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Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

Parashat Naso

The Naziriteship of Shimshon Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein

This week's *haftara* (*Shofetim* 13:2-25) revolves around two issues: the reaction of Mano'ach and his wife to the angel's tidings and the naziriteship of Shimshon. It is obviously the second issue that connects the *haftara* to the *parasha*, but the two issues are intertwined in the *haftara*, and we shall try to understand the reciprocal relationship between the two. For this purpose, we must first analyze each issue separately.

When we come to discuss the story of Mano'ach and his wife, what is most striking is their passivity. Scripture gives no indication of any stress on their part or of any struggle against the situation in which they find themselves. Rather, they appear to be peacefully reconciled with their lot. We do not hear Mano'ach or his wife beseeching God that He should bless them with a child; at no point do they cry out or pray to Him. Even when the angel arrives and informs them about the upcoming pregnancy and birth, he does not present these tidings as an answer to their request, and there is no mention of any prayers that had been offered in the past. We get the impression that the angel's tidings involve something that not only did they not expect, but they did not even hope for. Their names aptly describe them. His name is Mano'ach and rest (*menucha*) and passivity are his most salient features.

This point is most conspicuous when we compare our story to the other accounts of childless women in Scripture. We are familiar with a number of such stories, and the most prominent feature common to all of the characters involved is their activity and unconstrained battle with their barrenness. Avraham and Sara turn to God and comment on the discrepancy between His promises and the reality in which they live, and they

even take the far-reaching step of arranging a surrogate mother in the form of Hagar. Facing a similar situation, Yitzchak and Rivka engage in extensive prayer, and Rachel's words, "Give me sons, or else I will die," echo in our ears to this very day. Similarly, Chana and the Shunamite woman – childless women who are the focus of two other *haftarot* – radiate inner strength and self-confidence toward the prophets. They demand satisfaction for the insult that they suffer; they are conscious of the emotional strength that they have developed and of their right to stand before God and put forward their case. These characters do not make peace with their situation, nor do they wait for an angel who will remember them. Rather, their entire being is involved in a struggle with their bitter fate.

All of this is missing in the reactions of Mano'ach and his wife. Scripture portrays them as very simple people; Mano'ach's wife is so lacking in identity and personality that she remains unnamed, and to this very day we refer to her as "Mano'ach's wife." This would not be so surprising were we not dealing with a story about barrenness, she standing at the heart of that story. Moreover, the angel's tidings are given to her and not to her husband. Would it be conceivable for the Torah to refer to Chana as "Elkana's wife," or to present Sara throughout *Parashat Lekh Lekha* as "Avraham's wife"? It is no wonder then that *Chazal* chide Mano'ach for going after his wife.^{1[1]} Besides her being his wife who should go after him, the fact that he goes after her, even though she is void of identity, creates irony that borders on parody. A circle is created in which essentially neither of them knows where he or she is going, but only that the one is going after the other.

These traits of simplicity and passivity find expression in their reaction to the angel's tidings. The woman is so frightened that she doesn't ask any questions, and therefore Mano'ach feels unsure about the matter. He turns to God with the request that the angel should return and "teach us what we shall do to the child that shall be born" (*Shofetim* 13:8), and when the angel reappears, Mano'ach asks him: "What shall be the rule for the child, and what shall be done for him" (v. 12).

At this point, let us move from Mano'ach and his wife to the second issue, namely, Shimshon's naziriteship. As we know, *Chazal* were ambivalent about the institution of naziriteship. This ambivalence is rooted already in the verses, for on the one hand, Scripture speaks of "the crown of God upon his head" (*Bamidbar* 6:7) and the nazirite is called "holy," but on the other hand, he must bring a sin-offering upon

1[1] "Rav Nachman said: Mano'ach was an *am ha-aretz*, as it is written: 'And Mano'ach went after his wife.' Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak raised an objection: Now regarding Elkana, about whom it is written: 'And Elkana went after his wife,' and regarding Elisha, about whom it is written: 'And he stood up and went after her,' [would you say] here too 'after her' – literally? Rather, after her words and after her advice. Here too then after her words and after her advice." In light of what we have said, it is easy to understand Rav Nachman's answer to the objection raised against him from Elkana and Elisha. They in fact went after Chana and the Shunamite woman, but this is not at all similar to the case of Mano'ach. They went after impressive women, whom it was appropriate to follow, but Mano'ach went after a woman lacking personality.

completion of his naziriteship. Both in *Chazal* and in the *Rishonim*, there are those who regard the nazirite as holy, and others who condemn him as a sinner.

This seems to be rooted in the fact that naziriteship is a spiritual process based on primal energies and ecstasies deeply implanted in the human soul. Generally speaking, the Torah creates for us an orderly and systematic spiritual world, one that is based on the development of man's intellectual and emotional strengths, and on the rational and structured use of these strengths. The world of *mitzvot* is characterized by spiritual discipline and the channeling of personal strengths through study and action. Naziriteship, on the other hand, is based on the primal energies dwelling in man's soul. A nazirite is identified by his long hair, and his holiness is expressed by the fact that he allows his hair to grow wild: "He shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow" (v. 5).

In contrast to the priest whose holiness is everlasting, the nazirite's holiness is temporary (*Nazir* 7:1). This assertion is not only true in the practical sense; but rather it defines the quality and nature of the nazirite's holiness.^{2[2]} By its very nature as an expression of explosive and bursting forces, it is limited in time, for excitement wanes and routine takes control of life. The nazirite whose spiritual ascendancy is based on this eruptive quality is not built for a long-term process, and therefore, his holiness is defined by its very nature as temporary holiness.

This explains the problematic attitude toward the nazirite. On the one hand, these forces contain great spiritual potential, but on the other hand, they also embody considerable danger. Primal energies are very powerful, but this power can lead to very different results. They can serve a constructive purpose, but they can also be dangerously destructive, and like any primal force, the ability to control them is neither promised nor even possible. Therefore, in addition to limitations in time, the course of naziriteship is meant to be limited to individuals whose nature demands it, rather than to serve as the king's way to be followed by all.

[In this context, let us bring an explanation offered by my revered teacher, HaRav Amital, regarding the rabbinic dictum dealing with the meaning of a vow, which is equally valid to naziriteship. The Gemara in *Nedarim* (22a) brings a Baraita that draws a comparison between a vow and offering a sacrifice on a *bama*: "Rabbi Natan says: He who vows is regarded as if he built a *bama*, and he who keeps it is regarded as if he offered a sacrifice on it." What is the foundation for such a comparison? The Ran (ad loc.) explains that in both cases the person wishes to expand the *mitzva* beyond what is stated in the Torah. The Torah commanded about sacrifices only in the Temple, but he who brings a sacrifice on a *bama* is not satisfied with the Torah's directive, and so he expands the *mitzva* without having been commanded to do so. He may be compared to one who takes a vow because he is not satisfied with what the Torah has forbidden, and so he forbids upon himself things that are permitted. To this HaRav Amital added the individualistic element and a person's desire to be different from the rest of the community by creating for himself his own personal *Shulchan Arukh*. While ordinary

^{2[2]} See *Nazir* 47a, *Tosafot*, s.v. *nazir*.

people are forbidden to eat ham and improperly-slaughtered meat, but are permitted to eat bread and apples, he who takes a vow feels a need to separate himself from the rest of the people and stand out by way of the prohibitions that he accepts upon himself by way of the vow. Naziriteship is also exposed to the same danger of the desire to stand out and be different. It might also be added that impulsiveness is another element common to sacrifices offered on a *bama* and naziriteship. He who offers a sacrifice on a *bama* does not recognize the walls of the Temple as establishing sanctity or the limitations set upon different places. Rather, he wants to offer sacrifices whenever and wherever it suits him. Similarly, the nazirite does not respect the regular courses of holiness and service of God, but rather he wants to replace the usual and institutionalized crown of priesthood with the crown of wildly growing hair.]

The track of naziriteship offered by the Torah does not come to fight man's impulsive and bursting energies, but rather to find a halakhic framework for them, while channeling them and imposing certain limitations upon them.

Returning to the *haftara*, we can assert with certainty that it was Shimshon's unconstrained and undeveloped primal energies, accompanied by impulsiveness and the lack of willingness to recognize boundaries, that led and guided him in his actions. It is possible that his naziriteship (which is unique from a halakhic perspective) is an expression of these forces, and it is possible that it is an attempt to restrain them. Either way, there is a connection between Shimshon's personal nature and the naziriteship thrust upon him from the womb.

The aggressive actions that Shimshon takes against the Pelishtim are not carefully planned and calculated military campaigns, but rather a series of impulsive actions based on his physical strength. Whether we are dealing with the smiting of the Pelishtim with the jaw of the ass or with the tying together of the tails of the foxes, or the like, we are dealing with impulsive public displays, rather than a comprehensive strategy. As a first step to raising the spirit of the people and encouraging them, his actions are significant, but they cannot serve as a substitute for a long-term program. Put simply, a valiant hero does not substitute for a political leader, and heroic acts, impressive as they may be, do not come in place of an overall campaign. Therefore, the verse does not speak of Shimshon as saving Israel for the long term, but rather that he will begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Pelishtim (v.5). His actions can serve as a good start, but they do not constitute a long-term solution. It seems that this is one of the reasons that *Chazal* referred to Shimshon, Gid'on and Yiftach as "lightweights" and contrasted them with Moshe, Aharon and Shemu'el. The two groups are set apart not only in their spiritual greatness, but also in their political leadership.

Shimshon conducts himself with impulsiveness and without regard for boundaries on the personal plain as well. This finds expression in his relationships with Pelishti women. When his parents object to his marriage with the Pelishti woman from Timna, the argument that he puts forward on his own behalf is: "Get her for me: for she pleases

me well" (*Shofetim* 14:3).^{3[3]} And indeed it doesn't take very long before we find him in the company of a prostitute in Azza, and in the end, his downfall will follow from this very same trait. In order to understand the situation, we must internalize the arguments of his parents who opposed his marriage to a foreign woman who was not of his people. Besides the very severe religious problem of intermarriage, we are talking about a national and security issue. Consider this: what would we think today if the commander of the Azza division of the Israeli army would associate with a Palestinian prostitute or if the head of the Ramala brigade would want to marry one of the natives of Bitunya? And what is Shimshon's answer to his parents about these concerns: "Get her for me: for she pleases me well"!

It is not by chance that his strength depends on growing his hair, an activity that expresses wildness that doesn't recognize frameworks or authority. The secret of his strength lies in this, and the moment that his primal energy exhausts itself and surrenders to limiting factors, his strength disappears. *Chazal* described Shimshon's impulsive nature with yet another metaphor, that accords with the entirety of his personality and his weaknesses, and not just his problem with women: "Shimshon followed his eyes; therefore the Pelishtim put out his eyes"^{4[4]} (*Sota* 1:8).

Let us now connect the two issues in our *haftara*. In light of what we have said about Shimshon and his personality, it is clear that what he needed most was a set of parents who could raise and educate him in such a way that he would learn to conquer his impulsiveness and to channel it in some way, until eventually he would mature and learn to conduct an orderly, meaningful and challenging life. The tragedy lies in the fact that his actual parents were precisely the kind of people who are unable to provide this, owing to their own limitations. Thus, a child was born with colossal strengths who needed expert education and supervision, but this mission exceeded the capabilities of his parents. If Mano'ach had to ask, "what we shall do to the child that shall be born," then it is easy to understand that he was not the appropriate person to raise a child like Shimshon.

Indeed, Shimshon appears as a meteor that instills a new spirit in his people and begins to deliver them, but the energy that drives his actions consumes itself and his parents lack the tools to teach him how to make the transition from temporary holiness to everlasting holiness.

[Perhaps we should see the absence of parental authority in our case as an expression of the more general problem of the rejection of the frameworks of authority among the entire people at that time. Just as there is no king in Israel, and everybody does

^{3[3]} Scripture describes this desire as coming from God, to establish a pretext for attacking the Pelishtim, but the argument is understood as being in keeping with Shimshon's personality, and does not appear the slightest bit strange to his parents.

^{4[4]} The Pelishtim did not understand that Shimshon would thereby lose his characteristic impulsiveness and childishness, and that they would be replaced by maturity and profundity that did not exist previously. Simply put, the putting out of his eyes raised Shimshon from strength to might (*gevura*), but this idea takes us far astray from the issue under discussion.

as he pleases, so too there is no parental authority in Shimshon's house and his answer, "for she pleases me well," appears quite natural and acceptable. If in the house in which the leader grew up there is no authority, and everyone does as he pleases, we should not be surprised if that is the situation throughout the country. Alternatively, if that is the state of the people that everyone does as he pleases, we should not be surprised that the leader that is accepted is of the impulsive variety who does whatever enters his mind, and not a well-reasoned and orderly leader.]

To summarize, the institution of naziriteship contains within it great spiritual potential, but it requires limitations with respect to the scope of its use, and it also presents considerable religious dangers and problems. The *Parasha* puts greater emphasis on the potential holiness, whereas the *haftara* focuses on the other dimension. Thus, it serves as a counterweight, that warns about the need for limits in accordance with the needs and for the provision of spiritual and personal guidance to those who opt for naziriteship.

A broader discussion of the issue would have included the fact that halakhically speaking Shimshon's naziriteship is different from ordinary naziriteship, and an examination of the ramifications of this point on what was said above. I was concerned, however, that going into these details would have complicated the discussion and I preferred to avoid this. For those who are interested, the issue is discussed in *Nazir* 4a-5a. See also the *Netziv's* discussion in his *Ha'amek Davar* on the passage dealing with the nazirite, where he argues that this type of naziriteship is of an altogether different nature.

Were it not for a lack of time dictated by the need to write two units in a short week, it would have been appropriate to compare and contrast Shemuel and Shimshon. Both were born to barren mothers and both were nazirites (see *Nazir* 66a, and Rambam, *Hilkhot Nezirut* 3:16), but they had very different personalities and family backgrounds. Already the Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shana* contrasts them in the *derasha* that sets Shemuel together with Moshe and Aharon as one of the three "heavyweights" of the world, whereas Shimshon is assigned to the group of "lightweights." We mention this as material for further consideration.

(Translated by David Strauss)
