

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS
SEFER SHOFTIM

Sefer Shoftim – Chapter 14

Considering the Naziritehood of Shimshon of Dan

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INTRODUCITON

Last time, we considered the unusual beginnings of the final and most tragic judge in our book, namely Shimshon of the tribe of Dan. Recall that his barren mother, introduced anonymously and abruptly without any further elaboration, was unexpectedly visited by a messenger of God who announced that she would imminently give birth. Most remarkably, the messenger also indicated that she was to forthrightly desist from wine and other intoxicants derived from grapes, that she was to avoid anything defiling, and that she was to take care never to cut the hair of her new son, for the child would be a nazirite from his birth until the day of his death, and that "he would begin to save Israel from the clutches of the Philistines" (*Shoftim* 13:5).

But while we noted that the motif of the barren woman whose sincere prayers are answered by beneficent God is not without precedent in *Tanakh*, with the resulting offspring naturally selected for a pivotal role later in life, the matter of this visitation is something else entirely. Here, in our passage, not only is a report of any prior tearful supplication or heartfelt entreaty of the mother entirely lacking (even the simple data concerning her name is strangely absent!), but the Divine designation of her future son as a nazirite from birth is utterly unparalleled. Nowhere else in the entire *Tanakh* is any man or woman set aside by God from birth for the onerous nazirite vows, and we may speculate that this utter dearth of analogy is for an eminently simple reason: to be a *nazir* is to freely and to autonomously choose to constrain oneself from a limited number of otherwise permitted things, in order to nurture one's spiritual awareness through the exercise of precious self-mastery. The *nazir* abstains from wine to symbolize his or her pointed focus upon more lofty

pursuits, he eschews the cutting of his hair in order to protest against our shallow and all-consuming preoccupations with matters of fashion, and he will not come into contact with the human corpse because he clings to God and to His essence of life everlasting.

THE FORTITUDE OF THE NAZIR

But the *nazir* is by definition a person who is profoundly driven towards an encounter with the Divine, one who will not settle for a comfortable but unexamined life; how shall such serious and transformative vows, that allow the common Israelite to partake of a spiritual experience that is otherwise the unique preserve of the High Priest, be imposed from above while bereft of conscious choice from below? How shall such a lofty mission be coerced from without even as its very touchstone is sincere submission from within? Even the naziritehood of Shemuel (in accordance with the prevailing Rabbinic view expressed in *Talmud Bavli Nazir* 66a) that was declared before conception by his righteous mother Chana, was not the product of coercive Divine fiat but rather the natural consequence of her own mindful and deliberate will:

She uttered a vow and said: Oh God of Hosts, if You shall surely be cognizant of your maidservant's plight, and shall remember me and not forget Your maidservant so that You grant your maidservant offspring of men, than I shall set him aside for God's service for his entire life, and no razor shall touch his head! (I *Shemuel* 1:11).

Shimshon's naziritehood is therefore *sui generis*, constituting a unique and peculiar phenomenon of its own kind. How then are we to understand it and what might be its meaning in the larger context of *Sefer Shoftim*? Why does the book conclude with the account of a man whose most unusual qualities were forced upon him by God Himself?

AN UNUSUAL JUXTAPOSITION

In order to begin to frame an answer, we turn to the insightful view of the ancient Rabbis, who were struck by the Torah's unusual juxtaposition, in *Sefer Bamidbar* Chapters 5 and 6), of the nazirite laws with the account of the *Sota* or wayward woman. There, the Torah describes the trial by ordeal of the woman suspected by her husband of disloyalty and treachery, of embracing a paramour even while her husband has unequivocally warned her not to do so. With witnesses to

any explicit wrongdoing lacking even while serious suspicions of impropriety exist, the woman is taken to the precincts of the Tabernacle and into the custody of the officiating priests. There, if she continues to protest her innocence, she is ceremoniously made to drink the bitter waters of deprecation, into which the inked words of a scroll containing Divine curses have been dissolved. Should she be virtuous so that her husband's accusations were without foundation, then the cursed liquid has no effect. But should she be guilty of surreptitious and serious wrongdoing, then "her belly shall swell and her thigh shall fall away, so that the woman shall be a source of scorn among her people!" (*Bamidbar* 5:27).

Immediately following this account are the provisions of the *nazir* who, as we have seen, chooses to temporarily adopt three specific strictures that proclaim what the Ibn Ezra understood to be true kingship, for "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 *Bamidbar* 6:7). Commenting upon the juxtaposition of the passages, Rabbi Yehuda remarked:

Why was the section of the *nazir* joined to that of the *Sota*? It is to indicate that whosoever sees the *Sota* in her disgrace shall constrain himself from wine! (*Sota* 2a).

It is, of course, beyond the scope of our lesson here to investigate the matter of the *Sota* in greater detail. We must leave the specifics of those unusual laws for our studies of *Sefer Bamidbar*. But this much is both clear as well as obvious: at its core, the matter of the *Sota* is a commentary upon the dissolution of society's most basic foundations, namely the reciprocal trust that informs the relationship of husband and wife. Whatever else may be said about the subject, the husband's jealous accusations are hurled against the backdrop of a relationship that has failed because mutual dependence, reliance and conviction have withered and died. Truly, when we read the painful account, we know not who is to blame: has the husband lasciviously sought companionship elsewhere so that his wife has succumbed in turn to the seductions of a secret lover? Conversely, has the wife broken the sacred vows of marriage and thrown her loyalties to the wind, so that her husband is now driven into a jealous rage? Or rather are conceivably both to blame for having neglected their relationship for too long, even while finding excitement and interest in the company of others? Only this much is certain: the marriage, human society's most sacrosanct commitment, has foundered because both partners have ceased to believe in the uniquely human capacity to

maintain and to foster trust. And the implications of that failure are profound: what society can continue to meaningfully function when the nuclear relationships that are its very glue have become undone?

A VOW OF REACTION

This, then, was the meaning of Rabbi Yehuda's trenchant remarks. Confronted with social dissolution and moral decay, breach of sacred trusts and treachery, the concerned and thoughtful person can do only one thing: recoil in disgust and retreat. For Rabbi Yehuda, the vows of the *nazir* are therefore primarily a REACTION, a response to society's breakdown and collapse. The *nazir* who has "witnessed the degradation of the *Sota*" abstains from wine and the cutting of the hair, thereby withdrawing from the world of men and their shallow fascinations. He will not come into contact with a corpse, with the moral death that surrounds him on all sides, because his life is lived in protest of their villainy. Instead, he will draw back into the world of the spirit, finding his solace in absolute God and in His presence, until such a time as he has gathered the necessary spiritual strength to return to that society, so that he might confront its failings and then enthusiastically begin the process of its restoration. It is as if Rabbi Yehuda argues that any meaningful repair of the frayed fabric of the world must be preceded by an honest assessment of its faults, a profound recognition of its imperfections and by an impassioned protest against its failures. A *nazir* cannot be a passive figure, one who accepts offensiveness with a shrug of the shoulders and then goes on with his day. A *nazir* reacts mightily, and in that reaction the long and arduous process of transformation is tentatively commenced.

Returning to our context, we may now consider it from this remarkable perspective. As we have seen, the Book of *Shoftim* describes the story of the steady and incremental decline of the people of Israel. With the initial ardor of the settlement drive long ago dissipated even while most of the Canaanite population remained entrenched, Israel struck down their roots in the new land. But slowly (or was it swift?) the people of Israel succumbed to Canaanite culture and to its insidious features, and they strayed from God; and with each successive cycle of woe, the slope of their decline increased. Each new judge was but a reflection of his or her age, and so over the course of the book, the caliber of each correspondingly decreased. Enter the final cycle in the book, as the people of Israel chafe under the yoke of the ascendant Philistines. Though in all earlier stories of extended oppression they pathetically cried out to God for relief (2:1; 3:9; 3:15; 4:3; 6:6; 10:10,15), here Israel's

entreaties are glaringly absent, as if they too have become numbed and desensitized to the sorrow of failure and to their resultant plight.

Suddenly, a woman is introduced, anonymous and obscure, a vehicle for God's final attempt to change the trajectory of Israel's self-destruction. A mysterious messenger appears to her, indicating that she will soon conceive and give birth to a figure that will initiate the arduous process of Israel's rescue from the Philistine tyranny. But how strange is the messenger's news, for she must abstain from wine and strong drink and must not cut the new child's hair, for "a *nazir* of the Lord shall the child be from the womb," a Divine imposition of unusual force, a burden borne until the "day of his death," as if to say to the people of Israel whom he will rescue: **NOW IS THE DECISIVE MOMENT OF CHOICE – EMBRACE PHILISTINE/CANNANITE CULTURE, SERVE THEIR GODS, IMMERSE IN THEIR WAY OF LIFE, ABANDON ME AND PERISH, OR ELSE REACT AGAINST THE SCOURGE OF INTERMARRIAGE AND THE ASSOCIATED MORAL RELATIVISM OF IDOLATRY, ARREST THE DECLINE AND LIVE!**

SHIMSHON'S CHARGE TO THE PEOPLE

Shimshon, therefore, like all of the judges who came before him, is an embodiment of the challenges of his own age, a reflection of his people's failures, a likeness of their ignominy, and also an expression of their hopes for deliverance. The strictures of the *nazir* inexplicably placed upon him by Divine fiat are an emphatic declaration that for Israel to survive as a nation in Canaan, for Israel to succeed at preserving its unique patrimony in a world inimical to their mission, for Israel to arrest their precipitous decline and to break the cycle of their betrayal and treachery, they must **REACT!** And that reaction, like that of the sensitive soul struck dumb by the degradation of the *Sota* and by the implied collapse of all of the sacred trusts invested in the bond of marriage, must initially be one of abrupt and unequivocal withdrawal and alienation from the pervasive culture that seductively and destructively beckons them from all around. Shimshon, in the very symbolism of his unusual way of life, is therefore to proclaim to his people the only possibility for their restoration that remains: "overcome apathy and spiritual torpor, protest against immorality and idolatry, and break ranks with corrosive Canaanite beliefs and practices that have brought us to the brink of self-destruction, even as the seditious satyrs continue" to entice.

Might we not speculate that this is the meaning of the curious arrival on the scene of the woman's husband Manoach, who seemingly

contributes little to the advancement of the story? After the messenger has appeared to her and transmitted God's communication, she shares the news with her incredulous husband who then requests of God that the messenger return (13:2-8). Return he does, communicating nothing substantially new, except this: "All that I said to the woman you shall observe...all that I commanded her (your wife) you shall do!" (13:13-14). Though Manoach attempts to show deference to the visitor, his entreaties are curtly rebuffed, and when the caller betrays his angelic origins by ascending heavenwards with the flames of the makeshift altar, Manoach fears death. Again, his wife reassures him and proves herself to be, without a doubt, the more sensible and discerning of the two.

Perhaps Manoach, then, whose name means "rest, cessation, and complacency," represents that part of the people's psyche that prefers spiritual stupor over the challenge of growth, Canaanite comforts over Israelite mission, reluctance to culturally disengage over his wife's enthusiastic embrace of the visitor's startling words. The angel's barb is therefore well-placed indeed: "All that I said to the woman you shall observe...all that I commanded her (your wife) you shall do!" But while the anonymous woman is slated to soon become the instrument of God's salvation, her husband Manoach will quickly fade back into the turbid obscurity that is his aspiration, for though he remains part of the account throughout Chapter 14, he is never mentioned by name again.

It is not of course that Israel are to suddenly adopt the *nazirite* lifestyle of Shimshon en masse in some sort of superficial and absurd literalism, but rather that they are to begin to internalize the uniqueness of their rescuer's calling, recognizing that their own response to their dire situation cannot be one of "business as usual." Rather, they must cry out, not against the political oppression that weighs so heavily upon them, but rather against the social injustice and the communal hurt, the moral devastation and religious ruin, the denial of meaning and higher purpose and the headlong embrace of spiritual shallowness that all go hand in hand with enthusiastic worship of the Canaanite pantheon, the bankrupt gods that champion ritual over content and empty incantation over that which is noble.

And so our potential hero is therefore placed in the most difficult situation of having to adhere to an upright way of life that is not of his own choosing but has rather been thrust upon him from even before his birth! As we shall see, of course, this unusual arrangement will introduce no small amount of complications of its own, as Shimshon enters the fray and begins to engage the mission that cannot be avoided. In the

meantime, readers are requested to continue with Chapter 15 so that we might begin to explore the meaning of this anomalous judge's questionable exploits.