

**Heroes, Then and Now**  
***Parashat Naso***  
**June 3, 2017**  
**Rabbi Carl M. Perkins**  
**Temple Aliyah, Needham**

Samson, whose conception and birth we read about in today's *haftarah* (Judges, chapter 13), is the closest we Jews come to a classic hero, the kind we encounter in Greek mythology.



The dictionary definition of a hero is: a person who, in the face of danger, combats adversity through impressive feats of ingenuity, bravery or strength, often sacrificing his or her own personal concerns for a greater good.

But the classical myths depict humans who are crucially flawed as well as strong.

That certainly describes Samson. In Judges 14, we learn that he saw a beautiful woman, a *Philistine* woman, and desired her for a wife. His parents weren't thrilled. "There are no daughters of your own kinsmen, there are no women among our own people, that you have to go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" (14:3)

Samson simply responded: "Get me *that* one, for she is the one who pleases me." That's the kind of person he was: a man of appetite, who wanted whatever met his fancy.

Soon afterward, a lion came roaring at him. But, we are told, the spirit of the Lord gripped him and he tore the lion apart, like you might tear a baby goat, a *g'di*. Later, he passed by the remains of that lion, and in it he found a swarm of bees, and honey. He scooped the honey into his hands and ate it as he went along. (Id., 8-9) That's the kind of person he was.

He then encountered a group of thirty Philistines, kinsmen of his wife, and gave them a riddle. He said: "If you can guess the answer to my riddle, I'll give you each a set of clothing. Otherwise, you give them to me."

So here's the riddle he gave them:

*Out of the eater came something to eat,  
Out of the strong came something sweet.*

They of course couldn't figure it out.

But then, those guys went to Samson's Philistine wife and said, "Tell us the answer!" And so she begged Samson to tell her. After nagging him for a week, he gave in and told her. That's the kind of person he was: easily diverted and distracted, easily seduced.

She told the others, and the next day, they came to Samson and said,

*What is sweeter than honey,  
And what is stronger than a lion?*

Samson then said, in a vulgar, dismissive way,

*Had you not plowed with my heifer,  
You wouldn't have guessed my riddle.*

He then went and murdered thirty men from Ashkelon, stripped them of their tunics and gave them to the men who had answered the riddle. And he left in a rage.

This was the kind of man he was: imprudent, impulsive, and easily offended.

Eventually, Samson’s wife left him and went off to marry someone who had been one of his wedding companions.

Later in his life, after he had sowed many wild oats, he married another Philistine woman, Delilah, who begged him to tell her the source of his strength. We, the readers, know why she was asking him. She intended, literally, to sell him out: to sell the information about the source of his strength to Philistines who wanted to capture and torture him. One wonders how it was that Samson didn’t realize this himself. But this was the kind of person he was: incurious and self-centered.

After repeatedly putting off Delilah, he finally succumbed to her charms—as he had to those of his first wife years before—and told Delilah that the source of his strength was his hair; that if it were ever cut, he would lose his strength.

So Delilah lulled Samson to sleep, called in someone to help her cut his hair.



Delilah then cried out, “Samson, the Philistines are upon you!”

Samson awoke—but wasn’t able to fight. And so the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and he became an object of mockery in Gaza, the capital city of the Philistines. They had him dance before them to amuse them. Then, they put him in between the pillars that supported their Temple, the Temple of Dagon, which was full of thousands of men and women, standing on the roof of the Temple, watching Samson.

And Samson prayed to the Lord for strength, and cried, “Let me die with the Philistines!” and pulled on the chains binding him to the pillars with all his might. And the Temple came crashing down on the lords and on all the people in it. And Samson died together with the Philistines.



(Samson dying with the Philistines, sand sculpture in Tel Aviv)

This very mixed image of the hero—courageous, strong and determined, yet also personally flawed—impulsive, vulgar, even stupid—is similar to the picture we get from reading the Greek myths where we learn that sometimes you can count on a hero, but he can also disappoint. He has some spark of the divine in him, but he is also very human.

The classic Greek hero was **Heracles**—later called Hercules by the Romans. Very strong, courageous, and strong-willed, yet someone who, like Samson, didn't often think before acting, Heracles embodies daring, audacity, and fearlessness—as well as some lesser qualities.

It's true that in the Biblical period, we Jews had soldiers. Just read the Books of Samuel and Kings. There are lots of soldiers in those stories. But we don't preserve many stories of the exploits of individual heroes. And indeed, before too long, we Jews were defeated: first in 722 BCE by the Assyrians; then in 586 BCE by the Babylonians; then in the year 70 CE, and the year 135 CE, by the Romans.

By the time of the Mishnah, published in the year 200, after we Jews had suffered two successive terrible defeats at the hands of Rome, we took our weakness and turned it into strength.

*Eizehhu giber?* as the Mishnah asks: “Who is a hero?” And the answer given is, “The one who conquers his impulses.” Beautiful. It elevates the suppression of the ego, the suppression of appetite and ambition to, well, heroic proportions. And then along comes Avot d'Rabbi Natan (an elaboration of and commentary on Pirkei Avot) a few generations later which gives a different twist to it: “*Eizehu giber?* Who's a hero? The one who turns an enemy (oyvo) into a friend (ohavo).” *Me-oyev l'ohav*. In other words, a true hero is a negotiator, a diplomat; someone who is not impulsive, but methodical, strategic, and wise.

So these are the virtues: restraint, the willingness and ability to seek and pursue peace, the ability to think strategically—not brute strength, impulsivity, and bravado—that we can justifiably identify as Jewish virtues that we associate with heroism.

And yet, I think that we still do not only respect, but also admire and aspire to, the ideal of heroism in the classic sense.

“Be strong, take courage!” Moses, and then Joshua, tell the people. And we read those stirring words in Psalms as well: “Be strong, and may your heart take courage!” And there's that famous line in Leviticus, “*Lo ta'amod al dam reyecha,*” “Don't stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” That verse impels us to intervene when someone else is threatened. It impels us not to stand idly by.

We recognize that we should come forward when someone needs us, yet we also realize that we might not always do that, and so we admire those who do.

We all came to learn of three American heroes this past week. On a commuter train in Portland, Oregon, between stops, a man began harassing two women, yelling anti-Muslim slurs. We all know what it's like, don't we, to be between stops on a commuter or a subway train, when someone begins behaving poorly? It's awkward and uncomfortable. We can't *wait* for the train to get to the next stop so that we can leave, or at least move to another car. In this case, three men came to the aid of the women being harassed, and they were viciously stabbed by the assailant, who fled at the next stop. (He was later captured by police.) Two of the men who came forward were killed; the third went to the hospital, but was well enough to attend the assailant's arraignment a few days later.

The two victims who were killed in the attack—their names are not as well known to us as that of Samson, but they should be—were:

- \* 53-year-old **Ricky John Best** of Happy Valley, Oregon; and
- \* 23-year-old **Taliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche** of Portland.

The victim who was injured in the attack was 21-year-old **Micah David-Cole Fletcher** of Southeast Portland.

And in case you think it is so easy to step forward to help when someone is being attacked, realize that no one else stepped forward. In fact, when the train reached the next stop, one person on the train took advantage of the chaos to go up to the body of one of the men who had been stabbed, and steal his wedding ring and backpack. (They were later recovered, and the thief was thrown in jail.)

This may have reminded some of us of an incident that took place on a train in France about two years ago. Three Americans—Airman First Class **Spencer Stone**; **Alek Skarlatos**, a specialist in the Oregon National Guard; and **Anthony Sadler**, a friend of theirs—were riding on the train when they saw a man walking purposefully down the aisle with an AK-47 machine gun. They sprang into action and, although they were wounded, they managed to overcome the assailant and prevent a horrible tragedy.

*What gives a person the courage, the strength, and the determination to act in such a heroic way?*

I think it's a combination of factors: a sense of right and wrong, a sense of justice, a sense of righteous indignation at witnessing bad behavior, and a determination to do whatever one can to address it.



Such a person is not willing to simply allow an indignity or injustice—much less, a horrible, murderous rampage—to take place without a fight. Such a person is willing to lose his or her life in the process.

Fortunately, in that incident in France, the three heroes survived. That didn't happen in Portland.

Modesty is also a piece of heroism. In both cases, the surviving heroes maintained that they had done nothing special. As one of those who attacked the gunman on the French train put it, "Hiding and sitting back is not going to do anything."

\* \* \* \* \*

We can do a lot worse than to talk about heroes and heroism with our friends and family. We can and should ask one another, and in particular, ask our kids:

What is a hero?

What qualities do you look for in a hero?

Does heroism always require physical strength, or can it be defined in other ways?

Does heroism demand extraordinary circumstances, like a train attack or a war? Or can heroism take place in our everyday lives?

Can anyone be a hero?

Who are *your* heroes?<sup>i</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

Nicholas Kristof recently shared the following:

"After coming out of surgery, weak but indomitable, [Micah] Fletcher wrote a poem that offers us guidance. According to The Oregonian, it read in part:

I, am alive.

I spat in the eye of hate and lived.

This is what we must do for one another.

We must live for one another.”<sup>ii</sup>

Given the way Samson lived most of his life, we needn't—and shouldn't—be idolizing him. But even about him we can ask a question: leaving aside his less-than-noble qualities, what about that last desperate act of his? Is *that* the kind of behavior we admire and seek to instill in our youth? Was it heroic? If so, why? And if not, why not?

In addition to reflecting on the nature of heroism, we should honor those who stand up for the defenseless, who stand up against bullying, tyranny, or evil of any kind. And we should mourn the losses of heroes like Ricky John Best and Teliesin Myrddin Namkai Meche, who remind us of the importance—and sometimes the price—of standing up for others.

Let's hope that these steps will give us the courage, the strength and the determination to do the right thing, when and if we find ourselves in comparable circumstances.

Shabbat shalom.

---

<sup>i</sup> See [https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/what-is-a-hero/? r=0](https://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/what-is-a-hero/?r=0) .

<sup>ii</sup> See [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/opinion/portland-train-attack-muslim.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fnicholas-kristof&action=click&contentCollection=opinion&region=stream&module=stream\\_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/30/opinion/portland-train-attack-muslim.html?rref=collection%2Fcolumn%2Fnicholas-kristof&action=click&contentCollection=opinion&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection) .