

# Haftarah Themes and Analysis by Gidon Rothstein: Naso

- Gidon Rothstein

Haftarah No. 2: Parshat Naso, Judges 13:2-25

## **Finding the Middle, the Example of Physicality**

One obvious connection between Samson and the Torah reading is that he was designated a “*nazir*,” for which there is no good English word other than Nazirite, from before he was born; the laws of that status are outlined in the Torah reading. More careful reading suggests a connection that both better explains Samson’s role in Jewish history and also the nature and meaning of being a Nazirite.

As with all people, Samson’s parents are crucial to appreciating the drama and themes of his life. The Sages see Manoah and his wife as righteous yet also remarkably attached to the physical, which helps explain why God would make their son a Nazirite, and of the particular rules to which Samson was required to adhere.

## **The Righteousness of Manoah and His Wife**

On the one hand, the Midrash sees Manoah as one of the leaders of the Jewish people Moses foresaw before he died. The comment both assumes that Manoah was a leader of his generation, and also that whatever function Samson performed in Jewish history was one that was already known to be needed in the time of Moses.

After the angel appears to Manoah’s wife—which, if you hold to Maimonides’s view of prophecy, already means she must have been at a high intellectual/spiritual level—Manoah prays for a reappearance and gets it; the ability to successfully pray for a particular outcome is usually a sign of spiritual sophistication. Numbers Rabbah points out that Manoah’s wife runs to him when the angel returns, and sees her as a good example of how righteous people do everything with alacrity.

When dealing with the angel a second time, Zevachim 119a notes that his offering a sacrifice would seem to have been prohibited when there was a functioning Tabernacle in Shilo, at least according to one view. The Talmud explains it as an *hora'at sha'ah*, a short-term breaking of the rules scholars and/or prophets may initiate. This assumes Manoah had the authority and right to issue such rulings.

Finally, Manoah asks the angel’s name, reminding us of the Patriarch Jacob, who also concluded his experience with an angel by asking for the angel’s name. At the same time, this last example suggests that he had not realized the angel was beyond his comprehension, a point made by the name *Peli*, which means wondrous or inconceivable.

## **On the Other Hand**

At least balancing their righteousness is the parents’ excessive physicality. The woman describes the man she saw as “looking like an angel,” words that reveal, as Radak points out, that she (and the rest of her generation) thought of angels as having a physical form. In addition, the Sages

blame Manoah for “going after” his wife, especially if he walked behind her, an act they saw as too easily leading to improperly physical thoughts.

Manoah’s concern that the angel eat and his certainty that they would die when he realized the angel was not human further demonstrate his difficulties balancing the physical and metaphysical. For him, sharing food was necessary to sealing one’s thanks for a message brought, and surviving a conversation with an angel seemed beyond possibility for a human being.

The latter case is particularly striking, since the wife’s point—that God would not bother to predict Samson’s birth or give her rules of conduct if they were going to die—is so clear that only a deeply held counterbelief could have led Manoah not to realize it himself. Their focus on their physical lives may also explain the tension that several Midrashim see in their marriage, caused by their childlessness. While the angel notes that she was barren, when she repeats his words to her husband, she leaves that out (the Midrash thinks the angel allowed her to, to foster peace in the family).

Another Midrash suggests that the angel reappeared to her (rather than to him or them) to lead him to appreciate her more. One final Midrash to mention sees the angel as telling her she was barren so that she would stop blaming her husband for it. Each one, then, saw their lack of children as a deep wound in their marriage, and blamed the other for it.

### **Samson: What Kind of Nazirite?**

The parents’ having combined both great righteousness and attachment to the physical goes a long way to explaining their being given a son who would be required to weigh his attachment to the physical throughout his life. Especially since Samson was allowed to come into contact with corpses, an essential prohibition to ordinary Nazirites, his status as a nazirite seems focused on grappling with how to avoid excessive physicality, such as personal grooming (which has some aspect of concern with sexuality to it) and proper use of food.

Given what we know of Samson and his struggles with self-control, the preparation was not only necessary, it perhaps did not go far enough. His great physical gifts, which provided such salvation to the Jews of his time, were also the burden under which he eventually broke.

### **A Spirituality Bound by the Physical**

The Midrash’s assumption that Manoah and Samson were shown to Moses and that Manoah and his wife struggled to put the physical and spiritual in their proper places give a perspective of Samson and the institution of being a Nazirite that link the Torah reading and haftarah productively.

Once we refuse to reject either the physical or the spiritual, how to give each its proper due is no simple task (as Samson’s ultimate failure shows). Thus, it is reasonable that God would know that the Jews would at some point need a leader like Samson, with a father like Manoah.

It also shows us the reason the Torah would establish the institution, even while preferring that people not make use of it. For those who need a period of intense training, nezirut can restore or

inculcate an awareness of the physical that will then allow that person to put it into proper perspective in the rest of their lives.

**Shabbat Shalom**