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ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Sefer Shoftim Chapter 13
The Birth of Shimshon the Nazirite
By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 13 of *Sefer Shoftim* opens with a familiar refrain: "The people of Israel continued to do evil in the sight of God, and God delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for a period of forty years..." Once again, in the Book's final gasp, the sorry cycle of Israelite treachery and Divine counter-wrath is stated, but this time the oppressors have a new identity. Gone are the Canaanites, Moavites, Midianites and Ammonites of earlier cycles, now replaced by a foe far more menacing and more fierce: the Philistines.

The Philistines, whose ascendancy began towards the end of the period of the *Shoftim* and continued until David vanquished them about one hundred and fifty years later, were a militaristic, technologically advanced people that dwelt upon the coastal plain of Israel. Scholarship, basing itself upon the Biblical record (see *Bereishit* 10:14; *Devarim* 2:23), archeological evidence and extra-Biblical texts, places their origins in the area of the Aegean Sea, among the Greek islands such as Crete that gave birth to the civilization of Minoa. Sometime during the 13th century BCE, waves of these maritime peoples, some of whom boarded ships and traveled eastwards with the winds while others journeyed overland along the coast of Asia Minor, began to settle upon the shores of the eastern Mediterranean from Lebanon in the north all the way down to Egypt in the south. Pharaoh Rameses III, who ruled over the "Two Lands" towards the end of the 12th century BCE, commemorated his victory over a large invasion force of these so-called Sea Peoples with the commission of a series of monumental stone reliefs for his mortuary temple at Medinat Habu. In the foreground of these reliefs, the tall raiders are depicted with plume-crested helmets, braided hair, long swords and armor upon their upper bodies, while in the background can

be seen carts and wagons that convey women and children. These women and children are representations of the families that accompanied the warriors on their expeditions, for the Sea Peoples arrived not only as conquerors but as colonizers as well. In all probability, the word "Philistine" is not an ethnic designation or delineator of geographic origins, but rather more generic and descriptive, for the term may be understood to mean "invader."

THE PHILISTINES ASCENDENT

But while the wily Pharaoh Rameses III employed a brilliant strategy that combined sea and land maneuvers to defeat the invaders, and thus succeeded in beating back their onslaught from the borders of the Egyptian Delta, the Philistines were able to easily establish themselves along the Canaanite coast. Eventually, they formed themselves into a powerful pentapolis, a confederacy of five towns each of which was ruled over by an independent governor. And in hindsight, the Egyptians welcomed the development, for, after coming to terms with the newcomers, they made use of the latter's mercenary tendencies to continue the hoary tradition of imposing their rule and influence over the land of Canaan, but this time by proxy.

The Philistines, settled in the coastal cities of Azza (modern-day Gaza), Ashkelon and Ashdod, as well as the plain cities of Gat and Ekron, quickly adopted the local Canaanite cultural heritage and pantheon, but nevertheless maintained some peculiar features that betrayed their non-Canaanite origins. Thus, their painted bichrome pottery was quite similar to Mycenaean ceramics of the same period, while their literary tradition and its penchant for tragedy recalled Greek antecedents. Is it any wonder that the account of Shimshon their nemesis has all of the literary trappings of a Greek myth?

It was, however, their knowledge of metallurgy and of the process by which iron is extracted from its ore that proved most decisive for the region. In all probability, this science and the potential for improved weapons that it introduced, was derived by the Philistines from their sustained maritime connections with the Anatolian coast. The potent combination of militarism, metallurgy and mercantile interests that characterized Philistine society from its inception proved to be fateful for those tribes of Israel that were settled cheek to jowl with their burgeoning coastal cities. By the end of the period

of the Judges, the Philistines had become a force to be reckoned with, for their expansionist aspirations soon turned towards the interior of the country of Canaan and to the lucrative trade routes that crisscrossed its hills. Pressing inland and armed with fearsome chariots of iron, they easily extended their oppressive hegemony over the hapless southern and central Israelite tribes in their way, most of whom were primitive agrarian homesteaders with inferior bronze implements and no martial tradition of which to speak. The Israelites were subjected to taxation and the hated corvee, while their large towns were kept in check by garrisons manned by professional Philistine soldiers.

Parenthetically, it should be emphasized that the name "Palestine," imposed by the Romans on the province of Judea after they had cruelly suppressed the aborted Bar Kochva revolt of the 2nd century CE, was a conscious evocation of this primeval and hostile conflict. The Romans, fed up with Jewish resistance and ongoing opposition to their harsh and rapacious rule, decided to commemorate their bloody victory over the Jews by derisively renaming these lands Syria Palaestina, so that Israel's ancient connection to the place might be expunged from memory by the recollection of the earlier implacable foe who had harshly oppressed them some fourteen centuries earlier! And it must surely therefore be one of history's greatest ironies that the modern-day conflict between Israel and its mortal enemies that dwell in Gaza and call themselves Palestinians, echoes, at least in name, this early and decisive clash.

THE OPENING OF OUR CHAPTER

It was against this backdrop that the events of *Shoftim* Chapter 13 must be appreciated, for the birth of the judge heralded in the narrative, Shimshon of Dan, occurred at a time when Israelite fortunes were at a low point. Remarkably, though, the narrative of *Sefer Shoftim* seems less interested in the historical account presented above, and more interested in the strange circumstances that surrounded the birth of this figure:

There was a man from Tzor'a from the clan of the Danites whose name was Manoach, and his wife was barren and had not borne children. An angel of God appeared to the woman and said to her: Behold, though you are barren and have not borne children, you shall nevertheless conceive and give birth to a son. Now therefore, be careful not to drink wine or intoxicating drink and do not eat anything

that defiles. This is because you shall become pregnant and bear a son, and no razor shall touch his head, for the child will be a *nazir* of the Lord from the womb, and he will begin to save Israel from the clutches of the Philistines! (13:2-5).

The general outline of the account is well known to us from other places in the Tanakh, for the "barren woman" motif recalls the stories of Sarah (*Bereishit* 21:1-3), Rivka (*Ibid*, 25:19-21), Rachel (*IBID*, 29:31), Chana (*Shemuel* 1:1:2), the Shunamite woman (*Melakhim* 2:4:8-17) and even the ruined city of Zion, who expectantly waits, like a childless woman, for the return and restoration of her exiles (*Yeshayahu* 54:1-8). In all of these cases, it is nothing less than Divine intervention that changes the fortunes of the barren woman, and this intervention is frequently (but not always) forcefully foretold ahead of time. Of course, the birth of a child under such circumstances, after an intense period of maternal longing and frustration, as well as sustained and sincere prayer, can be nothing less than a portentous event. With rare exception, the offspring so born is therefore destined for a special mission in life, and in this respect the account of Shimshon's birth does not divert substantially from the prevailing pattern.

THE UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES OF SHIMSHON'S BIRTH

Here, however, not only is the birth of the "savior" figure announced from the outset, but a unique set of conditions are placed upon the mother even prior to the moment of conception, and upon the child from the moment of its birth! The wife of Manoach is to abstain from "drinking wine or intoxicating drink and eating anything that defiles," while the child soon to be born is to have the strictures of naziriteship placed upon him from the moment of his birth! Nowhere else in the Book of *Shoftim*, whose pages are filled with the storied exploits of leaders who arose in Israel to save their people from oppression, do we have anything that remotely resembles our account in this matter. The closest parallel might be to the story of Shemuel recounted in the opening chapters of the book bearing that name, in which barren Chana vows to God to dedicate her offspring – if God will but answer her prayers – to a life of service at the *Mishkan* at Shilo, even imposing upon him certain constraints that are naziritic in origin: "no razor shall touch his head' (*Shemuel* 1:1:11).

But while the early Rabbis debated whether in fact Shemuel was a nazirite in the full sense of the term (see *Talmud Bavli* Tractate *Nazir* 66a, in

the Mishna), no one could deny the fundamental difference between the two circumstances: Chana accepted the nazirite vows for her child as her free and autonomous choice, as an act of dedication and devotion to the God who alone could hear and fulfill her prayers, while in our account, the state of naziriteship is Divinely imposed, with no introduction or warning, upon a nameless woman and her unborn child who have nowhere expressed a prior connection to the Deity, much less an interest in a challenge of this sort! Perhaps, then, the analog is to be found elsewhere, in the story of Yirmiyahu the prophet whose reluctance and fear were forcefully overcome by God's proclamation of an imposed calling:

The word of God came to me, saying: "Before I fashioned you in the belly I had already known you, and before you went forth from the womb I had already sanctified you, for a prophet unto the peoples I had designated you!" But I said: "Woe is me, Almighty God, behold I know not how to speak, for I am but a lad!" But God said to me: "Do not say that 'I am but a lad,' for concerning all that I shall send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not fear them, for I am with you to save you, says God...(*Yirmiyahu* 1:4-8).

In a similar vein, one might argue that the imposition of the nazirite vows upon the not-yet-born child of our passage is an emphatic statement of his future mission, a mission that is from the outset enforced and compulsory, and will be binding and non-negotiable until the bitter end. Nevertheless, the matter of imposed naziriteship is an unusual feature that seems exaggerated, for, like the case of Yirmiyahu that came after him, we may have expected God to have sufficed with a polite but adamant declaration of His intended role for the offspring. Would it not have been adequate for God to have selected Shimshon for his mission at some later point in his development, perhaps designating him as a savior figure once he had reached adulthood and maturity, rather than linking the matter to a naziriteship enjoined before the child's birth?

Conversely, if one were to argue that prenatal naziriteship was, for whatever reason, necessary, what is eminently lacking from our account but found in at least one of the other "barren woman" contexts, is an announcement not only of the imminent birth but of the future child's assigned name as well. Thus, Yitzchak the son of Sarah is named ahead of his birth (*Bereishit* 17:19), this name being an expression of the

incredulousness replaced by great joy that would accompany his arrival. If ever there was a child that we might have expected to have been named ahead of time it is surely the offspring of Manoach's wife, the simple woman whose very diet was dictated in deference to the birth of the one "who will start to save the Israelites from the clutches of the Philistines" (13:5)! Why was the name of the boy left up to parents who in the end selected an appellation that recalled, of all things, the pagan sun god that was so enthusiastically worshipped – in one form or another – by all ancient peoples of the Fertile Crescent ("*Shimshon*" – from "*shemesh*" or sun)?

THE PASSAGE OF THE NAZIR

In order to gain a grasp of the issues, it might be useful to consider the matter of the *nazir* in its broader context. The provisions of this unusual vow are spelled out at length in *Bemidbar* 6:1-21, and we will therefore suffice here with a brief mention of the highlights. The prohibitions of the *Nazir*, a man or woman who freely chooses to adopt a set period of abstention from things permitted, are in effect limited to three main categories: all products of the grape, any cutting of the hair, and all contact with a human corpse. While the Torah neither spells out the significance of the oath nor the meaning of the proscriptions, it does unequivocally link the matter of the *nazir* to the realm of holiness and sanctity: "all the days of his naziriteship, he shall be sanctified to God" (*Bemidbar* 6:8). The ancient Rabbis disagreed over the desirability of becoming a *nazir*, with some of them decrying the autonomous imposition of additional prohibitions over those already mandated by the Torah for the average person, while others saw in the onerous rites a legitimate aspiration for those that were more spiritually inclined (see *Talmud Bavli* Tractate *Ta'anit* 11a). But while the early Rabbis may have expressed ambivalence, the medieval commentaries were almost unanimous in their enthusiastic endorsement of the matter. The sentiments of Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) may be regarded as typical:

There are those that explain that the word "*nazir*" is related to "*NeZeR*" or crown, as the verse states that "the *nezer* of his Lord is upon his head" (*Bemidbar* 6:7). This interpretation is not unlikely. Understand that all people are enslaved to the desires of this world; the true king who wears upon his head the crown of dominion, is the one who has achieved freedom from desires...(commentary to 6:7).

For Ibn Ezra, the *nazir* is a type of monarch, for he too exercises dominion. But unlike the temporal king whose rule extends over earthly realms and whose power is measured in the main by wealth and armies, the *nazir* is king over his inner drives, over the terrestrial desires that hold most of us in their sway. Thus, the *nazir* abstains from wine that clouds judgment, numbs the senses, and is often, when consumed to excess, only an escape from more pressing challenges and concerns. He does not cut or tend to his hair, a rejection of the prevailing infatuation with appearance and fashion that consumes so much of our energy, resources and time. He avoids contact with any corpse defilement, because his life is dedicated to life everlasting, to the service of the God whose essence is timeless and immutable existence. The *nazir* therefore also wears a "crown," his long and unkempt locks attesting to monarchy of another more exalted sort: mastery of the self. No wonder that the rites of the *nazir* are quite similar to those that pertain to the *Kohen Ha-gadol* or High Priest, and that the latter is also described as being crowned by the "*nezer*":

The kohen who is more exalted than his brethren, the one who has had the anointing oil poured upon his head and has been designated to wear the (special) garments, shall neither cause his hair to grow long nor rend his clothing (as signs of mourning). He shall not come into contact with any dead bodies, not even to defile himself for his mother or his father. He shall not leave the precincts of the Temple and thus desecrate the Temple of his Lord, FOR THE NEZER (CROWN) OF THE ANNOINTING OIL OF HIS LORD IS UPON HIM, I am God...(Vayikra 21:10-12).

THE SELF-CONTRADICTION OF IMPOSED NAZIRITESHIP

In essence, then, the *nazir* is also a type of High Priest. Unlike the latter, however, whose suitability for office is a direct function of noble lineage and heredity and who does not choose but is rather chosen, the rites of the *nazir* may be freely adopted by anyone. Any man or woman, whether of humble origins or exalted birth, may aspire to the sanctification of the *nazir*, and does so as a matter of freewill. Perhaps we may go so far as to say, then, that the *nazir* represents the possibility of any Israelite to experience the overarching presence of God, an encounter that we mistakenly believe is the exclusive preserve of the High Priest who alone may enter the most holy precincts of the Temple!

But if our analysis is correct, that the *nazir* is a positive role model for sanctified living precisely because of the autonomy involved in the acceptance of the rites, then our introduction to Shimshon is all the more puzzling. Why would the Deity impose *naziriteship* upon the unborn child and upon his mother, when IMPOSITION is antithetical to the striving for holiness that is the hallmark of the sensitive and God-searching soul? And while we may have found in *Yirmiyahu* an analog for sanctification from birth (or before) for a particular task or mission, there is no other precedent for the imposed naziriteship that serves as the critical introduction to Shimshon's birth.

Next time, we will revisit the *nazir*, this time considering the matter from the perspective of Rashi's sage words. In so doing, we will gain more insight into our particular passage as well, as we begin to understand the special challenge and mission of the judge known as Shimshon. In the meantime, readers are requested to continue with the study of Chapter 14.