

Samson, Clinton & the Lady

- Basil Herring. The very subject of the Haftara is none other than temptation itself, but of a different kind, and in a different place.

Truth to tell, I was not going to deliver a sermon today. Three sermons in one week of the spring is more than anyone should inflict on a captive audience. But I found the parallel between headline and haftarah so fascinating, that, I must admit, I could not resist the temptation. Indeed the very subject is none other than temptation itself, but of a different kind, and in a different place. Today, therefore, I will speak, with care and (I hope) due delicacy, of the sexual accusations and innuendos, and also the past admissions, of the current President of the United States.

Now I know full well that we are presumed innocent till proven guilty. And it is entirely possible that Paula Jones, in laying charges that Governor Clinton sexually harassed her in a most vile and egregious manner, is lying either completely or partially. Yet it is also true that the President on 60 Minutes, in the presence of his wife, back in the election in 1992, admitted marital infidelities, owned up to his filandering ways, and said that he no longer did such things. Thus, other than the issue of sexual harassment by the boss, it is not important whether or not the current charges are true. More significant is that Bill Clinton clearly conforms to the well-established, and time-honored, pattern of men who wield great power over others, but cannot control themselves and their urges, an often fatal flaw, that has been known sometimes, but not always, to destroy them. On this Shabbas, two such cases come to mind: the first name, alas, is also in the headlines, in the person of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, on her death bed, wife of a slain President now universally recognized as guilty of infidelity not merely as Governor but as President, acting within the portals of the White House itself, and sister-in-law of a Senator whose past sexual reputation, to say the least, precedes him. In that sense, we might say, the present incumbent, is not too bad, by comparison.

But the second case, in the context of our parshah, I believe, is much more interesting, and instructive. I do not refer here to the suspected adulteress, whose treatment is so central to the parshah, although it would be wonderful if we too had some of those mystical “bitter waters” as truth-serum for our own wayward spouses, in the White House or beyond. The one I do have in mind, is the man whose birth is so carefully foretold in the haftarah—and that is Samson. Now here was a complex man if ever there was one! He was on the one hand, the beloved leader of the nation, for 22 years an honest, selfless, and effective biblical Judge of Israel of heroic proportion, a Nazirite of epic dimension, and a valiant fighter for the honor of his people, who single-handedly struck fear and terror into the hearts of their mortal enemies in that wretched and restless area that we today refer to as the Gaza Strip. But then there was the other side of the man, as it emerges from the pages of Tenakh, and Hazal.