

Bringing the Prophets to Life

Weekly insights into the Haftara by Rabbi Nachman (Neil) Winkler

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Naso

This week's haftara relates the miraculous birth of Shimshon, Samson, who, even before his birth, was marked for exceptional accomplishments and for leadership in Israel. Additionally, the charge given to his mother that her soon-to-be-born son would take on the strictures of nezirut throughout his life (the clear connection to the parsha), indicated that he would also have a special relationship with his Father in heaven as well as one with his people.

We have discussed the story of Shimshon in the past including our attempts to understand his character and his accomplishments. But this perek in Sefer Shof'tim (13) speaks only of his birth and so, by understanding the state of the Israelite nation at that time - and that of Shimshon's tribe of Dan, we would better understand the mission he was challenged to meet and whether or not he was successful.

The story of Shimshon occupies a full four p'rakim in Sefer Shof'tim (13-16),

more than any other SHOF'EIT (judge, or better, chieftain). Given that no other shofeit is recorded in the rest of the sefer, the end of his leadership marked the close of an era, with the guidance of the prophet Shmuel beginning an entirely new era. The final chapters of the book (17-21) are acknowledged as not being in chronological order, retelling events that had taken place during the previous years of the Shof'tim era. Significantly, the events in the final p'rakim, describe a time of wide-spread idolatry in Israel (the story of Micha's idol) and a civil war, with the tribes' battling against shevet Binyamin.

It is no wonder that the book concludes with a pithy summary of the final episodes and, perhaps, all of the entire era, with the words BAYAMIM HAHEIM, EIN MELECH B'YISRAEL... - in those days, there was not king in Israel - and, therefore ...ISH HAYASHAR B'EINAV YA'ASEH. - ...each person did whatever he deemed proper. A painful description of the era of the Shof'tim.

Simply put, the situation of Israel during most of the Shof'tim era was a "mess".

And into this "mess" entered Shimshom.

In order to repair the situation,

Hashem looked to have a leader who would both raise the nation's spiritual stature and would unite the people. His sanctification of the child with the state of nezirut - even before his birth - would provide the unborn with an aura of sanctity, and the nation's knowledge that he was chosen by G-d would encourage their acceptance of Shimshon as their leader. Likewise, Hashem would bless him with strength to ease the oppressive hand of the Philistines and further unite the people behind his leadership.

It was with these G-d-given "tools" that Shimshon went out to meet this challenge.

But did he succeed?

I have always felt that he did not.

After reviewing his story, we should consider the following:

He was sent to be a leader - but he never led the nation - or her army - or even his tribe! In fact, the only time we find a large (Israelite) contingent gathering around him was in order to hand him over to the enemy!

He was meant to protect a weak nation - yet fought most of his battles to avenge personal affronts and not to defend national interests.

He, as a nazir, could have raised the spiritual stature of Israel and brought

them closer to their G-d, and yet we read of his marriage to a Philistine woman, his celebration with Philistine friends (MERE'IM) and his eventual fall into the hands of a Philistine harlot.

Given these facts, it is difficult to regard him as the "hero" we should admire.

However, I have recently reconsidered my view of Shimshon and have begun to see him as a tragic figure whose failures reflected the sad state of the nation itself. Given his miraculous birth and his widespread feats (13:25), one would have expected a massive following supporting him! The fact that we find no mention of any national or tribal support in any of the p'rakim, stands as a subtle - yet powerful condemnation - of the people of that time.

Furthermore, an oppressed population which was so faithless that it regarded their divinely chosen leader as a threat rather than a redeemer - speaks volumes of their reluctance to remove the yoke of the P'lishtim.

Lastly, the tribes' simple disregard of Shimshon's commanded state of nezirut might indicate the people's perception of Samson as "not one of us" - an outsider, a stranger. And, given the nation's seemingly distant relationship with Hashem (note the

behavior of Shimshon's parents upon receiving the angel's message), it is not difficult to believe that the population rejected him, his elevated nezirut stature and his leadership.

Each generation receives the leader fitting for them and if the leader is lacking, then perhaps it is because the generation is as well.

It is a lesson well-worth remembering in all times.

And in our time as well. ✨