

The Loneliness of Samson

12 Sivan 5775; May 30, 2015

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Samson is ‘the Jewish Hercules!’ Nearly every Jewish kid learns about this “hero” early on in their Jewish education. He’s an exciting character... His birth occurs in the most unusual, miraculous way... an angel comes to announce his arrival to a previously barren mother. He grows up to attain bionic strength, and to make the story even more exotic, he wrestles a full grown lion with his bare hands, and slays a thousand Philistines with a jaw bone! His status as a Nazir, with his long flowing hair—the secret to his strength—and his alternative lifestyle give him that whole superhero mystique, and let’s face it, he is quite the lady’s man. In his dramatic death scene, the blinded, bound Samson’s legendary strength returns one last time to bring down his enemies, as he topples the pillars of the pagan temple on the heads of the dreaded Philistines. It’s really quite amazing that with the spate of biblically themed movies that have recently come out that no one has thought to do another Samson movie.

Yet with all the thrill of the Samson story, there is something so deeply depressing, so tragic about this lead character. If you read the story closely, you won’t be able to help noticing that *everything that Samson does, he does alone*. He doesn’t have a helper, a partner, a teammate. When he fights, which is frequently, he fights alone. Samson doesn’t field an army, he is an army of one. Although he marries three times, he doesn’t really trust any of his wives...the first one divorces him because she can’t live with his secrets and solitary way of life. There is nothing in the text that suggests that he has any friends, the way that King David did with Jonathan; He doesn’t have siblings to collaborate with the way Moses did with Aaron and Miriam. He certainly doesn’t open up to his parents. When he had that wrestling match with the lion, the text specifically says: *lo higid l’aviv u’le-imo et asher asah*, he didn’t even tell his parents what he had done.(Judges 14:6) Why would the text go out of its way to tell us that he kept this information from his parents? In the very first recorded conversation between Samson and his parents, he expresses his attraction to Philistine women. And they throw up their hands and say, “Aren’t there enough Jewish girls around here that you have to go off and find a Philistine?” (Judges 14:3) *Ah, some things never change...* They can’t quite figure him out any more than his

wives can. The truth is that Samson was destined to be a loner from day one. Typically people took on the Nazirite vow temporarily, but Samson was made to be a Nazir *min ha-betten ad yom moto*, from the womb until the day he dies. (Judges 13:7) Even his name Samson, *Shimshon*, means the sun—like the one in the sky...different from all the other stars...brighter, hotter, outshining everything else in the sky. Samson is fundamentally, existentially alone. And when we review his record of accomplishment, it's a mile wide and an inch deep. Samson provides only the most temporary relief from oppressive Philistine enemies. His reign is noticeably short: 20 years. Most biblical leaders characters tended work a lot longer: Deborah, Gideon, Moses, King David, King Solomon all ruled for at least 40 years. And while many of those other leaders ended their term leaving the Jewish people more united, or having created a central shrine or government, or having ushered-in a renewal of faith...After Samson, the Jewish people further descended into anarchy, civil war, apostasy and a whole lot of other unpleasant things. I believe, my friends, that the reason Samson was so unsuccessful was that he was so profoundly lonely. It's very hard to lead when you lack meaningful relationships with the very people you presume to lead! It's almost impossible to leave a positive legacy if you never built any coalitions, never collaborate or partner with anyone.

Evolutionary biologists posit that the feeling of loneliness developed to alert humans that they had gotten too close to the perimeter and risked becoming prey. Human beings are social animals, and we rely upon each other for survival. When we stray too far or become too disengaged from the pack, then our lives are imperiled.^[1] Now loneliness is not the same as being alone. We all crave and need some alone time. I absolutely adore my wife and kids, but I love the early morning hours before anyone gets up when I can read the newspaper, sip my coffee, and just dwell by myself in that quiet time. I remember that I used to think it was the ultimate social faux pas--the ultimate embarrassment to go to a movie alone...that is, until I tried it. Then I realized that I kind of enjoyed getting lost in the movie with my box of popcorn and sitting off on my own in the dark. One can be lonely though, without ever being alone. Being lonely is the persistent feeling that your life is missing someone or something; it's a feeling of hopelessness and deep sadness, and according to a study published by Brigham Young

^[1] "When Being Alone Turns Into Loneliness, There Are Ways to Fight Back," by Elizabeth Bernstein, *The Wall Street Journal*, November 4, 2013

University, loneliness is “[as] strong a predictor of early death as was alcoholism or smoking 15 cigarettes a day, and it was a stronger predictor than obesity or a sedentary lifestyle[!]”^[2]

Now it seems to me that Samson was not an old man when he died. As I said earlier, he was a judge for only 20 years, and if he began his career at around 20, well that would have made him younger than me when he died. The more I read about Samson, the more I have come to believe that it was his loneliness, his dissatisfaction with his life and lack of trust in relationships; his isolationist tendencies that contributed to his demise. Like all stories and characters in the Tanach, I think we have to ask what this one is doing here and what we are supposed to learn from it.

I want to suggest that Samson’s story is preserved as a model of patently un-Jewish behavior! At the very outset of this human experiment God said: *Lo tov lihiyot adam levado*...Loneliness is not good for human beings. (Genesis 2:18) And if you survey the map of Jewish life, Jewish practice, Jewish prayer, you will find again and again that Judaism is meant to draw us out of our inwardly focused existence and bring us into the context of community. “You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) That’s a perfect example! Everybody is self-absorbed, somewhat egocentric, and occasionally narcissistic—and the Torah reminds us that some of that energy needs to be directed outward, toward other people. So many of the mitzvot of our tradition place us in direct relationship with others, and some of the richest parts of Jewish life simply must be experienced in community with others. One of my favorite Mishnayot is from tractate Pe’ah, Mishnah 1 chapter 1. The rabbis teach that certain activities not only provide benefit in this world, but even have benefits in the world to come...and they are: honoring one’s father and mother, deeds of loving kindness, and making peace between people. What’s the common denominator of all these rewarding activities? They all involve relationships with others; they all involve giving something of ourselves, our love, our resources, our sensitivity to help other human beings. Nothing unravels the grip of loneliness more than being involved in the lives of others.

A year after Samson wrestled that fierce lion to the ground, he happens upon its carcass. Inside the skeleton of the animal a swarm of bees are flying around a honeycomb. Samson scoops up

^[2] Ibid.

some of the honey, tastes it, and later on, offers it to others. But first he tells them a riddle: “Out of the eater came something to eat; out of the strong came something sweet.” (Judges 14:8-9, 14) It’s an impossible riddle to figure out—how would anyone know that the honey came from the carcass of a lion...especially if he never told anyone about it?! But the more I think about it, the more convinced I’ve become that the lion is not the answer to the riddle, Samson is. Out of the strong came something sweet...the strong one is him! There is sweetness inside of him, yet he struggles so much to share it with others. There is sweetness in all of us, dear friends, and the more we learn to share it with others, the more connected we will be to them, and you guessed it, the less lonely we will be!

Shabbat Shalom