

Parashat Naso 5779, 2019:

## *Who Really Was Shimshon?*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The laws pertaining to the *Nazir* (Nazirite) are found in this week's *parasha*, and begin with the following passage:

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to the children of Israel, and you shall say to them: A man or woman who sets himself apart by making a nazirite vow to abstain for the sake of the L-rd. He shall abstain from new wine and aged wine; he shall not drink [even] vinegar made from new wine or aged wine, nor shall he drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, and he shall eat neither fresh grapes nor dried ones. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 6:1-3, this and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

*Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) often chose a *haftarah* (reading from the Prophets) with an underlying theme that parallels a subject found in its associated Torah portion. Our *haftarah* follows this approach, and focuses upon the miraculous events preceding the birth of the most famous *Nazir* of all time, *Shimshon HaGibor* (Samson the heroic one). The essence of our narrative begins in the following manner:

And there was one man from Zorah, from the family of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren, and had not borne. And an angel of the L-rd appeared to the woman, and said to her, "Behold now, you are barren, and have not borne; and you shall conceive and bear a son. Consequently, beware now, and do not drink wine or strong drink, and do not eat any unclean thing. Because you shall conceive, and bear a son; and a razor shall not come upon his head, for a Nazirite to G-d shall the lad be from the womb; and he will begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." (*Sefer Shoftim* 13:2-5)

A number of *pasukim* (verses) later, the *haftarah* concludes with the birth of Shimshon and explicit statements that Hashem both blessed and rested His Divine spirit upon him: "And the woman bore

a son and called his name Samson; and the lad grew, and the L-rd blessed him. And the spirit of the L-rd began to come to him at times in the camp of Dan...” (*Sefer Shoftim* 13:24-25)

Based upon his colorful nature and the all-too famous incident with Delilah, Shimshon emerges as one of the most misunderstood figures in Tanach. We are indeed fortunate that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) address these misperceptions and help reveal his authentic persona. The Torah teaches us that two of the twelve tribes received the appellation “*gur aryeh*.” *Ya’acov Avinu* (our father Jacob) bestowed this title on Yehudah and his descendants, whereas *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moses) did so regarding the tribe of Dan:

A cub (*gur*) [and] a grown lion (*aryeh*) is Judah. From the prey, my son, you withdrew. He crouched, rested like a lion, and like a lion, who will rouse him? (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:9)

And of Dan he (Moshe) said: “Dan is a young lion (*gur aryeh*), streaming from Bashan.” (*Sefer Devarim* 33:22)

*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* (Parashat Va’yechi VII) explains “*gur aryeh*” as Ya’acov’s blessing to Yehudah to acquire “the strength of a lion and the temerity (*chutzpah*) of a lion cub.” Little wonder, then, that in his *Commentary on the Torah* on this *pasuk* (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:9), Rashi (1040-1105) notes that Ya’acov’s use of *gur aryeh* prophetically refers to Yehudah’s most famous descendant and forebear of the *Mashiach*, *Dovid HaMelech* (King David), who embodied both lion-like strength and great boldness. In addition, seven *pasukim* later we find, “Dan will avenge his people, like one, the tribes of Israel.” Herein Rashi, basing himself on a variety of passages found throughout Rabbinic literature, states:

All Israel will be like one with him, and he will avenge them all. Concerning Samson he [Jacob] uttered this prophecy. We can also explain, “like one, the tribes of Israel,” [as follows]: like the special one of the tribes, namely David, who came from Judah.

Rashi’s gloss strongly underscores the perception of *Chazal* regarding the relationship between the tribe of Yehudah and the tribe of Dan, as epitomized by their most famous descendants, King

David and Shimshon. This idea is given powerful voice in *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah*, Parashat Vayechi 14: “*Ya’acov Avinu* saw him [Shimshon in a prophetic vision] and thought he was the *Melech HaMashiach* (the King Messiah)...” Clearly, Shimshon’s potential was nearly unlimited.

In my estimation, Shimshon’s status as one of the most outstanding Judges and protectors of the Jewish people is given its most powerful expression in Rabbi Yochanan’s words in *Talmud Bavli*, *Sotah* 10a:

Rabbi Yochanan said: “Shimshon judged the Jewish people just like their Father-in-Heaven. As the text states, ‘Dan will avenge his people, like one [Rashi — the One of the World Who renders righteous judgment], the tribes of Israel.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 49:16). And [in addition] Rabbi Yochanan said: “Shimshon was named after the name of the Holy One blessed be He. As the text states: ‘For a sun (*shemesh* — similar in Hebrew spelling to Shimshon) and a shield is the L-rd G-d; the L-rd will give grace and glory; He will not withhold good from those who go with sincerity.’” (*Sefer Tehillim* 84:12, Talmud translation my own)

Rabbi Yochanan compares Shimshon to the Almighty in two respects, as an honest and forthright judge and as a true *shomer Yisrael* — guardian and defender of the Jewish people. In his view, this was the real Shimshon, even though he grievously erred with Delilah, among others.

I believe another aspect of Shimshon’s greatness is found in his willingness to do *teshuvah* (returning to the proper path of serving Hashem), just as *Dovid HaMelech* did in the wake of his initial involvement with Batsheva. Shimshon rose to this level when he beseeched Hashem for the strength to destroy his idolatrous Philistine captors. When Hashem granted him this power, Shimshon was able to *mekadash shame Shamayim b’rabim* — sanctify Hashem’s name before the entire world:

And the people [Philistines] saw him (Shimshon) and praised their god, because they said, “Our god has delivered into our hands our enemy and the destroyer of our land, and who has slain many of us.” And Samson called to the L-rd and said, “O L-rd G-d, remember me and strengthen me now, only this once O G-d, that I may be avenged the vengeance for one of my two eyes from the Philistines.” And Samson grasped the two pillars of the center, upon which the house rested, and leaned upon them, (the) one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, “Let

my soul die with the Philistines,” and he bent with (his) might, and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. And the dead that he killed at his death were more than he had killed in his lifetime. (*Sefer Shoftim* 16:24,28-30)

With Hashem’s help and our fervent desire, may we live lives that are *mekadash shame Shamayim* and bring honor to His holy Torah. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha*’s name.

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