

SAMSON, ABSALOM, AND THE PITFALLS OF *NEZIRUT*

ALEX MAGED

The sixth chapter of the book of Numbers details the laws of the Nazirite, i.e., the Israelite who forbids him or herself, through a voluntary vow, from consuming any alcoholic beverages or grape products, coming into contact with a human corpse, and cutting his or her hair. Whether the asceticism of the Nazirite constitutes a religious ideal, or an aberration thereof, is subject to dispute among the rabbinic commentaries. Concerning the mandatory sin-offering which the Nazirite must present upon the completion of his term, Rashi, citing the Talmud, explains: “[this offering is required] because he tormented himself over [withdrawal from] wine.”¹ By contrast, Ramban posits that it is not the Nazirite’s abstinence, but indeed, his termination of that abstinence, which obligates him to sacrifice a sin-offering.² Thus, we find two positions entirely at odds with each other: Rashi casts *nezirut* as the cause of sin, while Ramban views it as the bulwark against said sin.

Nor does our picture of *nezirut* grow any clearer when we turn from the section of text in which its laws are recorded to the Haftarah associated with that particular Torah portion of Naso. This Haftarah, Judges 13:2-25, tells of the birth of Samson, a notoriously complex character. For twenty years, Samson fights the Philistines on behalf of the Israelites. His formidable might is legendary, but his short temper, his erratic behaviour, and his uncurbed lust alienate many of his would-be supporters. Ultimately, Samson’s lack of discipline catches up with him; later in his life, the Israelite hero is seduced by a Philistine temptress named Delilah to whom he reveals that the secret of his strength lies in never cutting his hair. It is a tragic mistake. Upon discovering Samson’s secret, Delilah lulls him to sleep, chops off his locks, shackles him in chains and hands him over to his enemies. He kills himself and many Philistines in a final act of revenge while in captivity.

Few biblical personalities lead lives as colorful as Samson’s. Yet there is in fact one character to whom Samson bears uncanny resemblance: Absalom.

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Absalom is a son of King David who rebels against his father in an attempt to usurp the throne. Though not a Nazirite, Absalom let his hair grow long, and beyond this the events of his life parallel Samson in a number of significant ways. Comparing Samson and Absalom will help us better evaluate the legacy of Samson, and will in turn shed light on the institution of *nezirut* which he represents.

LONG HAIR

Both Samson and Absalom possess distinctively long hair. Absalom's hair weighs *two hundred shekels* and he cuts it only once a year (II Sam. 14:25-26); Samson's head had *never been touched by a razor from the time I was in my mother's womb* (Jud. 16:17). Absalom's hair represents the physical beauty which endears him to the people of Israel: *like Absalom there was not a man in all Israel as beautiful... from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head* (II Sam. 14:25); *and Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel* (II Sam. 15: 6). Samson's hair, meanwhile, is associated with the superhuman strength which allows him to conquer the Philistines (Jud. 16:17). Yet for both men, their hair is also the cause of their eventual downfall. Absalom is captured and killed when his hair becomes entangled in an elm and his mule rides off without him, leaving him *suspended between heaven and earth* (II Sam. 18:9-15). Samson is captured and killed when Delilah cuts off his hair, thereby sapping him of his strength (Jud. 16:18-20).

ANGER, VIOLENCE AND REVENGE

Both Absalom and Samson grow angry often, and both bear grudges. Absalom refuses to speak with Amnon for a period of two years, and hates him for violating Tamar, his sister (II Sam. 13:22). He also spends two full years harboring hatred against Joab, David's general, before attacking him (II Sam. 14:28-32). Samson, too, grows irritated easily. His wrath flares against the Philistines after they solve his riddle, so he kills them (Judges 14:19). Then, when he leaves his wife for a year without any explanation, her father assumes – correctly, it would seem – that he walked on out her because he found some reason to hate her (ibid. 15:2).

Additionally, both Absalom and Samson take the lives of their enemies through acts of revenge, and in similar circumstances. Both kill those respon-

sible for harming a beloved woman. Absalom kills Amnon as punishment for the raping of Tamar (II Sam. 13:21-9). Samson kills a group of Philistine men after they execute his ex-wife (Jud. 15:6-7).

Finally, it is interesting to note that both characters burn the fields of their enemies – and both do so as a reaction to being denied access to a loved one. Absalom sets fire to the field of Joab, David's general, because the latter refused to let him see his father (II Sam. 14:28-32). Likewise, Samson sets fire to the fields of the Philistines because his father-in-law, a Philistine, refused to let him see his wife (Jud. 15:1-5).

KEEPING COMPANY WITH THE ENEMY

Both Absalom and Samson spend a period of time living in the territory of Israel's enemies. Absalom lives with the king of Geshur for three years (II Sam. 13:37-39) while Samson cohabits with women in the Philistine cities of Timnah (Jud. 14:1-6), Gaza (16:1), and Sorek (16:4). Moreover, both consort with the women of their political opponents – and both do so in full public display. Absalom pitches a tent on the roof of David's palace and mocks the exiled king by consorting with his concubines *in front of all of Israel* (II Sam. 16:22). When Samson, for his part, consorts with a harlot in Gaza, the entire city finds out (Jud. 16:1-2).

OTHER POINTS OF COMPARISON

Both Absalom and Samson have a price on their head. Joab offers *ten silver pieces and one belt* to whoever kills Absalom (II Sam. 18:11). Likewise, each of the Philistine governors offers Delilah *eleven-hundred pieces of silver* in exchange for capturing Samson (Jud. 16:5).

Both characters place their trust in confidants who turn out to be double-agents. Absalom is betrayed by his adviser, Hushai the Arkhite, who is a spy of David's (II Sam. 17:14-17). Likewise, Samson reveals the secret of his strength to Delilah, his consort, who has been paid by the Philistine governors to capture him (Jud. 16:16-20).

Both Absalom and Samson make apparently illogical decisions which the text's narrative voice informs us were arranged by God. Absalom rejects the sound advice of his long-time adviser, Ahitophel, and adopts the unreasonable plan of Hushai the Arkhite – a spy of David's – because *the Lord had*

ordained to nullify the good advice of Ahitophel in order to bring calamity upon Absalom (II Sam. 17:14). Likewise, Samson falls in love with a Philistine girl because *it was from the Lord – He was seeking a pretext against the Philistines* (Jud. 14:4).

Both Absalom and Samson call out to God in their moment of distress. While in exile, Absalom vows that *if the Lord shall return me to Jerusalem, I shall worship Him* (II Sam. 15:9). While in captivity, Samson prays: *O Lord God! Remember me and strengthen me just this one time, O God, and I will exact vengeance from the Philistines . . .* (Jud. 16:28).

The texts of both stories state explicitly that more men died indirectly in the course of conflict with Absalom and Samson than were killed directly by the hands of either character. Of the war between Absalom and David we read that *the forest [where they fought] consumed more people than the sword* (II Sam. 18:8). Samson's enemies also died as a result of being submerged by their surroundings. Samson committed suicide by leaning on the pillars of the Philistine temple in which he was being held captive. As a result, *the building collapsed on the governors and all the people inside it: the dead whom Samson killed as he died were more than he had killed in his lifetime* (Jud. 16:30).

Neither Absalom nor Samson dies in a dignified way. Absalom is stabbed by ten men who take his body *and flung him into a large pit in the forest* (II Sam. 18:17). Samson dies when the Philistine temple collapses on top of him and only after his brothers come to recover his corpse is he finally buried (Jud. 16:31).

Both stories end with an abrupt transition from a mood of joy to one of grief. When Absalom dies, David's loyalists celebrate the fact that the rebellion has been quashed. But when they see David grieving over his son, *the salvation of that day was transformed into mourning for all the people* (II Sam. 19:3). When Samson is captured, the Philistines throw a great party replete with public sacrifices, praises to the gods, dancing and merry-making (Jud. 16:23-5). But festivities give way to tragedy when Samson brings the temple crashing down, killing over three thousand Philistines (Jud. 16:27-30).

THE MEANING BEHIND THE PARALLELS

The pointed parallels between Samson and Absalom serve to highlight underlying issues common to both. These are issues that we are tempted to gloss over when we encounter the narrative of Samson in isolation, because Samson's great contributions on behalf of the Israelite nation overshadow some of his more questionable conduct. Only when confronted with a character so similar to Samson – yet so much less forgivable – do we suddenly recognize the nefarious ends to which, under different circumstances, his behavior might have led.

Both Samson and Absalom are tremendously talented. But both get carried away on account of their talents, convincing themselves that they do not need to abide by the same rules and even appearance as the rest of society. That, in fact, is precisely the danger inherent in the endeavor of the Nazirite; as Dr. Erica Brown observes, one who adopts ritual strictures which the Torah does not legislate implies that the standards to which his friends and neighbors hold themselves are somehow beneath him.³ With time, he may begin to fancy himself as “holier-than-thou.”

In this vein, it is instructive to note that the Hebrew word for Nazirite, *nazir*, is related to the word *nezer*, “crown.” Properly performed, *nezirut* offers its practitioners the opportunity to lead their lives with an added measure of dignity, perhaps even of regality. Yet the practice can also lead to arrogance and self-importance, if appropriate perspective is not maintained. All too often, those who pride themselves on their ability to act beyond the letter of the law wind up believing that they are above it; they place themselves outside of the community as a way of asserting their position atop of it. In this sense, there is little difference between Samson, the Nazirite, and Absalom, the would-be-king — for both claim “crowns” that their contemporaries never offered them.

Our sages caution us that we should not seek to separate ourselves from the collective of which we are a part.⁴ One who, like the Nazirite, refuses to drink wine or to expose him or herself to a dead body, inevitably distances himself from his community. Suddenly, this person no longer shares in the joy or the grief of his neighbors: he cannot fully participate in their festive occasions and he cannot attend the funerals of their loved ones. In his quest to exalt himself, he isolates himself. Eventually, he may, like Samson and Absalom,

push away even his own parents, and find that those whom he believed he could trust were never quite as close to him as he imagined.

To be sure, it is a worthy goal to cultivate individuality and to strive for personal excellence. The key is to do so in the context of a community. Only in this way can we use our gifts and talents as they were meant to be used: not to compete, but to collaborate; not to intimidate, but to inspire.

NOTES

1. Rashi, Numbers 6:11.
2. Ramban ad. loc.
3. See E. Brown, *Leadership in the Wilderness: Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers* (New Milford, CT: Maggid Books, 2013) p. 48.
4. Avot 2:4.



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