



DAVID GROSSMAN

LION'S HONEY

THE MYTH
OF SAMSON

"Original and very clever." **The Times**



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The Myth of Samson

David Grossman

Translated from the Hebrew by Stuart Schoffman

Authorised King James Version



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The Book of Judges

Chapters 13–16

from The Authorised King James Version

Chapter 13

And the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.

2 ¶ And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the family of the Danites, whose name *was* Manoah and his wife *was* barren, and bare not.

3 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto the woman, and said unto her, Behold now, thou art barren, and bearest not: but thou shalt conceive, and bear a son.

4 Now therefore beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean *thing*:

5 For, lo, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head: for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb: and he shall begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.

6 ¶ Then the woman came and told her husband, saying, A man of God came unto me, and his countenance *was* like the countenance of an angel of God, very terrible: but I asked him not whence he *was*, neither told he me his name:

7 But he said unto me, Behold, thou shalt conceive, and bear a son; and now drink no wine nor strong drink, neither eat any unclean *thing*: for the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb unto the day of his death.

8 ¶ Then Manoah intreated the LORD, and said, O my Lord, let the man of God which thou didst send come again unto us, and teach us what we shall do unto the child that shall be born.

9 And God hearkened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again unto the woman as she sat in the field: but Manoah her husband *was* not with her.

10 And the woman made haste, and ran, and shewed her husband, and said unto him, Behold, the man hath appeared unto me, that came unto me the *other* day.

11 And Manoah arose, and went after his wife, and came to the man, and said unto him, *Art* thou the man that spakest unto the woman? And he said, I *am*.

12 And Manoah said, Now let thy words come to pass. How shall we order the child, and *how* shall we do unto him?

13 And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Of all that I said unto the woman let her beware.

14 She may not eat of any *thing* that cometh of the vine, neither let her drink wine or strong drink, nor eat any unclean *thing*: all that I commanded her let her observe.

15 ¶ And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, I pray thee, let us detain thee, until we shall have made ready a kid for thee.

16 And the angel of the LORD said unto Manoah, Though thou detain me, I will not eat of thy bread, and if thou wilt offer a burnt offering, thou must offer it unto the LORD. For Manoah knew not that he *was* an angel of the LORD.

17 And Manoah said unto the angel of the LORD, What *is* thy name, that when thy sayings come to pass we may do thee honour?

18 And the angel of the LORD said unto him, Why askest thou thus after my name, seeing it is secret?

19 So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered *it* upon a rock unto the LORD: and the *angel* did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on.

20 For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar. And Manoah and his wife looked on *it*, and fell on their faces to the ground.

21 But the angel of the LORD did no more appear to Manoah and to his wife. Then Manoah knew that he *was* an angel of the LORD.

22 And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God.

23 But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received our burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these *things*, nor would as at this time have told us *such things* as these.

24 ¶ And the woman bare a son, and called his name Samson: and the child grew, and the LORD blessed him.

25 And the Spirit of the LORD began to move him at times in the camp of Dan between Zorah and Eshtaol.

Chapter 14

And Samson went down to Timnath, and saw a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines.

2 And he came up, and told his father and his mother, and said, I have seen a woman in Timnath of the daughters of the Philistines: now therefore get her for me to wife.

3 Then his father and his mother said unto him, *Is there* never a woman among the daughters of thy brethren, or among all my people, that thou goest to take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistines? And Samson said unto his father, Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well.

4 But his father and his mother knew not that it *was* of the LORD, that he sought an occasion against the Philistines: for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.

5 ¶ Then went Samson down, and his father and his mother, to Timnath, and came to the vineyard of Timnath: and, behold, a young lion roared against him.

6 And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he rent him as he would have rent a kid, and *he had* nothing in his hand: but he told not his father or his mother what he had done.

7 And he went down, and talked with the woman; and she pleased Samson well.

8 ¶ And after a time he returned to take her, and he turned aside to see the carcase of the lion: and, behold, *there was* a swarm of bees and honey in the carcase of the lion.

9 And he took thereof in his hands, and went on eating, and came to his father and mother, and he gave them, and they did eat: but he told not them that he had taken the honey out of the carcase of the lion.

10 ¶ So his father went down unto the woman: and Samson made there a feast; for so used to do the young men to do.

11 And it came to pass, when they saw him, that they brought thirty companions to be with him.

12 ¶ And Samson said unto them, I will now put forth a riddle unto you: if ye can certainly declare it me within the seven days of the feast, and find *it* out, then I will give you thirty sheets and thirty change of garments:

13 But if ye cannot declare *it* me, then shall ye give me thirty sheets and thirty change of garments. And they said unto him, Put forth thy riddle, that we may hear it.

14 And he said unto them, Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness. And they could not in three days expound the riddle.

15 And it came to pass on the seventh day, that they said unto Samson's wife, Entice thy husband that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire: have ye called us to take that we have? *is it not so?*

16 And Samson's wife wept before him, and said, Thou dost but hate me, and lovest me not: thou hast put forth a riddle unto the children of my people, and hast not told *it* me. And he said unto her, Behold, I have not told *it* my father nor my mother, and shall I tell *it* thee?

17 And she wept before him the seven days, while their feast lasted: and it came to pass on the seventh day, that he told her, because she lay sore upon him: and she told the riddle to the children of her people.

18 And the men of the city said unto him on the seventh day before the sun went down, What is sweeter than honey? and what *is* stronger than a lion? And he said unto them, If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle.

19 ¶ And the Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he went down to Ashkelon, and slew thirty

men of them, and took their spoil, and gave change of garments unto them which expounded the riddle. And his anger was kindled, and he went up to his father's house.

20 But Samson's wife was *given* to his companion, whom he had used as his friend.

Chapter 15

But it came to pass within a while after, in the time of wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said, I will go in to my wife into the chamber. But her father would not suffer him to go in.

2 And her father said, I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion: *is not her younger sister fairer than she?* take her, I pray thee, instead of her.

3 ¶ And Samson said concerning them, Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure.

4 And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails.

5 And when he had set the brands on fire, he let *them* go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards *and* olives.

6 ¶ Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire.

7 ¶ And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and afterwards that I will cease.

8 And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam.

9 ¶ Then the Philistines went up, and pitched in Judah, and spread themselves in Lehi.

10 And the men of Judah said, Why are ye come up against us? And they answered, To bind Samson are we come up, to do to him as he hath done to us.

11 Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock Etam, and said to Samson, Knowest thou not that the Philistines *are* rulers over us? what *is* this *that* thou hast done unto us? And he said unto them, As they did unto me, so have I done unto them.

12 And they said unto him, We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines. And Samson said unto them, Swear unto me, that ye will not fall upon me yourselves.

13 And they spake unto him, saying, No; but we will bind thee fast, and deliver thee into the hand: but surely we will not kill thee. And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock.

14 ¶ *And* when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and the cords that *were* upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands.

15 And he found a new jawbone of an ass, and put forth his hand, and took it, and slew a thousand men therewith.

16 And Samson said, With the jawbone of an ass, heaps upon heaps, with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men.

17 And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking, that he cast away the jawbone out of his hand, and called that place Ramath-lehi.

18 ¶ And he was sore athirst, and called on the LORD, and said, Thou hast given this great deliverance into the hand of thy servant: and now shall I die for thirst, and fall into the hand of the

uncircumcised?

19 ~~But God clave an hollow place that was in the jaw, and there came water thereout; and when he had drunk, his spirit came again, and he revived: wherefore he called the name thereof En-hak-korah, which is in Lehi unto this day.~~

20 And he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines twenty years.

Chapter 16

Then went Samson to Gaza, and saw there an harlot, and went in unto her.

2 *And it was told* the Gazites, saying, Samson is come hither. And they compassed *him* in, and lay wait for him all night in the gate of the city, and were quiet all the night, saying, In the morning, when it is day, we shall kill him.

3 And Samson lay till midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put *them* upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that *is* before Hebron.

4 ¶ And it came to pass afterward, that he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.

5 And the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and said unto her, Entice him, and see wherein his great strength *lieth*, and by what *means* we may prevail against him, that we may bind him and afflict him: and we will give thee every one of us eleven hundred *pieces* of silver.

6 ¶ And Delilah said to Samson, Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength *lieth*, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee.

7 And Samson said unto her, If they bind me with seven green withs that were never dried, then shall I be weak, and be as another man.

8 Then the lords of the Philistines brought up to her seven green withs which had not been dried, and she bound him with them.

9 Now *there were* men lying in wait, abiding with her in the chamber. And she said unto him, The Philistines *be* upon thee, Samson. And he brake the withs, as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire. So his strength was not known.

10 And Delilah said unto Samson, Behold, thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: now tell me, I pray thee, wherewith thou mightest be bound.

11 And he said unto her, If they bind me fast with new ropes that never were occupied, then shall I be weak, and be as another man.

12 Delilah therefore took new ropes, and bound him therewith, and said unto him, The Philistines *be* upon thee, Samson. And *there were* liars in wait abiding in the chamber. And he brake them from off his arms like a thread.

13 And Delilah said unto Samson, Hitherto thou hast mocked me, and told me lies: tell me, I pray thee, wherewith thou mightest be bound. And he said unto her, If thou weavest the seven locks of my head with the web.

14 And she fastened *it* with the pin, and said unto him, The Philistines *be* upon thee, Samson. And he awaked out of his sleep, and went away with the pin of the beam, and with the web.

15 ¶ And she said unto him, How canst thou say, I love thee, when thine heart *is* not with me? thou hast mocked me these three times, and hast not told me wherein thy great strength *lieth*.

16 And it came to pass, when she pressed him daily with her words, and urged him, so that his soul was vexed unto death;

17 That he told her all his heart, and said unto her, There hath not come a razor upon mine head, for I *have been* a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any *other* man.

18 And when Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called for the lords of the

Philistines, saying, Come up this once, for he hath shewed me all his heart. Then the lords of the Philistines came up unto her, and brought money in their hand.

19 And she made him sleep upon her knees; and she called for a man, and she caused him to shave off the seven locks of his head; and she began to afflict him, and his strength went from him.

20 And she said, The Philistines *be* upon thee, Samson. And he awoke out of his sleep, and said, will go out as at other times before, and shake myself. And he wist not that the LORD was departed from him.

21 ¶ But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house.

22 Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again after he was shaven.

23 Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand.

24 And when the people saw him, they praised their god: for they said, Our god hath delivered in our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us.

25 And it came to pass, when their hearts were merry, that they said, Call for Samson, that he may make us sport. And they called for Samson out of the prison house; and he made them sport: and they set him between the pillars.

26 And Samson said unto the lad that held him by the hand, Suffer me that I may feel the pillars whereupon the house standeth, that I may lean upon them.

27 Now the house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines *were* there; and *there were* upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while Samson made sport.

28 And Samson called unto the LORD, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes.

29 And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left.

30 And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with *all his* might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that *were* therein. So the dead which he slew in his death were more than *they* which he slew in his life.

31 Then his brethren and all the house of his father came down, and took him, and brought *him* up and buried him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the buryingplace of Manoah his father. And he judged Israel twenty years.

Foreword

'Samson the hero' is what every Jewish child, the first time he or she hears the story, learns to call him. And that, more or less, is how he has been represented over the years, in hundreds of works of art, theatre and film, in the literatures of many languages: a mythic hero and fierce warrior, the man who tore apart a lion with his bare hands, the charismatic leader of the Jews in their wars against the Philistines, and, without a doubt, one of the most tempestuous and colourful characters in the Hebrew Bible.

But the way that I read the story in the pages of my bible – the Book of Judges, chapters 13 to 16 – runs against the grain of the familiar Samson. Mine is not the brave leader (who never, after all, actually led his people), nor the Nazirite of God (who, we must admit, was given to whoring and lust), nor just a muscle-bound murderer. For me, this is most of all the story of a man whose life was a never-ending struggle to accommodate himself to the powerful destiny imposed upon him, a destiny he was never able to realise nor, apparently, fully to understand. It is the story of a child who was born a stranger to his father and mother; the story of a magnificent strongman who ceaselessly yearned to win his parents' love – and, therefore, love in general – which in the end he never received.

There are few other Bible stories with so much drama and action, narrative fireworks and raw emotion, as we find in the tale of Samson: the battle with the lion; the three hundred burning foxes; the women he bedded and the one woman that he loved; his betrayal by all the women in his life, from his mother to Delilah; and, in the end, his murderous suicide, when he brought the house down on himself and three thousand Philistines. Yet beyond the wild impulsiveness, the chaos, the din, we can make out a life story that is, at bottom, the tortured journey of a single, lonely and turbulent soul who never found, anywhere, a true home in the world, whose very body was a harsh place of exile. For me, this discovery, this recognition, is the point at which the myth – for all its grand images, its larger-than-life adventures – slips silently into the day-to-day existence of each of us, into our most private moments, our buried secrets.

There is a point in the Samson story – the moment when he falls asleep on Delilah’s lap – that seems to absorb and encapsulate the entire tale. Samson withdraws into his childish, almost infantile self, disarmed of the violence, madness, and passion that have confounded and ruined his life. This is, of course, also the moment when his fate is sealed, for Delilah is clutching his hair and the razor, and the Philistines outside are already relishing their victory. In another moment his eyes will be plucked out and his power extinguished. Soon he will be thrown into prison and his days will be ended. Yet it is now, perhaps for the first time in his life, that he finds repose. Here, in the very heart of the cruelty and perfidy that he has surely expected all along, he is finally granted perfect peace, a release from himself and the stormy drama of his life.

* * *

In those days, apparently the end of the twelfth and beginning of the eleventh centuries BCE, there was not yet a king in Israel, nor any central authority. The neighbouring nations of Midian, Canaan, Moab, Ammon, and Philistia took advantage of the weak Hebrew tribes and launched campaigns of conquest and pillage against them. Every so often there would arise, in one tribe or another, a person who would know how to lead his tribe, sometimes several joined together, into retaliatory battle. If he won, he would become the leader and judge, and be called *shofet*. Such were Gideon and Jephthah, Ehud the son of Gera, Shamgar the son of Anat, and Deborah, the wife of Lapidot. Thus the Israelites swung cyclically between periods of oppression and redemption that corresponded, as recounted in the Book of Judges, to their sins and their atonement. First they would worship idols, then God would muster the murderous neighbours as punishment. They would cry out to Him in their affliction, and He would elect from among them a person who would save them.

In the midst of this turbulence lived a man and woman of the tribe of Dan. They lived in Zorah, in the Judean lowlands, an especially violent region, as in those days it was the boundary between Israel and the Philistines. For the Israelites, it was the first line of defence against the Philistines; for the Philistines, it was the essential first step in any attempt to conquer the Judean hill country. The man was called Manoah, but the woman’s name is not known. It is said of her only that she was ‘barren and had borne no children’, which is enough to suggest that, along with the hardships of the frontier, the marriage had also been filled with pain.

But anyone familiar with the semiotics of biblical storytelling also knows that the very mention of a barren woman almost always foreshadows a momentous birth. And indeed, one day – during one of those periods when ‘the Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord’ – when the woman was alone, without her husband, an angel of God appears before her and tells her: ‘You are barren and have borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.’ And immediately he gives her a list of instructions and warnings, and also good news: ‘Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicants, or to eat anything unclean; for you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.’

She goes to her husband and says, ‘A man of God came to me.’ And the reader’s ears prick up because the woman does not use the same word as that of the biblical narrator – ‘an angel of God’.

appeared to the woman' – but rather 'came to me', a charged phrase rich with double meaning, which more than once in the Bible refers to the act of copulation itself.

The husband's ears probably prick up too, and his wife quickly describes the stranger. 'He looked like an angel of God, very frightening,' she explains. 'I did not ask him where he was from, nor did he tell me his name.' And between her words one can hear, it seems, a note of apology – so frightening was the man's appearance that she didn't have the nerve to ask where he was from, or even his name.

And the husband, Manoah, how does he respond, and what does his silence say? Maybe he furrows his brow in puzzlement, trying to fish out a question from the confusion so suddenly thrust upon him by his wife, but she doesn't wait for him to ask, and quickly, anxiously, continues to pile on new information: The man of God told me 'you shall conceive', and promised I would have a son and commanded that I not drink wine or liquor, or eat anything unclean, because the boy would be a Nazirite from the womb until his dying day ...

There, she has told him everything. She has freed herself from the burden of the encounter and the extraordinary news, yet the text does not tell us a thing about any emotion that flows between them, nor of any smile or tender glance. And this should come as no surprise, since as a rule the Bible rarely records the feelings of its heroes. The Bible is a history of actions and events, and leaves to us, to each and every reader, the task of speculation, an exciting task but one that carries the risks of exaggeration and fantasy. Nevertheless, let us dare to do, in the pages that follow, what many generations of readers before us have done, men and women who have read the sparse biblical text according to their faith, the conventions of their age, and their own personal inclinations, and attached meanings and conclusions (and sometimes wishes and delusions) to every word and syllable.¹

And so, with necessary caution, but also with the pleasure of guesswork and imagination, let us try to fix in our mind's eye the encounter between the man and his wife, she speaking and he listening, she going on at length and he not saying a word. And there is no knowing what is welling under the silence, excitement and joy perhaps, or maybe anger at the wife who converses so freely with a stranger; and we may also wonder whether she, as she speaks, looks him straight in the eye or averts her gaze downward, away from the husband to whom, for some reason, an angel did not appear. And even if only a small part of what we have pictured actually took place, there is no doubt that the news they have received will shake them both to the core, will stir up his deepest feelings about her long-time barrenness and startling pregnancy, and maybe also hers about him, about the weakness and impotence that, it would seem, are hinted at in this brief scene.

And we, peeking in, are so captivated by this highly charged family moment that we almost fail to notice that what the wife reports to her husband is not quite the same as what she had been told. Two central details are missing: she does not mention that a razor must not touch the head of their unborn son, nor does she tell her husband that this son 'shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines'.

Why does she omit these crucial details?

One might argue that in her excitement and confusion she simply forgot the matter of the razor. She was doubtless quite agitated; and perhaps assumed that Manoah would be aware that, if the boy was to be a Nazirite, the well-known restrictions would apply, including the prohibition against the cutting of hair. But how to explain the second omission? How can it be that a woman withholds – even conceals – from her husband such significant information regarding their future son, news that would surely give him satisfaction and pride, and perhaps a measure of compensation for all those bitter barren years?

To comprehend this, to understand *her*, we need to go back and read the story through her eyes. Recall that the biblical text does not even reveal her name. The word 'barren' is all that is said of her and is even redoubled: 'barren and had borne no children.' And this emphasis suggests that she has been waiting long years for a child who never arrived. She has probably given up on the possibility

that she will one day have a child. And it is quite likely that the 'title' 'akara, 'the barren one', has been conferred upon her by others, in the family, in the tribe, in all of Zorah. And who knows, maybe even her husband, in moments of anger, flung at her now and then the searing epithet 'akara, and between them, too, the word became her name, the barb that stings her every time she thinks about herself and her fate.

And now, this same 'childless one who has not given birth' is suddenly graced by the appearance of an angel who brings her the news that she will bear a child. Yet at this very instant, as her dream is fulfilled and her joy is boundless, the angel adds: 'For the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.'

And she plunges into a dizzying maelstrom of thoughts and emotions.

A son will be born to her. To *her*. Until this moment she knew nothing of this, of course. The angel knew about it first and told her the news. And perhaps at the moment of the telling she feels a unfamiliar twinge inside (angels know that revelations work best with concrete proof). And she is doubtless very proud that her son will be the one to save the Israelites: what mother wouldn't be proud to produce the saviour of his people? But maybe, in a hidden corner of her heart, her happiness is less than complete.

For another recognition, painful and still repressed, is beginning to gnaw at her: she has now conceived her own private, intimate child, but rather some 'national figure', a Nazirite of God and the redeemer of Israel. And his uniqueness is not something that will develop slowly, over the years, so that the two can grow comfortably together into their roles – to be a saviour's mother is also a position of responsibility – but instead this is happening now, suddenly, already, in a fixed and inexorable manner: 'For the boy is to be a Nazirite of God from the womb on ...'

She tries to understand. This child, this long-awaited child, at the moment he has been given to her has begun to sprout within her, has already been touched, it turns out, by some other, strange entity, and this means – and here she feels a sharp, alien sting – that he will be a child who will never be her alone.

Does she understand this immediately? There is no way of knowing. The whole episode has surely overwhelmed her, and it is perfectly possible that at this moment she is filled only with joy over the pregnancy, and pride over the special boy who will be born to her – to *her*, and not to all those in the village and the tribe who saw her only as 'akara, the childless one ... But we may surmise that, deep down, Samson's mother knows, with a deep womanly intuition – a knowledge that has nothing to do with any religious faith or fear of God – that what has been given to her has also been taken away at the same instant. The moment of her greatest intimacy – within herself, as a woman – has been confiscated and made into a public event, shared with strangers (including we who interpret her story after thousands of years), and for this reason, in an instinctive gesture of distancing and denial, she pushes away part of the disturbing news.

And here we are reminded of another woman of the Bible, whose fate was the same as that of Samson's mother: Hannah, who tearfully prayed and vowed that, if a son were born to her, she would give him to God as a Nazirite, and following that vow, Samuel was born, and she was obliged to turn him over to Eli the high priest. Both these tales of extraordinary pregnancies carry with them the uncomfortable implication that God has somehow exploited the despair of these mothers, who thirsted so avidly to conceive and give birth that they were willing to accede to any 'suggestion' regarding the destiny of their child, even – in the language of our own day – to serve as 'surrogate mothers' for God's great plans.

* * *

The wife of Manoah goes to her husband and tells him about the encounter, and we have already observed that her report sounds almost apologetic and overly detailed: ostensibly revealing all, but in fact omitting much. It is worth mentioning here that any number of commentators on the story – including poets and playwrights, painters and novelists who over the years have explored the character of Samson – have hinted that Samson was born of a liaison between his mother and the ‘man of God’. Others, notably Vladimir Jabotinsky in his wonderful novel *Samson the Nazarite*, went so far as to raise the possibility that Samson was the product of a romance between his mother and a flesh-and-blood Philistine.² According to this reading, the business of the ‘man of God who came to me’ was simply a cover story that she invented in order to explain away her embarrassing pregnancy to Manoah. This hypothesis, of course, adds extra spice to the saga of Samson’s complex relations with the Philistines. But we, tempted though we are, will trust instead the version given by Samson’s mother, since we shall soon discover that, even if she spoke the whole truth, her great, fateful betrayal was not, in the end, at the expense of her husband.

For, after she announces to Manoah that they will have a son, she recites to him the second bit of the angel’s message – which, it will be recalled, she quotes with less than complete accuracy. She omits to mention the prohibition of hair-cutting; likewise the boy’s future role as national saviour. ‘The boy is to be a Nazirite of God from the womb’, she says, and concludes with a few words of her own: ‘until his dying day’.

And this is surely a strange addendum: a woman, who has just learned that she will bear a child after long years of infertility, tells her husband what will be expected of their son – and then speaks of *his dying day*?

Even someone who is not a parent, who has never experienced that special moment at which the expectant couple gets the good news, knows that on such an occasion there is nothing farther from their hearts and minds than the ‘dying day’ of the unborn child. And even if many anxious parents are preoccupied, even to the point of obsession, with the dangers and disasters that lie in wait for their children, they are nonetheless not inclined, on the whole, to imagine their youngster as an elderly person, decrepit, nearing the end – and certainly not as dead. To construct such a mental picture requires a strenuous, almost violent act of estrangement that would appear antithetical to the natural instincts of parenthood.

A woman who thinks and speaks out loud about the dying day of the child that is only beginning to take shape in her womb requires a remarkable measure of grim sobriety. Such a woman, at a moment like this, assumes a posture of cruel alienation – from the child, from the father who hears such words, and, no less, from herself.

What, then, has driven Manoah’s wife to add these words?

Again, let’s ‘rewind the tape’ and try to examine what exactly has happened. The angel brings the woman the news, then vanishes. She hurries to her husband, as the mixed message swirls inside her. She is, or will soon become, pregnant; but the child – how to put it? – is not completely hers, is not like other children are to their mothers. He has been deposited within her, as it were, for safekeeping, and she knows that things that are deposited must, in the end, be returned.

Something begins to weigh on her, to slow her down: who, then, is this child that grows within her? Is he wholly made of the essence, the blood and bone, of his parents? If so, why does she faintly sense that even now he is diluted by another essence, foreign and inscrutable, something puzzling and superhuman (and therefore, perhaps, inhuman too)?

Here, in a mental leap forward of several thousand years, what comes to mind is a touching newspaper interview that was once conducted with the mother of Andrei Sakharov, the renowned Russian physicist and Nobel laureate. She spoke of her son with pride, of course, and with love, but at the end of the interview said, with a kind of a sigh: ‘Sometimes I feel like a chicken who has given

birth to an eagle.’ And in those words could be heard a trace of astonishment. One could sense the wonder in her eyes, which distanced the son from the mother’s heart and put him in a place where she could look at him with total objectivity, as if he were a ‘phenomenon’, or an utter stranger: as if the mother herself were putting her son on a high pedestal, and looking at him from the same vantage point as if from the same distance – that any other person might, and from this place she whispers, who are you? How much are you really mine?

And perhaps Samson’s mother too, even as she goes to bring her husband the good news, is lacerated by such questions – how much of him is mine? Is this the child I prayed for? Will I be able to give him the bountiful, natural love that for so long I have yearned to give a child of my own?

And then, when she meets her husband and speaks out loud, the words suddenly penetrate her mind with full force, and with all their complex implications. When she reaches the words ‘for he will be a Nazirite of God from the womb’, it is almost possible to feel how something inside her is blocked, stunned, frozen, and instead of quoting the angel’s words completely, she swallows them and blurts out different, unexpected ones, that perhaps took even her by surprise: ‘until his dying day’.

And if we have dwelt exhaustively upon this moment, it is because we sense that someone whose mother could look upon him, if only for a moment, from such a distance, whose mother mourned him even before his birth, will always be somewhat alienated and remote in his dealings with others. He will always lack the capacity for simple human contact that comes so naturally to most people, and will never be able to be – as Samson himself phrased it, toward the end of his life – ‘an ordinary man’.

And thus, even if Samson’s mother has been miraculously ‘cured’ of her barrenness, it would seem that she has directly passed along to her son the barrenness-as-metaphor that sets a person apart from the vital core of human existence – a unique case of ‘hereditary sterility’.

Yet it is God, and not Samson’s mother, who has decreed that he will be a Nazirite, in other words a person who places a partition between himself and life – and indeed in the Hebrew word *nazir* we can hear a suggestive conflation of the root *ndr*, meaning ‘vow’, and the word *zar*, ‘stranger’. Nevertheless, it is hard not to feel that it is also the mother’s view of her son – her intimate gaze upon the embryo she carries, and her chilling verdict – which no less than God’s command has determined the fateful course of his life until his dying day.

* * *

The strangeness conferred upon the unborn child is soon multiplied. Manoah, taken by surprise, prays to God and requests further instructions: ‘Oh, my Lord! Please let the man of God that You sent come to us again and let him instruct us how to act with the boy that is to be born.’

‘The boy that is to be born?’ Still in his mother’s womb, Samson is already classified by his father as assigned a formal, arm’s-length definition. For even if Manoah’s lips have longed for many years to pronounce the words ‘our son’, ‘my child’, ‘my boy’, he takes care to use the term used by the man of God as quoted by his wife, perhaps because he senses that he must, even now, maintain an awe-struck distance from one who will soon be an exalted figure.

And Manoah perhaps guesses something more: that it will be necessary to handle this child like a precious vessel – maybe too precious – which is possibly beyond the spiritual means of its own parents; and that this will not be a child who can be raised according to one’s natural instincts alone. ‘And God, I beg of you, kindly furnish additional instructions ...’

And indeed, the angel returns, but again chooses to appear before the wife as ‘she was sitting in the field and her husband Manoah was not with her’. And thus the impression is strengthened that the angel for some reason prefers to entrust the information, the secret, to the woman, and that he endeavours to meet with her when she is alone, and not merely ‘alone’, but when her husband is not

with her. But she – perhaps for fear of gossip, or out of loyalty to her husband and a sense of the shared destiny – wants Manoah to be present at the meeting. This time, the narrator goes into a bit of detail: ‘The woman ran in haste to tell her husband.’ And we can imagine her strong legs racing through the stalks of corn, her arms pumping, slicing the air, the thoughts flying through her head, and when she reaches Manoah and tells him that the same man, ‘the man who came to me before’, has appeared to her once again.

Vayakom vayelech Manoah aharei ishto: ‘Manoah rose and followed his wife.’

The ring and resonance of these words convey the slow, heavy movements of Manoah, whose name means ‘rest’ and, in more recent Hebrew, also means ‘late’, in the sense of ‘deceased’. Thus, in five words that stand in amusing contrast to ‘the woman ran in haste to tell her husband’, the narrator sketched a sluggard of sorts who drags after his quick, energetic wife. Indeed Manoah was chastised by the rabbinic authors of the Talmud, who labelled him an *am ha’arets*, an ignoramus, for transgressing a cardinal rule of gender: ‘A man does not walk behind a woman on the road, even his own wife – and, even if he finds himself on a bridge with her, she should be beside him, and whoever walks behind a woman when crossing a river will have no share in the world to come.’³

So Manoah follows his wife, meets the stranger, attempts to size him up. Although he had earlier explicitly requested that the Almighty bring back the ‘man of God’, Manoah may not yet be free of nagging suspicion about the fellow whom his wife met alone in the field – twice – after which she knew immediately that she was to bear a child. ‘Are you the man who spoke to my wife?’ he demands and the reader can imagine, beyond the words, the dejected look he directs at the angel, and hear the mixture of mistrust and jealousy and the irritable humility of a man who cannot help but recognise his own inferiority.

Note that Manoah does not ask ‘Are you the man who *came* to my wife?’ Perhaps something restrains him from using that blunt word, whose utterance in such a charged setting – two men, or possibly pregnant woman – could well push the three into out-and-out confrontation. Yet at the same time, Manoah calls the stranger a ‘man’ and not ‘the man of God’, and juxtaposes the words ‘man’ and ‘wife’, coupling the two in an intimate cocoon while he stands outside, thus exposing further his suspicions and the jealousy that flickers behind his question.⁴

And the angel answers, curtly: ‘I am.’

‘May your words soon come true,’ says Manoah, adding: ‘What rules shall be observed for the boy?’ And here again there seeps an undertone of wariness toward the stranger, and maybe toward the promised son too, and it is clear that Manoah still does not believe he is conversing with a man of God, much less an *angel*, for if he did he would surely fling himself upon the ground and not speak to him as he has, with a lack of courtesy and not one word of supplication.

And here arises the question: has the angel changed his appearance in between his two ‘performances’, before the wife and now the husband? For it is clear that in Manoah’s eyes he does not appear unmistakably to be ‘an angel of God, very frightening’. Did the woman exaggerate, for some reason, in her description – or perhaps the angel’s appearance has not changed at all, but rather the real difference lies in the abilities of the man and the woman to ‘read’ the hidden identity of the interlocutor?

The angel, once again, provides detailed instructions regarding the right conduct that will ensure the proper birth and rearing of God’s Nazirite. At the same time, it is hard not to notice that throughout the conversation, he speaks to Manoah with obvious reluctance, as if under protest, thus emphasising the man’s superfluousness, his second-class status in relation to his wife: ‘The woman must abstain from all the things against which I warned her.’

Upon re-reading we notice that the angel too, when he repeats the instructions to Manoah, does not mention the prohibition against cutting the child’s hair. What is the meaning of this repeated

omission, this time on the angel's part? When the woman did so, it could be attributed to her temporary confusion. But this time the omission takes on a more serious aspect: Samson's weak spot was, of course, his hair, and the shearing of his locks was what, in the end, brought about his death. Can it be that the woman and the angel wished, for some reason, to conceal from the father the secret of the son's weakness? Is it possible that that the two of them sensed that in a matter so critical to the life of 'the child that is to be born' Manoah could not be relied upon to keep the secret?

Even after the outlining of the instructions, the tension between the husband and the angel continues. Manoah's situation is intolerable: a sea of information overwhelms him from every side; he is flooded by harsh, conflicting feelings, foremost the nagging suspicion that his wife and the haughty stranger are weaving an elaborate conspiracy against him. Even someone far quicker and cleverer than Manoah would feel, at a moment like this, that his mind was growing dim. In his distress, Manoah attempts to draw closer to the angel: 'Let us detain you and prepare a kid for you,' he offers. The angel declines for no apparent reason, in a hostile and judgmental manner: 'If you detain me, I shall not eat your food,' he says, adding that Manoah should sacrifice the kid to God, not to him. Maybe he suspects that Manoah merely wants to detain him, in order to try to figure him out. 'For Manoah did not know that he was an angel of the Lord,' reads the text, and this lack of knowledge, even after a few minutes have gone by, further attests to the dullness of Manoah's character.

Embarrassed, Manoah asks the angel's name, appending a clumsy explanation to his question: 'We should like to honour you when your words come true,' in other words, when your prophecy comes to pass. But the angel rebuffs him: 'You must not ask for my name; it is *pe'eli*,' miraculous, unknowable. '*Peli*,' he retorts; in other words, beyond your ken, too big for you. One can assume that this word spoken out of a clear desire to silence Manoah, will long be etched in his memory. An insult like this cannot but echo in days to come, when he will face his son and will run into – as into a wall – his unfathomable, strange, miraculous deeds.

Manoah, hesitant and confused following the angel's off-putting reply, places the kid and the meal offering on the rock. The angel performs a miracle, produces fire from the rock, and then ascends heavenward as Manoah and his wife watch and fling themselves face downwards on the ground. And only now, finally, does Manoah believe that indeed this was an angel of God. 'We shall surely die, for we have seen a divine being,' he tells his wife, his voice quivering with fear – a fear not only of God and angel but of everything that the astonishing encounter is destined to bring about in their lives. And maybe it is also a fear of the unborn child, their child, for whom they had waited and prayed, who even now is surrounded not only by amniotic fluid but by an impenetrable membrane of enigma and menace.

'We will surely die,' mumbles Manoah, and his wife responds with simple logic, perhaps also with a subtle scorn that she draws from the angel's air of chilly condescension, which still hovers over them. 'Had the Lord meant to take our lives, He would not have accepted a burnt offering and meal offering from us, nor let us see all these things, and He would not have made such an announcement to us.'

And so, this woman, who until moments earlier had been reducible to the epithet 'the childless one', grows larger in the reader's mind with every passing verse. Perhaps it is the new pregnancy that empowers and ennobles her, or perhaps what instils new confidence, despite all her doubts and anxieties, is the knowledge that she carries a child who is one of a kind. It is hard to imagine, moreover, that a woman as sharp as she is had failed to notice that the angel opted – twice – to appeal to her alone.

But it may also be that these guesses are incorrect, confusing cause and effect; and it is rather that she has been this way all along, a strong and quick-witted woman, resourceful and brave, and precisely for these reasons the angel preferred to bring her, and not her husband, the news. It is interesting to note in this connection that Rembrandt, when he drew the encounter between the couple and the angel

‘pushed’ Manoah face down into a submissive, even ridiculous position – at first glance he resembles a sack of potatoes – whereas the wife, in contrast to the biblical account, sits erect beside her fallen husband, exuding nobility, confidence, and determination. It is clear that Rembrandt too, like many who have read the story, sensed that the woman is the strong, dominant one. And if this is so, we can already imagine how decisive her influence, and that of the words she has just spoken, will be upon Samson – from the womb until his dying day.

* * *

Zorah today is a kibbutz, located not far from a *tel*, or mound, that almost certainly sits atop the archaeological remains of the biblical settlement. Its founders, members of the socialist ‘Unitar Kibbutz’ movement and veterans of the legendary Palmach fighting force, settled there towards the end of 1948, in the midst of the War of Independence that had broken out when the armies of four Arab countries invaded the newborn State of Israel. During this war, as in the wars in the time of the Judges, the Judean lowlands were of great strategic importance and therefore a focus of the warring forces. When the Israeli army drew near the Arab village of Sar’a, most of its inhabitants fled, and the ones who remained were expelled. All became refugees, most of whom ended up in the Deheish refugee camp not far from Hebron, where their families reside to this day.

It is mid-October 2002. A hot, gloomy day in the lowlands. The radio reports heavy traffic at the Samson Junction, between Zorah and Eshtaol. A dirt path winds away from the main highway into a forest, leading the hiker into the abandoned gardens of Arab Sar’a. There, hidden in a small grove, suddenly appear two figures, a mother and son, Palestinians who have come from Deheishe to harvest the olives from trees that once belonged to their family. The woman vigorously shakes the branches of the tree and beats at them with a stick, and her son, a boy of about ten, swiftly and silently gathers the black hail of olives on a sheet spread out beneath the tree.

Here, roughly three thousand years ago, in this same brown, rugged landscape, amidst olive and oak trees, terebinths and carobs, the wife of Manoah lay down to give birth. Here she gave the boy her name, *Shimshon*, which in Hebrew connotes ‘little sun’, and perhaps also a conflation of *shemesh* and *on* – sun plus strength, virility.

There is, of course, great similarity between Samson and other ‘sun-heroes’ such as Hercules, Perseus, Prometheus and Mopsus, son of Apollo.⁵ In the Talmud, Rabbi Yohanan sought to ‘purify’ Samson of any hint of paganism: ‘Samson was called by the name of the Holy One, Blessed be He, it is said, ‘For the Lord God is a sun and a shield’ (Psalms 84:12) ... as God protects the entire world, so too Samson in his time protects Israel.’⁶ Whereas the first-century Judeo-Roman historian Josephus Flavius, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, asserts that ‘Samson’ means ‘strong’, adding that ‘the child grew up in apace and it was plain from the frugality of his diet and his loosely flowing locks that he was to be a prophet’.⁷

‘The boy grew up, and the Lord blessed him’, the Bible tells us, and the Talmud comments, ‘He was blessed *b’amato*’, the word *amah* (literally, ‘cubit’) being a euphemism for penis: ‘His *amah* was like that of other men’, continues the Talmud, ‘but his seed was like a fast-flowing stream’.⁸ Even this rabbinic commentary ventures fancifully far afield, Samson’s subsequent deeds do substantiate the general thrust of its assumption. And no less important than this particular divine blessing is what comes thereafter: ‘The spirit of the Lord began to move him in the encampment of Dan, between Zorah and Eshtaol.’

What exactly is this divine ‘spirit’ that begins to ‘move’ the lad? Was it a sense of mission, a calling, or an interior burst of inspiration? *Lefa’amo*, reads the Hebrew, from the root ‘to beat’ or ‘throb’, a clear echo of the human heartbeat, which pounds louder as one’s emotions are stirred.

Indeed this sound, persistent and agitated, will surge from Samson's body and soul at every stage of his life. The Jerusalem Talmud, attempting to give concrete physical expression to Samson's arousal, declares that, when the holy spirit came upon him, each of his footsteps was as great as the distance from Zorah to Eshtaol, and the locks of his hair would ring like a bell – *pa'amon* in Hebrew, from the same root – and the sound would carry for that distance as well.⁹ The *Zohar* or 'Book of Splendour', the central work of Jewish mysticism, offers an appealingly vivid description: '*Lefa'amo*. The spirit would come and go, come and go, and never properly settle within him. And it is therefore written "The spirit of the Lord began to move him," for this was the case from the beginning.'¹⁰ The medieval commentator Gersonides, in another play on words, interprets Samson's arousal from the heroic rational point of view: 'One time (*pa'am*) he would decide to go to war against the Philistines, another time he would decide not to, like a bell that strikes this way and that.'

Yet a simple reading of the text reveals that Samson is not stirred by any calling or inspiration but rather in a different, unexpected direction. For what does the young man do when he is aroused by the spirit of God? Does he begin gathering an army in order to redeem his people as soon as possible from the Philistines, or amass political power within his tribe, or try to get the blessing and support of the high priest? Not at all: Samson awakens to *love*.

'Samson went down to Timnah; and while in Timnah, he noticed a girl among the Philistine women.'

Straight away he goes back up the hill, home to Zorah, turns to his father and mother, and declares 'I noticed one of the Philistine women in Timnah; now get her for me as a wife.' And although the word 'love' is not stated here explicitly, one can sense in Samson's words the determination and depth of feeling that churn inside him. It is hard to know if he himself is capable at this moment of differentiating his tangled emotions, of separating love from the great new 'divine spirit', but is that so surprising? Love, and first love all the more, is doubtless likely to arouse in a person the sense that he has just been born and that a new, powerful, and unfamiliar wind is coursing through him.

Here is the place to explain – for those who puzzle over this speedy coupling of a Nazirite with a woman – that the Nazirite in Judaism is not the same as a monk in the Christian or Buddhist traditions.¹¹ In the Torah (see Numbers, Chapter 6), the Jewish Nazirite is commanded to refrain from three things: he is forbidden to drink wine or to eat grapes or their derivatives; he may not cut his hair and he may not go near a dead body (a prohibition not specified in the case of Samson). On the other hand, he is not forbidden to marry or to be intimate with a woman. Still, the reader is advised not to harbour expectations of juicy escapades akin to the tales of lecherous monks in Chaucer or Boccaccio. The biblical writer – who, like most authors, is a natural-born killjoy – is quick to remark, regarding Samson's attraction to the Philistine woman, 'that this was the Lord's doing; He was seeking a pretext against the Philistines, for the Philistines were ruling over Israel at that time.'

In other words – not love, or lust, or romance, and above all not free will: Samson is drawn to the Philistine woman because God is looking for an excuse to strike the Philistines who are oppressing the Israelites. This is the sole motive the Bible offers for the desire that Samson feels. But the presentation of events cannot prevent the reader from wondering about the role of Samson *the man* in this story. For he himself surely does not experience his feelings of love as someone else's 'pretext' not even God's – and his strong and immediate reaction to the woman from Timnah proves that he, the man, the flesh-and-blood Samson, seeks and needs love! Is he in any way capable of understanding that this burning love is not entirely 'his', and that he is merely a political and military tool in God's hands? Is there any man who could understand such a thing? Is there anyone who could endure the knowledge that, just as he was not his parents' 'natural child', so too now, as a man, his natural desire for a woman has been confiscated, or else installed in him?

And as we raise these questions, a sad possibility becomes increasingly apparent: that the hero of our story is a man who does not know, and perhaps will never really understand, that God, even before his birth, has *nationalised* his desires, his love, his entire emotional life.

‘Get her for me as a wife,’ Samson half-asks, half-demands of his parents. It is interesting to note that, in contrast with the typical biblical scene in which a son asks his father to bring him a particular woman as a wife, here Samson takes his request to both his father and mother. And from here on, they will almost always be mentioned together, the father and the mother, as again and again the biblical storyteller makes it clear that Samson’s mother is at least as important as his father.

And they also answer him together, in one voice (‘His father and mother said to him’), which parents typically say to Samsons in such situations: ‘Is there no one among the daughters of your own kinsmen and among all our people, that you must go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ In other words – why don’t you marry one of our own?

For it is not only that Samson chooses to marry a foreigner, the daughter of another people, but that this particular people, the Philistines, are among the worst and bitterest of Israel’s foes: with the advantage of iron weapons they repeatedly engage in the conquest and enslavement of the tribes of Israel, while preventing them from developing iron-smithing of their own, ‘for the Philistines were afraid that the Hebrews would make swords or spears’.¹² Indeed for the past forty years, as is told at the beginning of our story, they have dominated and provoked the Israelites. And it is also known that the tribe of Dan, Samson’s tribe, dwells in the borderlands and finds it hard to build a homestead there, as it is continually embattled with stronger nations, the Philistines and others. These continuous struggles have exhausted the tribe, depleted it and stripped it of cultural, political, and social influence within the Israelite nation.¹³ (In this light it is possible to read as somewhat unrealistic the blessing of Dan by his father Jacob before the patriarch’s death, the expression of both a hope and a wish: ‘Dan shall govern his people as one of the tribes of Israel.’ After which Jacob adds, perhaps with a heavy sigh: ‘I wait for your deliverance, O Lord ...’)¹⁴

This is the larger national context in which the relationship between Samson and the Philistine woman begins to blossom. But no less fascinating is what happens here between the young man and his parents: first of all, they are confused, because they know (or at least his mother does) that Samson is destined to save his people from the Philistines, so what is he doing with a Philistine woman? Next when they say to him, ‘Is there no one among the daughters of your own kinsmen and among all our people, that you must go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ there is a clear echo of blame and complaint: ‘Why can’t you be like everyone else?’ We may read this with a smile, as it sounds like one of those tired lines so many of us have heard from our parents (and sworn never to say to our children), but the Samson story is anything but a comedy. It is a tragic tale; not least because of the strangeness of *this* child, his difference from his parents, is so sharp and clear-cut that it sometimes seems that he and they belong to two entirely different dimensions of human existence, two realms that are separated by an unbridgeable chasm. And therefore, that trite parental line is uttered here with incurable, heart-rending anguish.

For it can be assumed that by now Samson’s parents have gathered that, with every step he takes, his strangeness and otherness will become more and more pronounced, that it will become clear to them and all that he, in a sense, is made of different ‘stuff’ – from some alien, unknowable essence that has infiltrated him even in the womb – on account of which he will never, in all likelihood, be able to connect naturally and harmoniously with his family or his people.

And even though they know well – having been the ones, after all, who were given the news – that Samson, by his nature, cannot be ‘like everyone else’ or like other human beings, they blurt out the plaintive question because it is so hard for them, as parents, to finally come to terms, without

hesitation, with the grand divine plan that confiscated their son and made him what he is. They feel both of them, the pain of the umbilical cord so roughly torn, which will stay sundered forever.—

One can imagine that at this moment – as his parents try to protest his decision – Samson looks straight into his father’s eyes. He wants to make it clear to him, with that look, just how ‘right’ the woman is, in his opinion. Facing him is the indecisive, fearful Manoah. Manoah, ever suspicious of this son who hatched so suddenly in his nest, like the chick of a strange bird, unexpected and dangerous. Manoah – a man so utterly unlike his energetic, obsessive, determined, brave, and excitable son, Samson. According to the text, Samson does not respond to his father’s and mother’s question. We don’t know if this is because he is indeed so determined, or whether that pained parental query – ‘Is there no one among the daughters of your own kinsmen and among all our people, that you must go and take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?’ – triggers, for a second, an unsettling sensation, the vague glimmer of possibility that the reason he is so attracted to this Philistine girl may not be so obvious, or entirely ‘natural’.

Again he says to Manoah: ‘Get me that one, for she is the right one for me.’ This time, Samson only addresses his father. Possibly he does so because he senses that Manoah is weaker and more easily swayed. But it may also be that he feels compelled to avert his eyes from his mother, for when he speaks about a woman who is ‘the right one’, he is incapable of looking straight at the woman who was a senior partner – if an unwilling one – in ordaining his tangled, troublesome destiny.

Samson and his father exchange duelling glances. This is a decisive moment in Samson’s personal history. Other difficult struggles await him, but this is the first time he has had to rebel openly against his father’s authority (and his mother’s). Without a doubt it has been abundantly clear to everyone even before this situation, that Samson is not the same as other people. Stories told within the family and spread among the tribe have buttressed this impression, stories about the unusual circumstances of his conception and the exalted task for which he has been chosen. His long hair, too, which has never been cut, has singled him out before one and all as *sui generis*. But this, now, is the moment when Samson declares himself not merely different, but also to be someone who is closer in his soul to the foreigner, the enemy.

* * *

They are on their way. Samson, his father and his mother have set out from Zorah towards the woman from Timnah, on trails that wind through dry brambles and late-summer fields of dusty stubble.

Long-legged Samson walks in broad strides, drawn towards Timnah by a powerful force. Ordinary mortals would find it hard to keep pace with him. His parents doubtless need to stop now and again and catch their breath; here, for example, on a hilltop at the southwest crest of the Zorah ridge overlooking the valley of Nahal Sorek, they stand, take a breath, wipe their sweaty faces. In those days the area was thickly wooded – ‘as plentiful as sycamores in the Shephelah plain’¹⁵ was once a simile for abundance – but today the trees are sparse, the hills exposed. The sycamores have been replaced by pines, planted by the Jewish National Fund, which in the thick air of a Levantine sirocco look almost grey. Below, in the plain, lies the city of Beit Shemesh, with its roads and rooftops and industrial zones, and the flat drainage basins of the surrounding streams, sparkling like mirrors, and something flaming red-orange in the distance – maybe a tree has caught fire in the searing *hamsin* wind, maybe it’s just burning garbage – and Samson’s back disappears over the saddle of the ridge, into the valley, down to Timnah.

And here, at the entrance to the vineyards of Timnah, a roaring lion appears before him, one of those that were indigenous to the Land of Israel in those days, but have since become extinct. The divine spirit then descends upon Samson: quick as a wink he tears the lion apart ‘as one might tear

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