who he was, neither did he tell me his name. But he said unto me, 'Behold. Thou shall conceive and bare a son. And now drink no wine nor strong drink, neither eat any unclean thing. For the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death.'"

We may admire her discretion. A stranger came to announce the most important news of her life, [00:20:00] and she never even asked him who he was. (laughter) More, she never really took a good look at him. The proof, she offers her husband no physical description of the face except that he had the countenance of an angel of God. How did she know what an angel looked like? I am reminded, and some of you are probably too, of the marvelous

story of the two Hasidim who came to see the Seer of Lublin.

Was very hard to get into the Seer of Lublin. They had to wait weeks and weeks.

Finally one was admitted into the study of the Seer of Lublin.

When he came out, his friend asked him, "Well, how was it?" He

said, "It was extraordinary." "What happened?" "I cannot tell

you." "What did he look like?" He said, "I don't -- how can I

say?" He said, he looked -- and he began looking [00:21:00] for

a metaphor. He said, "He looked like an angry lion." He said,

"What? Like an angry lion?" "Yes, like an angry lion." He

said, "How do you know what an angry lion looks like?"

(laughter) And he said, "Until now I didn't. Now I do."

(laughter)

In the case of Manoah's wife, her overheated imagination ran

away with her. She was doubtless so moved by the news that in

passing it along to her husband she embellished a little. The

angel has said to the woman child shall be a Nazarite from the

womb period. That was all. But to her husband the woman quotes

the angel as adding, "to the day of his death." Is this to show

us *chas v'chalila*, [00:22:00] God forbid, that women are not

always reliable, that they could be at times excitable and apt

to exaggerate, if not misrepresent? In general terms, her

report to her husband of her conversation with the angel is incomplete.

She does not mention that he had told her of her being barren nor his urging her that no razor ought to touch her future son's head nor his promise that her son would save the people of Israel. Why did she hold back all these details? On the other hand, the husband, Manoah, is rather odd. His reaction? He prays to God. "Let the man of God whom you did [00:23:00] send come again to us and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born." He wanted him to come back. By the way, when he said, he said teach us what to do to the child, not to us but to the child.

But hadn't he heard what his wife just said? Hadn't she told him precisely and clearly what they were obliged to do? Had he so little confidence in her memory? Did he need corroboration? Nevertheless, the angel kindly returned. Faithful to his habits, again he appeared before the woman. And she was alone in the fields. As before, extremely excited, she rushes to tell her husband. Her husband hurries back with [00:24:00] her, probably breathless and full of trepidation. And you see the husband is still skeptical. He's not entirely convinced that

the whole story is true, and so he says, "Are you the man who spoke unto the woman?"

"Yes," says the angel. "Then tell us what to do," Manoah asks. The angel repeats his instructions a third time, but something is wrong here. The angel does not answer the question. Manoah asked the angel what do to with the child. The angel tells them what the mother should do. Now, what is it? Is he really convinced, is the angel convinced, is Manoah convinced that everything depends on the mother? But the conversation continues. And Manoah, almost like Jacob [00:25:00] when Jacob fought with the angel, he wants to ask him, what is his name? But the question that Jacob asked was *Mah shimekha?* what is your name?

He asks *Mi shimekha?*, who is your name? Well, the angel replies, "Why do you ask my name?" You know, angels are also Jews. They answer with a question. (laughter) And he says -- he gives a kind of confusing answer. He said, "My name is *pele*," meaning either marvelous or miraculous. Manoah and his wife bring an offering to the Lord. As for the angel, probably unwilling to expose himself to further cross-examination, he rises to heaven in the flames on the altar and disappears. And here a [00:26:00] double transformation takes place.

Up to now it is the woman who is excited, not her husband, who is a cool fellow. Now their roles are reversed. In the grip of fear, Manoah cries, "We shall surely die." Now I am convinced we are going to die, he says, because we have seen God. His wife now takes it calmly, and she reassures him. And she said really, come on. If God had wished to kill us, you think he would have made us live through all these events? And she was right. The text says, "And the woman gave birth to a son and called his name Shimshon, and the child grew. And the lord blessed him, and the spirit of the lord began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Tzorah and Eshtaol," end of quote. [00:27:00]

So everything now is all right. The parents are happy. God is pleased with his young Nazarite. The people are oppressed and unhappy, well, they are used to that. And suddenly it is, in a manner of speaking, suddenly, as if the earth begins to shake, we witness a kind of earthquake, an unforeseen, unthinkable, intolerable event bursts upon everybody. Shimshon, the young ascetic adolescent, and I imagine him shy, a yeshiva bochur, you know, studying. (laughter) He who is consecrated to God one morning leaves his parent's house and goes to Philistine territory to a place called Timnath.

We know more or less where it is. Does he go there as a tourist, as a scout? [00:28:00] Did he somehow learn that destiny had set a trap for him in Timnath? What -- we only know that he falls in love with a woman. What? He, the man who must reject earthly pleasures enamored of a woman? And a pagan to boot? Don't judge him too hastily. A good son despite all this, he asks his parents' consent to marry her, to make, you know, an honest woman out of her. We can imagine his mother's and father's confusion and distress. They say to him, and this is from the text, couldn't you find a wife among the daughters of your own people?

Perhaps, they added, really Shimshon, why must you make us so miserable? (laughs) What will others say? And aren't you too young? [00:29:00] And what will you live on? (laughter) But Shimshon is stubborn. He is in love. The Nazarite is also a man. His senses are alive, his desire burning. Is this the first woman he has ever noticed? Is she his first love? If so, we understand. First love is special. We discover or invent all qualities and virtues in the beloved. Is she beautiful? Oh, she is the most beautiful girl in the world. Graceful? The most graceful.

So to his parents he says she pleases me well. Nothing else matters. From that point things happen quickly, very quickly. What he desires he will possess. And the girl, he must have been [00:30:00] a handsome young man, so she says yes immediately. And therefore, nothing should, nothing can come between him and the object of his desire. A young lion attacks him, big deal? He tears it to pieces. He says not a word to his parents about that. But afterward he is moved to look at the carcass of his young lion, and he sees a swarm of bees that has gathered within it.

He scoops out the honey, of which there is plenty, and offers some to his parents. You see, a good boy. But the text says he told them not that he had taken the honey out of the carcass of the lion. The marriage takes place. It is grandiose, music, the best food. Thirty of the groom's companions [00:31:00] take part in the festivities, which last seven days. And then he tells them a riddle. Quote, "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness." The winner is offered 30 sheets and 30 changes of garments. No one is smart enough to come up with the answer. So they enlist the aid of a double agent, the young bride.

She should make him tell. Isn't she their fellow citizen, their sister? She lets herself be persuaded, and so does Samson. How can he resist the tears and the charms of his young wife? He confides the answer in her, and she passes along the answer to the others. Shimshon is clever. He immediately realizes what has [00:32:00] happened. He is not stupid. And his anger bursts forth. He goes down to Ashkelon, kills 30 men, strips them, and flings their garments to the winners. The marriage is over. Finished, to rub salt in the wound he learns that his wife has married a Philistine friend. She didn't wait long to betray him.

So you see, despite all his heroics, Shimshon the hero is not the star of a B movie. He loves women, but they don't return his love. In fact, he is unlucky with women. He thinks he's making conquests, but he is the victim. In the end, as we shall see, it will be a woman, Delilah, [00:33:00] who will bring about his downfall. Will he never learn? We cannot deny the duality of the character as he is presented to us in the biblical text. He has remained a Nazir, a Nazirite. That is, he does not shave or cut his hair or does not drink wine. A third attribute of the Nazir is not to touch a corpse.

However, apparently he has been dispensed of this third attribute because he killed. He had to defend the Jewish people, his people, so he was allowed to do that. But he does something which a Nazir perhaps shouldn't have done. He carouses with his friends. He is a fighter and unbeatable a fighter. But his physical strength, we are told, derives always from [00:34:00] the spirit of God. He is a Jew, but more often than not we see him in Philistine circles. He's consecrated to God, but in thought and deed he roams about chasing pagan females.

Is this the kind of behavior and commitment we expect from a political leader, from a judge appointed to arbitrate the differences of his tribe and the conflicts of his people? Does he even know the law? He seems more an athlete an acrobat, a kind of gladiator. The text calls him inspired, but it's *vatitzlakh alav ruach Adoshem*, the spirit of the lord came unto him. This is an expression we frequently find in the text, but on the other hand, can we say that he is inspiring? He? What does he inspire? [00:35:00] *Yirat Shamayim*, fear of heaven? *Ahavat Hashem*, love of God? We don't see him attending synagogue.

Does he inspire generosity to his neighbor? If that motivates him the text is rather discrete about it. The commandment of *Kibud av v'em*, the duty to honor one's parents, the respect one owes them, love of Israel? He is busier with another kind of love. So how can Samson be a role model, an example to the young? The truth is that from one viewpoint in this whole picturesque narrative few characters are above suspicion or blemish. We hardly need mention Samson's women. They all cheat. They all play with him, the better to sell him out to his adversaries.

His friends, [00:36:00] they incite his wife to turn away from him. His best friend takes advantage of the first opportunity to run off with his bride. His in-laws, we are told, slam the door in his face. The angel, all right, we never question an angel. Besides, he never answers. (laughs) The parents, a just man and a just woman surely, otherwise they would not have been blessed with a Nazarite son like Shimshon. But tell me, how did they rear him? An only child, didn't they spoil him a bit too much? Did they ever criticize him or punish him for a lapse of speech or conduct?

Why did they let him spend so much time away from home? Why did they fail to make him understand that a nice Jewish boy's place

is not among the Philistines? Obviously, [00:37:00] he had many, too many Philistine friends. We don't know anything about his Jewish friends. A close reading of the text confirms that. Thirty local companions, all Philistines, were invited to his wedding, so he knew them from before. And his parents said nothing, no objection from them? Why did they really let him marry a pagan woman? Why did they make themselves accomplices by helping him win the hand of his chosen bride?

Why did Manoah's wife not behave like a good Jewish mother who in that situation would scream, tear her hair out, cry to heaven for mercy, and say I don't want to live to see that day? You know. (laughter) As for Shimshon, the *tachshit*, as we say in Yiddish, how can we explain his indifference to the possible [00:38:00] if not probably anguish of his parents? Did he love them enough? Did he even consider them? In the end, he confided the answer to his riddle to his wife, not to his parents. Did he mistrust them more than he did the Philistine woman?

Didn't he realize that in marrying a Philistine girl, not only pagan, but the daughter of the oppressors of his people he ran the risk of breaking the parents' heart? Did he feel no love for them, no compassion, no concern? What did he think they

thought? What did he think they felt as they attended his wedding surrounded by Philistines alone?

As for Shimshon, let's continue more. We know that he was strong and victorious, but let's see what were his qualities as a political [00:39:00] and military leader. The truth is that they're hard to identify. After all, a leader must be able to mobilize, to motivate his people. He did everything by himself. All alone he inflicted punishments and reprisals upon the enemy. Good. But why alone? It was always a solitary hero who rose against the enemy. Why solitary? Worse, incidents in which he figures were often, if not always, centered on him as an individual, on him as a ridiculed, infatuated, rejected husband, on him, not on the people of Israel.

Is that why the people never rally to stand beside him, to follow his lead, to support him in battle? That [00:40:00] said, however we may reproach Shimshon, I cannot shake off the suspicion that the people during his rule somehow were not up to the standard. We do not leave a commander in chief to fight alone. We do not abandon him in prison. Worse, we learn from the text that it was the leaders of the tribe of Judah who, true, threatened by the enemy, delivered him to the Philistines. The text says so. All right, he belonged to the tribe of Dan on

his father's side and to Judah only on his mother's, but he was a Jew and a proud Jew.

He insisted always on his Jewishness. How could the leaders do that to him, especially when they knew the fate awaiting him at the hands of an enemy thirsting for revenge? [00:41:00] But then again, if the people were weak, was it not also their commander's fault? And yet, our favorite literary sources, those of the Midrash, naturally see matters in a different light. There everything is amplified, colored, and made more subtle. In the opinion of certain commentators, Manoah and his wife were worthy of visits from an angel, so close were they to perfection.

The words *Vayehi ish echad mitzaroah*, there was once a man named Manoah from Zoreah, is interpreted in the Midrash *ish echad*, a man, signifies a unique man. *echad b'doro*, a unique in his generation. That is better, purer, more pious, more devout, more just than anyone. [00:42:00] His wife also, naturally. Others insist on the human aspect, that in spite of their qualities they were human too. Instead of explaining their lack of children by Divine will, the couple blamed each other. They were quarrelling all the time.

Manoah said it's because you are barren that we have no children. And she said it is your fault because you are sterile. And therefore, the angel came to have some peace at home. Why distort the angel's promise by adding that the son would be a Nazarite to the end of his life? Because she really thought so. Not being a prophet like the angel, she could not foresee Samson's spiritual decline. Besides, what mother could imagine such a thing, such a thing about her cherished son? [00:43:00] As for Shimshon himself, the makers of Talmudic legend rely on the expression *ki to'ena hi*, to explain his blinding passion for his first Philistine wife.

And they said it was God's will. More simply, heaven is responsible, not he, for everything, for his seeking a quarrel with the Philistine's, for his provoking them to provoke him, for giving him a pretext to fling himself upon them and strike them with the full force of his anger. His parents did not know this, says the text. They could not know that their son's misbehavior was part of a grand strategy devised by God Himself. And here we touch upon a very, very strange topic, both in the Talmud and in mysticism, a topic that we call *mitzvah ha'ba'a mitokh aveirah*, , [00:44:00] a good deed resulting from a transgression.

And this concept is a delicate and dangerous concept because it has been misused, abused by Sabbateans and their followers the Frankists. Is it possible that a transgression of the law could produce something holy or at least beneficial? Strange as it may sound, some Talmudic sages answer in the affirmative, and they offer us an example, Shimshon. He had to do what he did in order to defeat the enemy. They also offer as an example Lot in the Bible, Lot and his three daughters. You remember they made him drunk and worse, and they bore his sons. [00:45:00] It was sinful, but according to some commentators, they had meant well, *lishmah*, they meant well.

They wanted to save the human species. They thought that they were the only human beings on the planet. And therefore, maybe one of them surely wanted to bring the first rosh yeshiva into the world, Shem. Comments Rabbi Nachman bar Yitzchak, in *Masechet Nazir, {Horayos}* " *g'dolah aveirah lishmah mimitzvah she-lo lishmah.*", which is a terrible sentence. A transgression with good intentions is superior to an unintentional good deed. (laughter) Luckily, this attitude is overruled in the Talmud. Otherwise, it may give some of you wrong ideas. [00:46:00] So if Shimshon therefore actually obeyed God's will, who is guilty, and who is innocent?

And again some of the sages do not hesitate to answer. Of all the Jewish protagonists, they say, nobody's guilty. The parents are surely innocent beyond reproach. Their son's marriage to a Philistine woman, come on. She wasn't a Philistine. Surprised? Yes. These wonderful Talmudic commentators assure us that she had converted long before. (laughter) Otherwise, Shimshon, no matter how infatuated, would never have caused his parents pain. If he married a girl, she must have been Jewish, and if she wasn't, he converted her. His many extramarital affairs culminating in bloodshed? A shrewd tactical ploy, an intelligent ruse. [00:47:00]

In his blessing upon the tribe of Dan, Jacob compared Dan to a serpent like the serpent, say some commentators, Shimshon did not kill for the pleasure of it but in self-defense. And Shimshon, therefore, always killed in self-defense. Like the serpent, Shimshon adapted himself to his social and ethnic surroundings, the better to surprise his prey. In other words, Shimshon was a secret agent, an underground warrior. Fearing collective reprisals against his people because of what he was doing, Shimshon acted the libertine, the Don Juan. He was careful to make the Philistines think that if he burned their fields and struck down their young men it was not out of

patriotism, *chas v'chalila*, but for personal reasons, because of his love affairs. Bravo, Shimshon.

By [00:48:00] fooling his enemies he has managed to rehabilitate himself. Explaining the secret of the name Shimshon *ki Shemesh u'magen Hashem Elokim*, God is the sun and shield, Rabbi Yohanan declares, and I quote him, "Even as God protected the world, so Shimshon protected the people of Israel." In the tractate of Rosh Hashanah he appears presiding over a court intellectually and morally equal to that of high priest Aaron. Better yet, in the Midrashic literature of the Palestinian Amoraim, after Bar Kokhba's heroic and tragic revolt, some sages see further, much further, and see in Shimshon the messiah himself.

It is Rabbi Hama bar Hanina who states it with this concerting assurance. And again he bases his reasoning on Jacob's prophecy before his death [00:49:00] in Genesis 49:16. Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. And he continues what we said, Dan shall be a serpent by the way, one that bites the horse's heel and so forth. Then Jacob, according to those sages, after a vision of Shimshon's death, he lamented. He lamented saying that he did not think that the hero was going to die. He thought that Shimshon will live forever, and it was

then that he cried out *Li'yeshuatekha kiviti Adoshem*. Oh Lord, your help is my hope.

For Rabbi Hama bar Hanina the message is clear. Since Shimshon, the son of Manoah, belongs to the tribe of Dan, Jacob is referring to him. For 20 years he will serve as judge in Israel, judge of Israel. And [00:50:00] since on his mother's side he belongs to the tribe of Judah, it is clear that he will be the *mashiach*, the messiah of the line of David, David who will also descend much later, of course, from these two very tribes. The Sifre is even more specific. Quoting a biblical verse in which the lord showed Moses all the land of Gilead onto Dan, the commentator says God pointed out to him the future savior of Israel. And who was it? Shimshon ben Manoah.

Shimshon the savior? The messiah of Israel? Is it thus that our ancestors, our people's teachers, guides and visionaries, our own teachers today, for they still are, is it how they imagine the *mashiach ben David*? Only to further transcend that meaning on a man who operated in real, concrete situations, [00:51:00] to link his legend with that of Bar Kokhba whose image is presented to us as also far from the profoundly spiritual aspirations of our people? Isn't this a bit too fanciful? Possibly. But that doesn't bother me at all. I have

never reproached anyone for an excess of imagination, unless that person was a historian.

But in my opinion, what we have here is a confusion of names. Those who saw a future mashiach, a future savior in Shimshon, were probably referring to a mashiach ben Yosef, not ben David. A tragic messiah, a savior abandoned, beaten, tortured, a messiah defeated and killed in battle, that is the fate as we know, of the mashiach ben [00:52:00] Yosef, the messiah son of Joseph. The faith of a hero who does not triumph over destiny, a hero who has slipped up somewhere, who for reasons that he himself could not fathom, allowed himself to be destroyed by the dark forces of the enemy.

And finally, it is not the Philistine armies that defeated Shimshon. It was first and foremost the Jewish leaders of Judah who, because of the threats from the Philistines, delivered him to them. On that count, I believe, Shimshon's fate was more tragic than that of mashiach ben Yosef, who fell in armed combat against the enemy. So we have seen now the metamorphosis of Shimshon, and there are so many that we read this chapter with great pleasure and anxiety. [00:53:00] And now we have arrived at the end of Shimshon's adventurous life and the climax of his turbulent story.

All hypothesis, all trials, all conquests, all disappointments are now behind him. At the end, because of Delilah, he is in prison in chains. What does he think about? What memories stir his hope or illuminates his dreams? The episode of the 300 foxes that he transformed into living torches and unleashed upon the enemy's fields? Thinking about them, all of those fields [00:54:00] aflame, must give him pleasure. And the story of the jawbone of an ass, how he surprised the Philistines. Freeing himself suddenly from the strong ropes that bound him and taking up the jawbone of an ass, which became a murderous weapon in his hands, and with that jawbone he killed 1,000 men.

Afterwards he was dehydrated, feverish. Fearing death, he called on the Lord. "Thou has given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant, and now shall I die for thirst?" And God performed a miracle. He cleaved a hollow place that was in the jaw, and water sprang forth. Why did Shimshon not thank heaven? Uh, he should have. Did he regret this omission? One [00:55:00] commentator says this was the turning point of his life. He forgot his obligation to give thanks. Ingratitude is the first sign of indifference. A man who does not know how to say thank you, something in his psyche is already impoverished and diminished. To be Jewish is to be grateful.

In the cell for those condemned to death does he think back to his first wife, burned to death in a fire set by the Philistines, or to the harlot he visited in Gaza? His enemies surrounded the house, preparing to kill him in the morning. Who tipped them off, the harlot? It makes no difference. At midnight he took the doors and the gate [00:56:00] of the city and the two posts and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders and carried them up to the top of a hill that is before Hevron. Ah, the look on their faces when those armed men saw that.

Then at a place called Nachal Sorek there was Delilah, the most striking and captivating of all the women he had known before. He saw her and he loved her. It was as simple as that. The text says *Vayehi achareihem*, and after all those things, *va'ye'ehav isha b'Nachal Sorek*, after all those things, he loved a woman in Nachal Sorek, and her name was Delilah. And the Midrash, as usual, digging deep in every word, says it is with his eyes [00:57:00] alone, without touching her, without speaking to her that he conquered her. And for the first time the text uses the word to love, *vayahav*.

He had scarcely seen her when he fell madly in love with her, probably love at first sight. If he had known more about the etymology he might have sensed danger by her name alone. Delilah, Delilah derives from the word *dal*, impoverishment. Even if that had not been her name, says the Midrash, it should have been (laughter) because it was she who impoverished Shimshon's heart, mind, and soul. She made no effort to resist the Philistine's demands upon her to help them vanquish her husband. Uh, [00:58:00] the seductress, the enchantress, she knew just how to drag his secret out of him.

It wasn't easy because she tried many times, and he always managed to stall, to invent other stories, explanations. But finally, finally she managed. And one Midrash claims that she used Lysistrata's method. She said to him what Lysistrata said, told other women, all women to tell their husbands. In her situation she said if you don't tell me the truth, what is the secret of your power, you can't have me. So to be fair to our hero's manhood, let's add another [00:59:00] Midrashic commentary which I found funny.

The whole time he was in prison in Gaza the man of Gaza came to offer him their women so that they might bear his children. No wonder he was exhausted. (laughter) Irony of irony, he actively

had chased women, but now they were brought to him. Why? Simply because he had revealed the secret of his strength to Delilah, his hair. A Nazir's strength lies in his hair? No. that's a symbol. A Nazir's strength lies in his will, in his inner strength to resist temptation. When it happened it was late, too late. He was in prison, and [01:00:00] what does it mean to be in prison and vanquished? It means to let things happen.

It is not the hunger or the sleeplessness or the cold or the thirst or the solitude. It is becoming an object in the hands of others, an object of cruelty or of love. It doesn't matter and you don't have to be inside a prison to be imprisoned. When you are an object, you are a prisoner. But Shimshon is in prison. And anyone can do anything to him. In a cage he becomes a wild beast trained to entertain, to perform. The worst of humiliations, formerly he inspired fear, now he inspires laughter. He is a spectacle, a pastime. This is unquestionable the most tragic passage in the whole tale.

It is here that the enemy's cruelty, the enemy's cruelty finds its most brutal expression. And now [01:01:00] we understand why so much later Agag, king of the Amalekites, like King Shaul, probably preferred death to captivity. In their cowardice the

Philistines carried their cruelty even further. They gauge out his eyes. Is it possible that those eyes worried them? Is it possible that they credited them with the power as mysterious as that inherent in his hair? All his life Shimshon lived by his gaze. Where he glanced, he ruled. What he saw he took. Measure for measure, says tradition. The punishment is linked to the sin.

Absalom's sin, with his long, beautiful hair, so he died hanging by his hair. By his eyes Shimshon committed his sins, so in his eyes he will be punished. And from now on [01:02:00] his imagination will be the worst of his torments. What does he think about? Whom does he evoke in his mind? The sins he committed, their irreparable nature? Does he see his parents long dead, his people who are doing nothing to liberate him, who have never shown any compassion towards him, much less solidarity with him? Does he think about God and the angel? Is he angry at the angel who predicated that he would be a Nazarite for he knows had he not been a Nazarite he would not have had the same fate?

If he considers his special status as a Nazarite, how does he view it? Does he realize that the whole concept of Nazirut, the whole concept of asceticism actually turns on what we call

shmirat halashon, the obligation to be prudent in speech,
[01:03:00] not to throw words about loosely. Say you are a
Nazir, and you are, just say my son will be a Nazir, and he will
be. Be careful with words. The whole idea of Nazirut, or
Nedarim, of which it is part, means *shmirat halashon*, be careful
with words. Weeks and perhaps months have passed since
Shimshon's capture.

His hair has begun to grown out but not enough to restore his
original strength. An adolescent boy leads him to the place of
execution, and here he is once more in Gaza, a city which has
always meant and perhaps will always mean trouble for Israel. I
hope not. Who is the boy? [01:04:00] I would give much to know
his name, to know more about him. I picture him as sweet and
gentle. I don't know why, but the text itself insinuates that.
Shimshon leans on the boy's fragile shoulder, fragile shoulders,
and the boy speaks to him. The boy guides him. One last time
Shimshon wants to feel free, to act as a man, master of his own
movements. And thanks to his unique young friend, he will be.

The immense temple of Dagon, with its gigantic columns, is
crowded with revelers. The whole population of Gaza is there on
the balconies to enjoy the spectacle. Below, forgetting the
part played [01:05:00] by Delilah, the Philistine princes thank

their God for delivering their formidable enemy in their hands. Let him entertain us, they cry. And you hear it in the text. And the prisoner complies. The text doesn't tell us how, but it is easy to imagine. Doubtless they make him dance like a bear, lurch like a clown, and happy and proud, they all applaud. And to the young friend holding him by the hand, Shimshon says, "Let me feel the pillars so that I may lean upon them."

And to save the boy's life, he asks him to go, to leave him alone. The prisoner is going to avenge himself, and he knows how. He also knows why [01:06:00] and most of all, for whom. For this time -- and here I become a fervent admirer of Shimshon, and here I will become a defender of Shimshon to the end, for this time the honor of Israel is at stake, the honor of the God of Israel. Now, it's a matter not of Shimshon and his welfare or health or life. It's a matter of honor for the Jewish people. As long as his enemies tortured Shimshon the person he said nothing. Didn't even moan.

But now they are attacking God. They are mocking and ridiculing the God of Israel who gave his name to the people of Israel. To the prisoner this becomes intolerable. [01:07:00] It is a matter of *kiddush HaShem*, of sanctifying the holy name. And so Shimshon wraps his two arms about the two pillars to his right

and his left, and he murmurs a prayer. "Oh God, I pray thee, remember me and strengthen me. I pray thee only this once, oh God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. Help me make them pay for at least one of my blinded eyes." And the Midrashic version set down by Rav is more explicit.

Remember lord, says Shimshon, that during the 20 years when I was judge and commander in Israel I never asked anyone to carry my walking stick from one place to another. In other words, he never asked anything of anyone. Shimshon, now a humble hero, a man who became aware of who he really was, a man [01:08:00] alone. Turning his possible failing of doing things alone into virtue, he insists that all he had to do for God and his people he did himself, and there is a true prince, a true leader. He feels no need to command, no need to diminish to prove his own superiority.

He who humiliates, and one cannot be a commander without somehow humiliating, he who humiliates, humiliates himself. And so God grants his prayer. "*Tamut nafshi im-P'lishtim*" cries the condemned man, let me die with the Philistines. Let my end be theirs as well. He makes the column sway and shake, and in a deafening thunder, the edifice collapses. And says the text,

"The dead [01:09:00] which he slew at this death were more than they which he slew in his life." Then and only then, his brothers and the members of his tribe came down from their camps and took care of the funeral arrangements.

We get the impression that Shimshon was finally beloved. They all accompanied him to his last resting place. Between Tzorah and Eshtaol he was laid to rest in the tomb of his father Manoah. And the tale ends with a brief reminder. "*V'ehu shafat et-Yisrael esrim shanah*", and for 20 years he was a judge to his people. And I am asking the question why "*v'ehu*"? [01:10:00] Why the *vav h'akhibur*? Why the "and he judged?" It should have been he judged. A commentary of the Midrash, says the Midrash, "These words applies not to the past but to the future.

Even after his death Shimshon inspired such fear and awe in his people's enemies that they allow them to live in peace, which means for 20 years Shimshon, after his death, defended his people. Well, in conclusion, now we know that that too is part of Jewish history. It happens sometimes that we live in the light of *z'chut avot*. It happens sometimes [01:11:00] that one generation is protected by another on condition that we deserve it. (applause)

M:

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