

Samson: Hero and Role Model?

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Our tradition is divided about Samson. On the one hand, his birth was heralded in a very special way, putting him a class with Biblical greats like Isaac, whose coming was also announced by angelic visitors. In addition, being a Nazirite was a serious dedication to God and put one in an esteemed class. Finally, he is one of the Judges, as listed in the Tanach, each the greatest hero of his or her time.

On the other hand, Samson is a problem. He is disrespectful of his parents, who are unable to say no to him. They cannot discipline him and go so far as to procure foreign women at his request. Each of these three women ultimately betrays him, the third time to his dramatic demise. Samson is extremely self-centered. His life is dominated by sensual pleasure and debauchery. He doesn't seem able to distinguish his personal vendettas from the situation of his Jewish People of his time at the hands of their enemies, the Philistines.

Josephus, the famous Jewish historian of Roman times, held Samson up as the model of the heroic soldier, but the rabbis were less than enthusiastic about Samson as a model of Jewish masculinity.

Samson is mentioned only infrequently in the Tractate of the Talmud dedicated to the laws of

the Nazirite. There, the great teacher Rabbi Yehudah challenges his status as a Nazirite, arguing that Samson himself did not choose to be a Nazirite. Samuel, a greater leader of the ancient Israelites, by contrast, chose this holy path and abides by its restrictions. The rabbis also note that the text tells us after every other judge that the land had peace for 40 years, but after Samson's judgeship only 20.

Biblical scholars suggest that Samson's story is more parody than history. His name, Shimshon, means sun, while Delilah means night or darkness. Their irreconcilability is present from the beginning and must ultimately lead to disaster.

Finally, Samson is the last of the judges, as if after him it was clear that some other system of leadership was needed. Interestingly, the system of leadership that follows, the monarchy, is more focused on chariots and power than on religious values. It fulfills what Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the revisionist Zionist and author, places in Samson's mouth as his dying words: "First is iron; even if it means forfeiting your wives and daughters, you must have iron. Second, a king, a leader who will lead you into battle. Is this not how the Philistines have come to rule over Canaan."

With all his defects, Samson has still been appealing to young Jewish men, because of his strength and power, a superhero, the Jewish Hercules. The rabbis might prefer Isaac, who dwelt in tents and listened to his mother, but Isaac was a nebbish. In generations past, where Jewish men were stereotyped as weak and defenseless and Jewish adolescents were picked on and beaten up in their neighborhoods, a Jewish Hercules was quite appealing.

Writing about Samson this week made me think of Philip Roth, whose portrayals of Jewish masculinity have been described as toxic. Though not physically violent, his early short stories and novels, satires on Jewish life at the time, were viewed by Gershon Sholom, one of the most important Jewish scholars of the 20th century, as “as bad for Judaism as [the infamous Czarist forgery] *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.” But Roth had an advantage that Samson didn’t have: He matured. And to me he became one of the greatest explorers of what it might mean to be an American and a Jew. His later life writings included his prescient novel, *The Plot Against America*, about which he complained, in a January interview, that people were maligning Charles Lindbergh, an anti-Semite but a true hero of aviation, by comparing him to Donald Trump.

Philip Roth’s personal life story was the story of so many of our second-generation immigrant families: a trajectory from working-class Newark, New Jersey, through college, and off to make a mark on the world.

Roth was often identified as the wicked son from the famous four sons of the Passover Seder, but he was engaged in the Jewish story throughout his life. He asked not only, What is this to you, but also, What is this to me?