



Parsha Naso
Haftarah Judges 13:2-25
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It seems that people are obsessed with "prequels" on the silver screen. A prequel is generally a movie, book, or play whose story precedes that of an earlier work. For example, Rise of the Planet of the Apes explains how things transpired in the movie Planet of the Apes (even though it was made many years later). Godfather 2 does the same for the original Godfather movie, and The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug sets the stage for the original film, The Hobbit.

This week's Haftarah for Parashat Naso is a prequel to the life of Samson, one of the great judges of Israel and certainly the strongest. His parents, Manoah and Mrs. Manoah are childless (her name is not found in the text, although the Midrash gives her the name Hatzlelponi), and one day an angel appears to Manoah's wife and informs her that she will bear a child who will save the Israelites from the Philistines, the arch enemy of the Jewish People. But there's a catch. She must become a Nazarite and refrain from drinking alcoholic beverages and consuming impure food, and her yet unborn son would need to do the same. He would also refrain from cutting his hair.

This Haftarah, from the Book of Judges, Chapter 13, is the perfect prophetic parallel to the Torah reading for in Parashat Naso we read about the original laws of the Nazarite (which also includes the prohibition of Nazarites coming into contact with the dead). Interestingly, the Torah describes the period of the Nazarite's abstinence as voluntary and temporary, but Samson was to be a Nazarite throughout his lifetime, and he had no choice in the matter.

It could well be that Samson may have tried to abide by these laws of abstinence, yet he was ultimately unable to control his urges and broke all of the Nazarite restrictions before his tragic and premature death (which also cut short the lives of many Philistines).

The Hebrew word for Nazarite is "Nazir" and that word is even used in modern Hebrew to describe monks (Christian and Buddhist) who live ascetic lifestyles. The Torah, in its infinite wisdom, recognizes that if one wants to take upon himself a life of austerity, that it should be a temporary condition, not a permanent one. In fact, the Torah portion prescribes that when the period of abstinence is completed, the "former" Nazir must bring a series of sacrifices, including a sin offering. Some believe that the sin for which he needed to atone was his voluntary refusal to take advantage of all the joys that God has given to us. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides opines that a Nazarite is called a sinner because one should only abstain from that which the Torah explicitly forbids (Hilchot Deot 3:1)

We should recognize that when we deny ourselves the normal pleasures of life, we are wont to lose control in other facets of our lives and get into deep trouble. Samson, strong as he was physically, undermined his strength by giving in to other temptations (most notably to the temptress Delilah).

We should always take the words of Pirke Avot to heart: Ben Zoma taught us: Ezeh Hu Gibor? Who is mighty? Who is a hero? The one who controls his urges-Hakovesh Et Yitzro (Avot 4:1).

Here are some questions about Samson and about being a Nazir that you may wish to ponder over the Shabbat dinner table:

1. Why do you think that the angel first appeared to Mrs. Manoah and not Mr. Manoah? (He appeared to Manoah later, but didn't share everything that he shared with his wife - especially the fact that their son would defeat the Philistines)
2. Name another barren woman in the bible to whom an angel appeared to tell her that she would bear a child?
3. Can you think of modern day examples of people who take vows to refrain from certain foods or activity who end up getting into trouble in other ways?
4. The name given to Mrs. Manoah is Hatzlelponi, which has been translated as "shade coming upon me" (a rather ominous name). Why do you think this name may have been chosen?

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