

The Unwilling Nazirite
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The verses we just heard read from our *parashah*, *Naso*, describe one of the most intriguing and perplexing institutions of biblical religion. All of us know that the Torah prohibits many things: various kinds of foods, various kinds of sexual relationships, various kinds of work on the Sabbath. Here we encounter instructions for an individual who freely decides to impose additional restrictions and renunciations, to give up things that are permitted to all Israelites. The individual, called *Nazir* or “Nazirite”, can be male or female—there is absolutely no differentiation in this case, both are of a totally equal status. The seriousness of this decision is expressed in the fact that the person who undertakes it swears a solemn vow, a *neder*, concerning this voluntary abstinence. The reason for the decision is not specified in our reading; we might assume that it could be an expression of deep gratitude, or of profound guilt, or of an aspiration to reach a higher level of personal sanctity.

Now while the decision to become a Nazirite is voluntary, the substance of the renunciation is not a matter of choice, like someone who decides to give up chocolate for Lent, or to give up smoking for health reasons. Three things are specified. The first pertains to what we ingest: no intoxicating beverages, nothing with alcohol, and beyond this nothing in any way derived from grapes: no grape juice to be drunk, no dried grapes or raisins to be eaten.

The second applies to physical appearance: no cutting of the hair.

And the third relates to ritual purity. The strongest source of ritual contamination in biblical law is direct contact with a corpse. Even today, Orthodox Jews who are *kohanim*, of priestly descent, will not enter a cemetery unless they are mourners for father, mother, sister, brother, son, daughter, husband or wife. But the Nazirite, like the High Priest alone, is prohibited contact with a corpse even for the closest relative.

Why *dafka* these three things: grapes, haircut, and dead body? It’s the kind of question that provides a challenge to all of our classical commentators as well as to modern biblical scholars and anthropologists, and I am not going to suggest an answer. Instead, I would like to shift to a discussion of the most famous Nazirite in history, or at least in literature. This is of course, Samson, the subject of the story in the Book of Judges which begins with our *haftarah*. And I would like to focus on a theme that I mentioned in passing near the beginning: the role of the woman.

I said that unlike most aspects of biblical religious life, here we have equality between the sexes: both men and women can vow to become Nazirites, and their obligations are the same. The author of this opening chapter of the Samson story seems to be having some fun with this theme. In the first verse we are introduced to Manoah, from the tribe of Dan. In the second verse, we meet the second character, whose name is But we are not told what her name is, for she is a woman; she is identified in this verse as *ishto* “his wife”; the only information we are given about her is that—like so many other biblical women—she was barren. In the following verse and thereafter she is identified as *ha-ishah*, “the woman.” Throughout the

narrative, we have “Manoah” and “the woman”, as if she is not even worthy of having a name.

Yet look at what happens in the narrative. An angel or messenger from God—and the Hebrew word *malakh* can refer either to a human messenger or an angel that appears in human form—to the woman with a message in a classic “annunciation” scene. She will conceive and give birth to a son. From this time on, she must drink no wine or other intoxicating beverages, and eat nothing unclean. Her son must never allow his hair to be cut: he is to be a Nazirite from the womb and throughout his life. And he is destined for a special role: he will begin to deliver the Israelites from their powerful neighbours, the Philistines.

Well that’s a pretty powerful message to keep as a secret, and so “the woman” does what we would expect her to do: she tells her husband Manoah everything that had happened. And how does Manoah respond? Just like a man. He can’t trust his wife to be reliable in such matters, and so he prays to God to send the messenger back “to us”, and tell *us* what to do with the child to be born. Only when *he* has also seen the messenger and heard the message himself will he be satisfied that his wife got it right.

God heeds Manoah’s prayer, and the messenger returns—but *not* to Manoah, or to both of them when they are together, but once again to “the woman.” This time, however, she immediately *runs* to Manoah and tells him that the same man has again appeared “to me”. And so Manoah meekly “follows his wife”, to encounter the stranger. When he asks the man to repeat the message to him, he is obliged, but the stranger says exactly what “the woman” had earlier reported, nothing new, no instructions added for the father. Doesn’t this seem like a narrator having some fun with the conventional gender hierarchies? The woman whose name is never even mentioned is the one who receives the divine message and reports it with total accuracy to the man, who doesn’t believe her until he hears the same thing himself.

And there is one other little play toward the end of the chapter. They make an offering to God, and when the flames of the offering burn strongly, the mysterious messenger ascends in the flames. This convinces Manoah that the stranger was indeed an angel in the form of a man, and he panics, saying to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen a divine being.” But “his wife” responds calmly, with considerable common sense, “If God had meant us to die, He would not have accepted the offering or sent this message!” Clearly, it is the woman who is at the centre of the narrative in this *haftarah*; even if her role is primarily to bear a son, she is the guardian of the purity necessary to fulfil his mission.

We don’t have time to go in detail through the rest of the story, in which Samson himself becomes the central character, and women—especially three Philistine women—become a source of seduction and danger. Returning to the *parashah*, however, I would point out that each of the three prohibitions pertaining to the Nazirite are broken by Samson. First, he is attacked by a lion and kills it, leaving the carcass by the road. When some months later he walks again on this path, he notices a swarm of bees who have made a honeycomb in the lion’s carcass; he scrapes out the honey and gives it to his parents to eat, without telling them of its source. Now the lion is *terefah*, the food derived from its body is impure and forbidden. This contact with a dead body is his first offence.

He then marries a Philistine woman and makes a wedding feast, which is called in Hebrew *mishteh*, from the verb *shoteh*, to drink, the verb used in both the Torah passage and the

haftarah in stating what the Nazirite should not drink. It clearly implies intoxicating beverages, the second violation of the Nazirite's rules.

And finally, the love affair with Delilah, a woman whose name is indeed given, who seduces him to admit the prohibition of cutting his hair. She brings in a Philistine barber to cut the hair while he sleeps, and Samson is left powerless. This is frequently understood, especially when told to children, as if there was some magical power in his hair, and the cutting of his hair left him vulnerable like Superman exposed to Kryptonite. Clearly that is not the sense of the story. There is no magical power in his hair; with all three Nazirite prohibitions broken, God's protection departs, and he is left like an ordinary, fragile human being, to be humiliated by his enemies.

And yet I sense there is some ambivalence in the narrative. Unlike the Torah Nazirite, who undertakes the renunciation voluntarily, for a limited period of time, Samson's status is imposed upon him from before he is born, and it is never supposed to come to an end. He is an unwilling Nazirite, his temperament totally different from that implied by the Torah rules. From one perspective, the life of renunciation is close to holiness; from another it is a refusal to appreciate the joys that come from God's creation. And indeed, the Talmud, cited by Rashi on Numbers 6:11, states that one there is an element of sin in the Nazirite's renunciation of wine, for which a sin offering is required (b. *Nazir* 19a, *Ta'anit* 11a) What is wrong with honey from the carcass of a lion: the transformation of something destructive into something sweet? What is wrong with wine at a wedding feast? What is wrong with falling in love and honestly disclosing intimate secrets to the beloved?

Let me be clear that I am not holding up Samson's relationship with Philistine women to be a model, like that of former Israeli President Moshe Katzav, or Dominique Strauss-Kahn, or—in a somewhat different category—the American political figures Arnold Schwarzenegger and John Edwards. But I find the biblical Samson to be not just a rather stupid womanizing Mr Universe body-builder, but in some ways a rather appealing figure.

The life of the Nazirite ascetic self-discipline is not an ideal for us, any more than is the life of unrestrained hedonistic self-indulgence. What we aim for, rather, is the capacity to appreciate and enjoy the beauties of the world with balance and moderation. That, and not the perpetual Nazirite, is the Jewish ideal. Or at least what Maimonides and many who were influenced by him understood to be the Jewish ideal.