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Samson and the Politics of Riddling



Abstract: Samson is often taken to be no more than an oversexed strongman. His inclusion among the judges of the Israelites in the pre-monarchical era seems to be an error of misplaced judgment, or at least of overzealous partisanship. This article offers a fresh look at Samson as a political leader. Through an analysis of Samson's riddling, this article demonstrates that the intellectual estrangement manifest in the riddle serves as a metaphor for Samson's presentation of the inherently alienating paradoxes of power and the challenges he faces in enabling a national discourse for his people.

1. INTRODUCTION

The story of Samson is conventionally understood to be centered on the physical prowess of its protagonist. Critical reactions to this reading have ranged from a delight in Samson, the mighty hero, to the denigration of Samson, a leader with a tendency to reduce interpersonal relationships to brute force. While these approaches differ fundamentally, and even contradict each other's assessments of Samson's character, what unites their evaluations is arguably more noteworthy than that which divides them. In all such appraisals, Samson is reduced to a remarkably simple, not to say simplistic, figure.

This essay offers a fresh look at Samson as a political leader. Through the analysis of biblical texts and the riddling techniques therein that dominate Samson's interpersonal relationships, this article demonstrates that Samson's self-understanding as a political leader is complex: he consciously grapples with the Israelites' as-yet incomplete idea of their own national identity, while attempting to master his own sense of estrangement. As such, Samson is revealed as a problematic figure who challenges both his contemporaries and later readers of his saga. At the

same time, Samson deliberately utilizes his strangeness to deepen his own, and hopefully also his people's, understanding of the paradoxes of nationhood. Samson does this in order to enable the Israelites to create a dynamic sense of national identity that can respond to the numerous challenges that present themselves in ever-changing circumstances and eras. Samson's ability to define these issues marks his accomplishment as a leader in the development of Israelite nationhood.

2. CONVENTIONAL READINGS

The Samson narrative has been conventionally read with a focus, not necessarily a positive one, on Samson's physical strength. The biblical text itself seems to present Samson as an individual who is promoted beyond his level of competence and becomes a victim of the Peter Principle. With his acts of seeming buffoonery and apparently senseless violence, Samson appears to lack sufficient dignity to hold the position of Israelite judge. Samson has been categorized by scholars as manipulative and of bad faith;¹ his tenure as judge seems to yield no permanent improvement in the political and economic well-being of the Israelites.² The mystery of why four chapters of a relatively laconic narrative of Israelite judges is dedicated to an apparent political disappointment explains perhaps why some scholars have chosen to see the Samson story as a compilation of various earlier histories, serving as a recapitulation of the pre-monarchic experience in ancient Israel.³

The Samson narrative spans chapters 13–16 of the book of Judges and can be summarized as follows:

Against the background of the Philistine domination of ancient Israel, the biblical text focuses on Manoah, a Danite whose wife is visited by an angel foretelling the birth of a son who will "begin to save the Israelites from the Philistines."⁴ This child, Samson, must adhere to the restrictions of a Nazirite and neither drink wine nor cut his hair. Subsequently, the text

¹ A typical assessment is found in Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 23. Also, cf. Edward Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," *Prooftexts* 1:3 (1981), esp. pp. 226–237, 239–241.

² Cf., for example, James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, a Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 20. Ulrich Simon describes Samson as "unstable." See Simon, "Samson and the Heroic," in Michael Wadsworth, ed., *Ways of Reading the Bible* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 157. Similarly, Yairah Amit, in Amit, *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 288, classifies Samson as an "unbalanced hero" and questions his efficacy as a judge.

³ Cf. Greenstein, "Riddle of Samson," p. 248.

⁴ Judges 13:5. All biblical translations are from the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanach*, modernized and modified by the present author.

highlights certain events in Samson's life featuring his unusual strength and cunning. Several of these stories center around Samson's marriage plans, which, to his parents' consternation, involve his desire to marry a Timnite (Philistine) woman. During the journey upon which he embarks in order to arrange the details of their marriage, Samson tears apart a lion surging forward in his path. Returning on the same path several days later, Samson discovers a nest of bees in the dead lion's chest cavity. He eats the honey as he walks home.

It is at the wedding festivities that Samson first displays his craftiness in dealing with the Philistines. He challenges them with a riddle that they "solve" only by threatening Samson's new bride with death if she does not provide them with the solution. This exchange sets off a cycle of violent revenge. Samson's wife is eventually given to another (Philistine) man, whereupon Samson destroys a large portion of the Philistine harvest. Eventually, the Philistines send an army to Ramat Lehi, demanding that Samson be delivered to them. The Israelites comply with this request, but by the text's account, Samson's bonds melt off him and he slays one thousand Philistines (this time with the jawbone of an ass). The Philistines finally manage to capture Samson when he reveals to Delilah, a woman in the pay of the Philistines, the secret of his strength: his hair that has never been cut. After Delilah cuts his hair, the Philistines successfully capture Samson, blind him, and make sport of him during a thanksgiving festival to their deity, Dagon. Samson's final act is to bring down the temple of Dagon upon himself and his Philistine captors.

Even upon a simple reading of the biblical text, one encounters certain aspects of Samson's behavior that are not reducible to the manifestation of his physical powers alone. Samson is portrayed as possessing certain social skills as well; perhaps chief among them being the recitation of riddles. The riddle is a technique linking several of Samson's far-flung exploits, and thematically serves several purposes.⁵ First, and perhaps most obviously, it functions as a device to move the literary narrative forward; at crucial junctures in the story, the riddle unleashes consequences that otherwise would appear fantastical in the normal course

⁵ In emphasizing the centrality of the riddle in the structure and content of the Samson story, I am utilizing Mieke Bal's notion of *mise en abyme* from *Lethal Love* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 756–776, 788, particularly as it is understood by Claudia Camp in "Riddlers, Tricksters, and Strange Women in the Samson Story," in Camp, *Wise, Strange, and Holy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 94–143, esp. pp. 95–96. However, while Camp focuses on the microstructure of the riddle as highlighting the values and themes of strangeness and the trickster, I expand upon the notion of the riddle as a pivotal microstructure to emphasize the political issues of power, knowledge, and difference.

of events. Second, the riddle allows conventional ideas to be reexamined and questioned: Samson uses the act of riddling to query the notion of national exclusivity and the proper relationship between the personal and the political realms as these are advanced by the biblical text. In addition, the form of the riddle serves as the means to explore issues such as personal identity and the extent and limitations of knowledge. As we will see, the consequences brought about by Samson's riddles can themselves be understood as attempts to generate a discourse about the quality of nationhood and of communal life. Finally, the riddle (and it will become evident that there is more than one riddle in the text) exemplifies the strangeness that is emblematic of Samson's life and political destiny.

3. RELATING THE RIDDLE

Of the critical attention that has been given to Samson's riddling, the lion's share has been devoted to analyzing the riddle with which Samson challenges his Philistine companions at his wedding celebration:

*Out of the devourer came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.*⁶

Much has been written about whether the content of this riddle makes it a fair riddle (that is, whether it can be solved without specialized knowledge of the particular adventure that had befallen Samson before the wedding festivities), and whether it can even be considered a riddle at all.⁷ But the utilization of such a controversial riddling structure can also be seen as a method of querying existing power relationships, presenting an unusual technique that can be employed as a means of dealing with power inequities.

Analysis of the genre of riddling⁸ in literature and in social interaction reveals that the issue that lies at the heart of the riddle is not merely the

⁶ Judges 14:14.

⁷ The argument here is whether a "neck riddle" is, properly speaking, a true riddle. For general commentary on this issue, cf. Roger D. Abrahams and Alan Dundes, "Riddles," in Richard M. Dorson, ed., *Folklore and Folklife* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 129–143. For a negative reply to this question, see W.J. Pepicello and Thomas A. Green, *The Language of Riddles: New Perspectives* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984), esp. pp. 87–88. Regarding the question whether this riddle is a fair riddle, see also Crenshaw, *Samson*, esp. pp. 111–120. For an approach claiming that this riddle is, in fact, unfair, see Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 136.

⁸ This discussion of riddles will not include the difference between the various genres of riddles, but will rather concentrate on their social and political implications as reflected in the Samson story. For more on the various genres of riddles and the cultural

attempt to answer a specific question. Rather, the way in which the riddle is posed is designed to prevent rather than facilitate the discovery of an answer. To complicate his question, the riddler will transform the usual categories in which the items forming the riddle are normally placed, rendering them strange, or uncanny, such that information that is nominally straightforward is presented only after it has been transformed by a veil of misinformation. The riddle, therefore, will always contain (at least) two objects that seem dissimilar, incompatible, or contradictory. The juxtaposition of these objects and their categories within the context of the riddle demands that these seemingly dissociated entities be connected in a novel manner, which is accomplished by reconceptualizing the essence of the items in question as well as their boundaries.⁹

The new way of thinking suggested by the riddle can have important positive consequences, as questioning of the accepted status quo may open up possibilities for a more benign way of looking at the world. In other words, the ambiguity created by the strange juxtaposition of normally unconnected objects¹⁰ (in Samson's case, the eater and the eaten [food]; the strong and the sweet) can prove liberating.¹¹ In this vein, the riddle can be used to mediate between diverse and even opposed categories of a cultural system.¹² The very fact that Samson is able to pose the question to the conquerors of his homeland points to the fact that boundaries in daily life between victor and vanquished are not strictly drawn. This becomes apparent when the riddle is viewed in context: the occasion of the riddle is Samson's marriage to a Philistine woman, which is officially celebrated in a Philistine city, and to which Samson brings his own Philistine companions.¹³

accounting of riddles, cf. Annikki Kaivola-Bregenoj, "Riddles and Their Use" and Richard Bauman, "'I'll Give You Three Guesses': The Dynamics of Genre in the Riddle-Tale," both in Galit Hasan-Rokem and David Shulman, eds., *Untying the Knot: On Riddles and Other Enigmatic Modes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 10–36 and 62–77, respectively.

⁹ Don Handelman, "Traps of Transformation: Theoretical Convergences," in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, *Untying the Knot*, p. 44. In the context of the Samson riddle, the connection between the strong and the sweet is unanticipated, as is the derivation of food from the eater or consumer par excellence so far-fetched as to be labeled oxymoronic.

¹⁰ Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 44.

¹¹ Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 48; Dina Stein, "A King, a Queen, and the Riddle Between: Riddles and Interpretation in a Late Midrashic Text," in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, *Untying the Knot*, p. 129.

¹² Stein, "A King, a Queen," p. 128.

¹³ Cf. Camp, "Riddlers, Tricksters, and Strange Women," esp. pp. 94–105.

But the destabilization of the world achieved by questioning accepted categories,¹⁴ while liberating, has a darker and more ominous side. Just as the riddle reveals that verbal classifications are not unassailable, it also implies that the institutionalized order is not immutable.¹⁵ In other words, the estrangement that obtains between the description vouchsafed by the riddle and the actual referent implies a parallel disjoining of the commonly accepted connection between power and its possessors. Consequently, a riddle is potentially revolutionary and, as such, poses a distinct danger to the party in actual possession of political power.

Thus, in the context of the Samson story, the posing of the riddle is a calculated challenge on Samson's part. The riddle's origin in a member of the subordinate Israelite tribes presents an implicit challenge to the Philistine interlocutors. Is their superiority simply to be assumed, because of their elevated political and economic status, or can they defend their position in the context of current and dynamic interchange? In other words, who is really the "dull giant": Samson, who appears motivated by nothing apart from what his eyes see, or the bloated Philistines?

To complicate matters, it becomes evident in the Samson narrative that riddling actually highlights an *ambiguity* in the location of power. Although the riddle apparently privileges the position of the questioner, who happens to possess at least one of the solutions to the problem posed by this challenge,¹⁶ it turns out that there is a risk involved for the riddler as well: in posing the riddle, Samson chances the possibility that the Philistines may indeed solve the riddle, and thus deprive him of any tactical political advantage that he may have originally possessed by utilizing the riddle. In the context of the narrative in Judges, then, the question is double-edged: Why would the Philistines agree to take part in a dialogue in which they have everything to lose? And why would Samson subsequently run the risk that they may discover the riddle's solution?

¹⁴ Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 41.

¹⁵ Arnold Stein, *Heroic Knowledge: An Interpretation of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957), pp. 128–129, 136; also Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 48.

¹⁶ Dan Pagis, "Toward a Theory of the Literary Riddle," and Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," both in Hasan-Rokem and Shulman, *Untying the Knot*, pp. 83, 53, respectively. In the context of the riddle, it is the questioner who holds and strives to maintain his or her position of power. The respondent at best avoids ridicule (in Finnish riddling contests, this is expressed as avoidance of banishment to Hymylä; cf. Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 45), or the estimation of his or her intelligence is validated.

In effect, the riddle reflects the internal contradictions of Samson's position in the context of his larger historical role. For Samson, the tragedy is that the ambiguity of the riddle permeates his political position, not allowing him to be identified clearly with any one side in the Israelite-Philistine encounters. Samson is strange to both sides and is therefore defended by neither. The complexities of the narrative reveal that the ambiguity of Samson's position cannot be interpreted as a "bridge" between exclusive antinomies:¹⁷ the various binary oppositions in the narrative do not resolve themselves so easily.¹⁸ While Samson's

¹⁷ Susan Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 608–624, esp. p. 613.

¹⁸ The riddle reflects a situation that is even more complex than the acknowledgment that Samson lives in a mediated state between the Israelites and the Philistines, or, as Niditch expresses it in anthropological terms, between the raw and the cooked (Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," p. 613). On the critical level, the view of the Samson text as privileging exclusive antinomies often concludes with evaluating this narrative as exclusively androcentric. Thus, even for J. Cheryl Exum, who mentions that Samson "crosses boundaries... mediating between them," the Samson saga in the end "functions... to control women and justify their subjection." For this, see J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1993), pp. 62–77, esp. pp. 62, 77.

Importantly, there are feminist analyses of the Samson narrative that take account of the text's nuanced understanding of duality and "otherness." Thus, for example, Mieke Bal in *Lethal Love* views the cutting of Samson's hair as a symbol of castration, following Freud (cf. also Edmund Leach, "Magical Hair," in John Middleton, ed., *Myth and Cosmos* [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976] quoted in Niditch, "Samson as Culture Hero," p. 616), so that Samson, the figure of the virile male par excellence, in a sense becomes a woman (*Lethal Love*, pp. 55, 57–61). For her part, Claudia Camp reads the Samson story as including a series of gaps ("Riddlers, Tricksters, and Strange Women," p. 117) into which she interjects the figure of the Wise and Strange Woman to help elucidate the resultant ambiguity. What is fascinating about this particular feminist approach to the Samson saga is that it builds on Bal's suggestion that "Woman represents the Other who gives access to the symbolic order" (*Lethal Love*, p. 60), which is itself a reworking of Lacan's pronouncement that it is the Father ("*le nom/?non? du père*") that is the desired source of such access (Lacan's conceptualization of "*le nom du père*" in fact manifests itself as "*le non du père*"; in other words, the creation/naming of the Law with which the Father is always credited in fact resolves itself as the [patriarchal] creation of prohibition. For more on this, see Tony Tanner, "Julie and 'La Maison Paternelle,'" in Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed., *The Family in Political Thought* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982], pp. 96–124. Tanner's article is based on Foucault's "Le non du père," in *Critique*, March 1962, pp. 195–209. Foucault argues that the Father's ability to maintain the "non" hinges upon his identification with the Law that he both names and which names him as its authority). Neither Bal nor Camp lose sight of the androcentric view of the universe present in the biblical text, while continuing to emphasize the often-ambiguous manner in which the text presents power and human relationships within the shifting landscape of politics and personal identity. We may add that one such example that has received rather little attention is Samson's remark, "[H]ad you not plowed with my heifer, you would not have discovered my riddle" (Judges 14:18). Most critics read this as a (typical) misogynistic response on Samson's part. On the other hand, the image of plowing—of exploiting another creature for one's own material enrichment—may have been

marriage to the Timnite woman appears to have the potential to mediate the deep cultural differences between the Israelite and Philistine peoples, Samson's persistent riddling challenges the oppressive Philistine authority that devalues¹⁹ the character and identity of Israelite nationhood. Thus, Samson is the focal point of anxiety as the tensions inherent in the categories of nation, religion, family, and belief play themselves out in the text. While theoretically the riddle has the potential to serve as the locus of negotiation between two disparate groups, the riddles in the Samson story do not actually serve this peaceful function at all. Instead, they reflect and even exacerbate the pressures rumbling just beneath the surface. These tensions manifest themselves in diverse ways and are not restricted to the obvious dissonance between the Philistines and the Israelites. Rather, the riddles expose the ongoing interrogation that Samson conducts regarding the accepted truths of his own culture, and reveal his own—albeit idiosyncratic—notion of what constitutes salvation.

4. THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

Samson's first reported excursion as an adult is one that bursts boundaries: he seeks marriage with a Philistine woman. To his parents' protests that there surely is no dearth of Israelite girls for him to marry, Samson responds only that he has chosen the girl that he wants, for "she is right in my eyes."²⁰ While at a certain level this episode may be seen as an instance of youthful rebellion, it can also be viewed as an attempt by Samson to determine the measure and limits of national exclusivity. To what extent is national uniqueness determined by exogamous restrictions? At what point does physical propinquity²¹ make social isolation impossible? Can moral and religious independence be maintained in a

Samson's way of acknowledging Philistine abuse of one of their own, just for reasons of gender. For another nuanced view of feminist analysis and the ambiguity of the biblical text, see Carol Smith, "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 76 (1997), pp. 45–57 and "Delilah: A Suitable Case for (Feminist) Treatment?" in Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

¹⁹ This is expressed in the biblical text by the use of the word *moshel*, which connotes oppressive rule against the wishes of the subjected group (cf. Malbim's exegesis of Genesis 37:8).

²⁰ Judges 14:3.

²¹ The text in Judges reveals that various Canaanite nations still remain even after the Israelite conquest of Canaan (Judges 1:27–36).

situation of complete social integration?²² To what degree does personal feeling (love) mitigate the demand for national exclusivity? To be sure, the text does not overtly frame the issues along these lines; the narrative itself hastens to point out that these seemingly bizarre requests on Samson's part are actually part of God's plan—although, as we will later see, careful parsing of the relevant verse leaves unclear the identity of the plan's originator, and the extent and nature of the plan itself. To modern eyes, the fact that Samson appears ready to forgo these long-held sanctions of marital endogamy and is prepared to look among strangers for a bride indicates that the Samson narrative also explores issues that continue to challenge modern theorists and practitioners of nationalism. The latter might advocate the positive expression of inclusive and multiple nationalities under conditions where land is scarce. At the same time, the denouement of the Samson narrative reveals that crossing borders, whether or not these are clearly demarcated, often means “going over the line,” and thus carries with it undesirable consequences of its own. Arbitrary violence easily overtakes relatively innocent people, who remain unaware of the larger issues at stake against which they figure merely as pawns. In the end, the Samson narrative warns against easily traversing received lines of demarcation to integrate with other groups, no matter what the motivation.

The consequences of crossing boundaries manifest themselves in a conversation that appears at first glance to be benign, but whose resolution foreshadows a later interchange (with Delilah) that will result in Samson's capture by the Philistines. This first discussion takes place between Samson and his Timnite bride, when Samson refuses to divulge the solution to the riddle with which he has challenged the Philistines. Closer analysis of the conversation between Samson and his new wife reveals a level of discourse that is remarkably disconnected, not just on the personal level (she pesters him), but also on the logical one. This is also evident in the internal rationale of the statements made by Samson's wife herself:

²² Cf. particularly Joshua 24:14–21, where Joshua warns that the Israelites must be exclusive in their worship of God. In his speech to the leaders and elders of the tribes, Joshua warns the Israelites against accepting any of the neighboring nations' social or religious mores (Joshua 23:7). The biblical text in Deuteronomy (a particularly potent example is Deuteronomy 7:1–11) insists that the only way to ensure national solidarity and unity of purpose with God is to adhere to the received endogamous strictures. In this connection, the apparent counterexample of Ruth, a Moabite who marries into the Israelite nation and is credited with being the ancestress of King David (Ruth 4:17, 18–22) actually serves to reinforce this point, as the text in Ruth openly records Ruth's acceptance of the Israelite strictures and way of life (Ruth 1:16) before her marriage to Boaz (Ruth 4:13).

And Samson's wife wept before him, and said, "You do but hate me, and do not love me; you have propounded a riddle to my compatriots, but have not told it to me." And he said to her, "Behold I have not told it to my mother and father and shall I tell it to you?"²³

The interchange between Samson and his wife seems to focus on a disconnected series of issues: she weeps because she thinks Samson hates her since he hasn't revealed to her the riddle's solution. Samson is amazed that she considers herself a sufficiently intimate relation of his to be privy to this information, especially since he hasn't relayed this information to his parents either. The disjunction here is between competing concepts of intimacy and privacy, and the proper boundaries, if such exist, between them. In other words, the central question is: at what point does a socially recognized form of intimacy (marriage, for example) mandate the erasure of lines that delineate the intimate sphere vouchsafed only to the self, in other words, privacy? Samson's wife would contend that the relationship of marriage precludes privacy for its participants. Samson's view, revealed in his response, is that different relationships require different measures of closeness, and that there is no privileged sphere of intimacy with immutable demands. Thus, the intimacy of marriage does not mean that there will be no secrets, or riddles in this case, between its partners; and it does not necessarily preclude (perhaps greater) loyalty or intimacy toward one's own parents.

The divergent views that Samson and his wife hold regarding the implications of the marital bond are further explicated in the words chosen by Samson's wife in her first statement on this issue: Samson engaged her fellow Philistines in a riddle but did not reveal its solution to her. She concludes from this that Samson does not love her, but rather hates her. Interestingly, she states the conclusion before the facts that motivate this conclusion,²⁴ giving the impression that she is dominated by her emotions. In addition, when parsed logically, the statements that she makes do not follow: Why does Samson's withholding the riddle's solution from her betoken his hatred? After all, Samson had not told the other Philistines the solution either. The conclusion that follows from the context of her statement is that the other Philistines at least were invited to participate in Samson's riddle dialogue; in other words, they are part of the conversation. His wife, on the other hand, is excluded, and it is this exclusion

²³ Judges 14:16; my translation.

²⁴ In Judges 14:16, Samson's wife starts off by claiming that Samson doesn't love her, and only then mentions the riddle in which her fellow Philistines (but not she) take part.

that she equates with lack of love and even hatred.²⁵ This unstated assumption is the basis for Samson's explicit response to his wife: I did not reveal the riddle's solution to my parents either. They too are excluded, and (since I certainly love them—although these words are missing from Samson's response) it does not therefore follow that love must be equated with constant inclusion.

At this level, the conversation seems to reach an impasse. What makes this dialogue of more than theoretical interest is that there is more at stake than a philosophical evaluation of a relationship or even the identity of the winner of Samson's challenge, with its prize of thirty sheets and thirty changes of clothes.²⁶ Indeed, Samson's wife has received a threat from her fellow Philistines, who inform her that she and her father's house will be burnt if she does not inform them of the riddle's solution.²⁷ The logic in this seemingly inapposite consequence, for what is not a specific action but rather the absence of a desired outcome, is terrifyingly simple and belies the apparent ease with which Philistine and Israelite society are supposedly integrated. The Philistines make this connection clear when they accuse Samson's wife of having brought them to the marriage festivities in order to chase them out (of their land holdings and dominant economic position). In the Philistines' reading of events, the supposedly benign celebration of a wedding marking the union of two people and two distinct social and religious groupings is really an excuse for the economic exploitation²⁸ of one (the stronger Philistines) by the other (the weaker Israelites).²⁹ According to this understanding of the passage, the Philistines may be seen as blaming Samson's wife for having engendered the chain of events that places them in potential danger of failing to answer the riddle, and thus of losing items of monetary value (the sheets and the changes of clothing). Following this logic, they can feel justified in threatening the Timnite woman and her family with a fiery death if

²⁵ The equivalence that she draws is well understood by minority groups in the Western world, where exclusion is often the weapon of disempowerment. Samson's response, on the other hand (and it must be remembered that culturally, Samson is not of the Western world), attempts to negotiate this issue by arguing that exclusion does not always carry with it connotations of disempowerment. He argues that sometimes, not being included means just that and nothing more.

²⁶ Judges 14:12–13.

²⁷ Ibid. 14:15.

²⁸ The text (Judges 14:15) uses the verb *horish*, which connotes chasing another out of his or her possessions. In this reading of the verse, the Philistines may be seen as blaming Samson's wife for having engendered the chain of events that put them in potential danger of failing to solve the riddle and thus losing items of monetary value.

²⁹ Cf. the commentary of R. David Kimhi (Radak) on Judges 14:15.

she does not reveal the riddle's solution to them. In this scheme, Samson's wife seems to serve the function of a Trojan horse.

Samson's wife defies this appellation. She insists on her overriding fidelity to her nation of origin, and, as she remains physically in her father's house even after her marriage to Samson, her patrilocal conception of marriage works to ensure this ordering of loyalties.³⁰ She openly alludes to this by referring to the Philistines as "my people," ironically demanding that Samson privilege the marriage bond with her over all other connections in his own life.³¹ For Samson's wife, his marriage to her entails the loss of his social and political individuality; henceforth, all loyalties must be to her clan and people. As far as she is concerned, Samson possesses no parallel reciprocal right regarding the primacy of his own social background and identity. Still, it is possible to excuse the Timnite woman's one-sided view of the primacy of her social origins by pointing out that she is put into a frightening position. When her life is threatened, it is indeed understandable that her own identity, and the method by which she thinks she can safeguard her life, become overriding concerns for her. In context, then, the fact that the Timnite woman does not necessarily make the most morally reasoned choice,³² or indeed the one that the reader of the text might consider morally preferable, fades into the shadow of the stark terror she faces.

Samson, however, is subject to no such fright. Indeed, one of the motifs of the Samson narrative is that he evinces no fear. Even when at the

³⁰ In *Death and Dissymmetry*, Mieke Bal argues that the narrative of Judges presupposes and masks the social system of marriage changing from patrilocal to virilocal residence (pp. 80–93). Certainly taking note of these two models of marital residence elucidates the tensions evident in different sets of married couples. In terms of the historical development that she posits in her reading of the book of Judges, however, Bal fails to take into account the stylistic analysis undertaken here that calls into question the strictly chronological composition of the book of Judges (see note 84 below).

³¹ Judges 14:16.

³² In strictly logical terms, the Timnite woman has another set of options beyond the two offered to her by her countrymen: to refuse the duality of the choices offered to her by the Philistines, and to invoke the aid of a third party (such as Samson, who immediately comes to mind) in order to avoid the stark choices and the accompanying set of consequences outlined by the Philistines (that the Timnite woman discovers the solution to Samson's riddle means that she also is aware of the previous set of circumstances that had given rise to the terms of the riddle, circumstances which themselves reveal the great extent of Samson's physical power). Thus, it can be argued that the natural reservations against involving Samson—in light of the Philistines threatening her and her father with death if she fails to reveal Samson's riddle—do not apply, because Samson's knowledge of the real circumstances behind her wish to discover his secret would arouse his natural sympathies against the Philistines. In addition, Samson's great physical strength (which is an integral part of the special set of circumstances giving rise to his riddle) would stand the Timnite woman in good stead against possible vengeance by her Philistine compatriots.

total mercy of the Philistines in the temple of Dagon, he manages to conquer what must have been a considerable amount of despair to achieve a certain victory over them. Thus, while it is possible to find an excuse for the Timnite woman's lack of moral acuity, no such rationale justifies Samson's inability to interpret the situation around him. Samson is deaf to his wife's verbal tone. He is not cognizant of her real motivation (even though it is alluded to in her careful choice of words), perhaps because he is unaware of the implications of his own response to his wife regarding intimacy and privacy. Samson fails to recognize that the ramifications of his personal situation go beyond the personal sphere and embrace the political arena as well. The question of Samson's wife—what is the solution to your riddle?—itself becomes the riddle by which Samson is stumped, because he does not recognize the political implications of revealing his personally held secret.

To be sure, Samson had already exhibited a singular lack of sensitivity when it came to understanding the political implications of choices in his personal life. When his parents remonstrate with him on the unsuitability of intermarriage with the Philistines, they identify the Philistines as *arel[im]*, meaning uncircumcised. Although the usage of this particular locution may seem to indicate nothing more than the notation of a physical marker, the parents' citation of this particular term is fraught with meaning. The term *arel* recalls with special force the biblical episode in which Abraham is commanded to differentiate himself physically from his neighbors in preparation for the birth of Isaac, the event that would mark the establishment of the Abrahamic clan as a nation of its own.³³ Their focused terminology reveals that Samson's parents are displeased with Samson's choice, but not on the grounds of idiosyncratic taste or preference. Rather, they instinctively react to the larger issues of national identity that lie at the core of this action of apparently exclusively personal import. Their disappointment is revealed by their incredulous questioning—like Samson, they are aware that it is not the lack of available Israelite women that motivates Samson in his choice of a Philistine woman to marry—and also recalls the unusual circumstances surrounding Samson's birth.

For his parents, Samson's national duty is obvious even before he is born. The first chapter of the Samson narrative describes Manoah's wife as "barren, and bore not,"³⁴ which implicitly identifies her with Sarah,

³³ Genesis 17: 4–19. See also note 22 above.

³⁴ Source-critical commentaries often impute the apparent redundancy of this text (if she is barren, obviously she has not given birth) to two differing sources for the finished form of the redacted text. On this, see, for example, Robert Alter, "Samson Without

Abraham's wife.³⁵ By contrasting their son's selection of a foreign spouse with the national exclusivity and endogamous patterns of marriage championed by the Abrahamic clan, Samson's parents reveal their profound disappointment in their son's choice. With her own individual situation recalling that of the matriarchal ancestress of the Israelites, Samson's mother had been able to remain confident in the divine messenger's prediction of her son's redeeming destiny until this moment of directed choice on the part of her now-adult son. At this point, Samson seems to repudiate the values that the founding members of the Israelite nation had embodied and, by implication, all that the circumstances of his birth had appeared to promise.

Samson's parents' implicit identification with the larger national destiny of the Abrahamic clan thus serves to rebuke Samson for failing to live up to both his national heritage, and his own prophetically-directed destiny. For his parents, and for countless readers of the biblical text, Samson's actions, and indeed his entire existence, represent a riddle. How can a savior flout the very laws enshrined by the legal code of his nation? How can a person who seems to disregard the methods (as enshrined in the largely endogamous marriage laws) by which this nation historically had maintained its own notion of national identity and exclusivity, be heralded as the savior of that same nation? More generally, how can salvation be achieved at all, if the protagonists of the story seem remarkably unaware of the larger historical forces shaping their destiny; or if they willfully disregard fundamental aspects of their national identity? This point regards not just Samson, but the entire Israelite nation as well: this is the one episode of foreign oppression recounted in the book of Judges when the Israelites do *not* beseech God for salvation.³⁶ In that context, why is deliverance predicted for that particular era in which Samson is judge?

We begin to answer these questions by starting with a reexamination of Samson's riddle(s). Instead of emphasizing just the structural

Folklore," in Susan Niditch, ed., *Text and Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 48. On the other hand, the midrashic reading is sensitive to the linguistic complexities of the text, and thereby discovers new information in the apparent redundancy: it is not just that Manoah's wife had not *yet* given birth (*lo yalda*); rather, she was incapable of *ever* giving birth (*akara*). Cf. *Midrash Bahayai* (Jerusalem: Blum, 1988), s.v. Genesis 11:30, p. 71.

³⁵ In Genesis 11:29.

³⁶ The national passivity of the Israelites here—in the one instance recorded in Judges where the Israelites do not beseech God for relief from their enemies (Judges 13:1)—is reflected on the personal level by the quiescence of Manoah and his wife who, unlike their erstwhile childless progenitors Abraham and Sarah, do *not* pray for children (Judges 13:2).

understanding of the riddle and the way in which it can destabilize heretofore fixed relationships, we will focus now on the content of Samson's riddle(s) and the discourse that it engenders between him, his Philistine companions, and the Israelites.

5. RIDDLING THE SOLUTION

We now return to the first riddle:

*Out of the devourer came forth food, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.*³⁷

Commentators and critics alike have been puzzled by the images presented in this riddle. That riddles may possess meaning beyond the structural functions of their words is an assumption contained in the wording of this riddle, and a device used to push the plot forward. Although there are critics who classify Samson's riddle as a "neck riddle" and therefore not as an "authentic" riddle,³⁸ rigorous analysis demonstrates that, on the contrary, Samson's riddle functions very much at the center of the narrative and indeed holds the clue to the meaning of the entire story.³⁹ Several major elements distinguish Samson's riddle from the typical "neck riddle." First, unlike the typical "neck riddle," whose solution serves to bring the events of the story to a final (and more or less satisfactory) close, Samson's riddle unleashes a complication of events which threatens to derail the entire enterprise toward which Samson's life had been geared from conception onward. Also, the prevalence of mysteries, or riddles, that entangle all major episodes of Samson's career and that make his actions appear both arbitrary and self-destructive, indicates that riddles hold the clue to understanding Samson both as an individual and in his role as a political leader. In addition, the argument that Samson's riddle can be solved only with reference to and knowledge of the bizarre discovery of honey in the lion's chest cavity makes little sense in a story whose personal relationships are characterized by complicated posturing and rarely by univocal shades of meaning. In separate articles, Camp and Crenshaw both contend that in the context of the wedding festivities, Samson's riddle is eminently solvable: the riddle's combination of strong and sweet naturally gives rise to thoughts

³⁷ Judges 14:14; my translation.

³⁸ Cf. note 7 above.

³⁹ In this context, Bal's insistence that the riddle functions as the *mise en abyme* of the Samson narrative together with her denigration of the riddle as being "inauthentic" strikes one as contradictory.

of love, or sex.⁴⁰ Crenshaw even claims that the ancient Philistines must have shared a common fund of cultural images with the neighboring Israelites and so would have been able in all likelihood to decipher the riddle posed to them by Samson.

However, despite this proposed commonality of cultural symbols, careful analysis of the text reveals that in fact the Philistines do not solve the riddle that Samson poses to them. To be sure, the Philistines offer a response that appears to have solved the riddle, but their answer corresponds neither to the actual occurrence recounted in the text prior to the wedding festivities, nor to the actual content of the riddle. In their answer to Samson's implied request for the citation of a specific occurrence, the Philistines do not, in fact, describe any particular event. Instead, they set forth their own images of strength and sweetness, which Samson then accepts as the riddle's solution. Rather than solve the riddle, the Philistines simply react to the images of "strong" and "sweet" first offered by Samson in his riddle.

But Samson does not ask about strength or sweetness. Instead, he demands that his interlocutors describe a situation where sweetness results from strength and where food is derived from a devourer or eater. That the Philistines neglect the actual structure of Samson's riddle and ignore the element of dynamic action at its core reveals that they have missed entirely the true import of the riddle. Samson's use of the verb *yatza* (*yod, tzadi, alef*)—which can be translated as "result" or "become"—suggests that he is meditating on the nature of human existence itself. Is it possible, he wonders, for strength to be transformed into sweetness and for a devourer to become a food product that is itself eaten? In other words, can theoretically antagonistic antinomies successfully be resolved in real life?

Read in this way, Samson's riddle can be understood as examining the possibilities of change and mediation in a world that, by actualizing

⁴⁰ This has been noted by Claudia V. Camp and Carole R. Fontaine, "The Words of the Wise and Their Riddles," in Niditch, ed., *Text and Tradition*, pp. 141–142; Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed*, pp. 112–117; J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 82. In "Riddles, Trickster, and Strange Women," Camp extends the list to include domesticity, desire, and women (pp. 132–133). Naftali H. Tur-Sinai, "Samson and His Riddle," in *Considerations on the Book of Judges* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1966) [Hebrew], presents another approach altogether, and suggests that in fact one answer to this riddle of the identification of the strong and the sweet is the Torah. He derives this from a set of linguistic parallels, noting that in Hebrew the word for "lion" and the word for "honey" (albeit a lesser-known locution of the latter term in Song of Songs 5:1) derives from the same root of *ari* (lion). As for the identification of these two with the Torah, Tur-Sinai points out that in Aramaic, a language spoken early on by far-flung kin of the Abrahamitic clan (Laban, living in Mesopotamia, is just one example of a relative speaking Aramaic), the word for Torah is *Oraita*, which derives from the root *ari*.

all options in their most extreme incarnations, seems intent on self-destruction. In this context, Samson's search for a wife among the Philistine women can be seen as an attempt to mediate this radicalization, perhaps in an effort to establish a new combination that would work to diffuse the Philistine threat; or perhaps because he simply could not find a bride to his liking from his own people that would be able to aid him in his effort to begin the process of salvation. The riddle, then, presents what Samson was seeking: sweetness (a personal companion) from the strong (the Philistines). The text reveals this effort to be doomed.

But the riddle may also be read as a meditation on styles of leadership.⁴¹ Leadership may present itself as strong and unforgiving, much in the manner of the Philistines, who deprive the Israelites of any type of metal implement so that they cannot even cultivate their own soil.⁴² In addition, leadership may look mighty and uncompromising, but its reality may be sweet. Its primary concern may be to care for its people and their welfare. Indeed, Samson manifests this type of concern for his people even when they are ready to surrender him to the Philistines. He agrees to be ignominiously bound and handed over; he asks only that they don't physically harm him.⁴³ In this reading, then, it turns out that the riddler and the riddle are one: the answer to the riddle is Samson himself.

The situation becomes even more complex, however, because Samson does not recognize that he is the answer to his own riddle. In effect, then, Samson has stumped himself. This explains why Samson remains unaware of the implications of his personal decisions for the larger political and social framework against which he operates. It also explains why he himself is unaware of his strength⁴⁴ and of the true source of his power. When his hair is shorn, Samson thinks that he can still escape the Philistines. The words he uses are significant: *etze kepa'am bepa'am* ("I will go out as other times before").⁴⁵ The use of the three-letter root *yod, tzadi, alef*—to leave, go out, or result—recalls the verbal construction of the riddle with which Samson had taunted the Philistines. Samson's inability to recognize himself as both the subject of and solution to his own riddle foreshadows his incapacity to wrest himself from the Philistine

⁴¹ For much of what follows I am indebted to the suggestions of Sarah Rosen in reaction to the lecture in which some of these ideas were first presented.

⁴² The text in I Samuel 13:19 describes the political, military, and economic oppression perpetuated by the Philistines even as late as the period of Saul's monarchy.

⁴³ Judges 15:12–13.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 16:9.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 16:20.

trap in which he is enmeshed.⁴⁶ One might even argue that this turn of events is indicated in the riddle. This aspect of the riddle's meaning is contained in the much-ignored first section of Samson's riddle (to which part the Philistines never respond): "from the devourer came forth food" (Judges 14:14).⁴⁷ While it is possible to argue that the double imagery of the riddle has one static (or iconic) referent only,⁴⁸ our reading of the solution to the riddle as being Samson himself enables us to deepen the dynamic complexity of that image. It is Samson, appearing as the "devourer" (meaning, the aggressor) throughout the Samson saga, who actually winds up captured by the Philistines, and being the subject of their mirth (that is, "food" for their collective appetites) in the temple of Dagon.⁴⁹ In that context, perhaps it is less painful in the end for Samson to be mystified by his own riddle.

Samson's mystification, however, can also be viewed in another context: as an integral part of Samson's own awareness of the limits and imperfections of politics. Samson has certainly been roundly criticized

⁴⁶ A riddle, as Handelman has written, "is a process that must move from 'here' to 'there'... any riddle presents this movement as puzzling and problematic... as long as no solution is found, the problem remains impenetrable, *the protagonist is trapped in the riddle...*" (Handelman, "Traps of Transformation," p. 43; emphasis mine).

⁴⁷ See also Yair Zakovich, *The Life of Samson* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), p. 116. [Hebrew]

⁴⁸ This is the position of Philip Nel in "The Riddle of Samson," *Biblica* 66 (1985), pp. 534–545, esp. p. 539.

⁴⁹ In this connection, the understanding of Samson as a "loose cannon" who unleashes limitless violence on a group of unarmed civilians is a serious misreading of the text that disregards repeated textual evidence (Judges 13:1, 14:4) of Philistine domination and oppression of the Israelites. Taking these statements into account, the willingness of the Israelites to deliver Samson into the hands of the Philistines does not therefore reflect their "relief" at ridding themselves of such a "loose cannon" but is rather an expression of their perceived vulnerability to the Philistine reading of events, since the Philistines, by virtue of their oppressive rule over the Israelites, possess the power to determine the acceptable and unacceptable versions of the "truth" of events (Judges 15:11; the term used is again *moshel*, denoting aggressive force on the part of the Philistines). It is in that sense that the Israelites remonstrate with Samson: Do you not know that the Philistines are oppressing us and that your actions in killing several of them have rebounded onto us, potentially resulting in an even greater loss of Israelite life? Finally, in terms of the Philistine presence in the House of Dagon, the text carefully notes, "and all the Philistine [military and political] leadership was there" (Judges 16:27), as was probably to be expected on a holiday of religious and political import. Thus, Samson's action in "bringing down the house" can be seen as a calculated attempt on Samson's part to destroy the leadership of the nation that was oppressing his own. In that context, the accompanying deaths of the other civilians in the building underlines a theme that is present in the Samson narrative from the beginning: crossing borders. As we have seen, this idea can have creative implications, but can also engender arbitrary violence against people who are not fully cognizant of the larger issues at play.

for his lack of statesmanship,⁵⁰ but it is possible to view the “messy” or unstatesmanlike quality of Samson’s leadership as Samson’s own commentary on the true nature of political life.⁵¹ In his capacity as leader, Samson unmasks the received pieties of leadership, to the effect that it is always possible to devise political solutions that are morally perfect. The moral and political ambiguities of Samson’s solutions characterize the realities of politics as situations of imperfect closure. As such, they prefigure the flawed situations that would mark the Israelite political system even at its height under David and Solomon. Thus the Samson narrative reveals politics to be characterized less by the constraints of absolute force⁵² than by the actions of the highly imperfect human beings that populate its structures, a situation that demands our sympathy, if not our complete understanding.

Samson’s general lack of awareness regarding the forces that propel his destiny reflects the general tenor of human existence. Indeed, Samson is not the only person in the narrative to be thus caught unawares. His father Manoah seems to be the prototype for the hopelessly clueless individual. Already at the very beginning of Samson’s life and story, Manoah does not perceive the uniqueness of the individual who informs his wife of the impending birth of their son. He asks for a repetition of the special instructions that are given to his wife, and he insists on inviting the divine messenger for a meal without realizing that the angel would not be able to eat with them.⁵³ Even Samson’s mother, who at the beginning

⁵⁰ See note 2 above.

⁵¹ In this sense, Samson’s understanding of power may be not unlike that of Machiavelli in *The Prince*. There, Machiavelli analyzes the minimal expectations for a leader to be able to retain his power. Machiavelli expresses no illusions about a leader being a perfect being, either morally or strategically. The important point, he emphasizes, is to “avoid the public disgrace of those vices that would lose him his state” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 15). Consequently, a ruler must learn “how not to be good.” This is not meant to imply any hedonistic celebration of evil, but rather to emphasize the centrality of pursuing the necessary imperative to maintaining power. In the end, Machiavelli concludes that the art of politics is to learn to “accept the least bad as good” (Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. 21), due not to any mistaken equivalence of the moral standards of good and evil, but rather as the reflection of a practical understanding of what is possible.

⁵² In Anthony Low’s understanding, portrayed in Low, *The Blaze of Noon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), this is Milton’s portrayal of the Philistine nation: “Philistia’s rulers are destroyed because they have arrogated power to themselves... in particular the policy of tyrannizing over the Jewish nation, holding its people in captivity, and attempting to force or seduce them from their duties to the God of Israel” (p. 122).

⁵³ The text in Judges tells us that “Manoah did not know that he was an angel of God” (Judges 13:16). While it is possible to classify this comment as merely informational, the remark of the Talmud leaves no doubt as to the quality of his intelligence.

of the narrative is the only person to interpret correctly the substance as well as the implications of the angel's message,⁵⁴ falls prey to doubts about Samson's choice of a foreign bride and fails to recognize the historic hand of God that she had correctly identified many years earlier. To be sure, it is not difficult to understand why she does not see divine guidance in everyday affairs: the text informs us that the divine spirit influenced Samson only intermittently.⁵⁵ In these circumstances, how is it possible to know when unusual efforts are called for or not? How can one differentiate between extraordinary circumstances and the overwhelming force of personal desires?

The story of Samson reveals that human beings often cannot tell the difference. The text's portrayal of the limited state of human knowledge⁵⁶ demonstrates that human beings often work in circumstances whose appearances mask the truth, and therefore, they are frequently misled regarding the nature of the reality that lies just beneath the surface.⁵⁷ But the Samson narrative takes these constraints one step further. Human

The statement there is very short: "Manoah was an ignoramus" (*Babylonian Talmud*, Brachot 61a).

⁵⁴ On the other hand, Manoah's wife understands immediately the import of the Nazirite strictures that devolve upon her and the unborn child (she needs no repetition of the instructions). Similarly, when her husband says he fears they will die because they have seen a heavenly creature, she logically proves to him that this would not happen: "If God had meant to kill us," she tells him, "he would not have accepted our sacrifices nor shown us all of these things" (Judges 13:23). Robert Polzin's position then, in *Polzin, Moses and the Deuteronomist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 184, that Manoah knows while his wife does not understand, appears difficult to sustain on the basis of the textual evidence. Similarly, Bal's contention in *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 74, that Manoah's wife (in terms of her function as wife and mother) is erased because she remains the nameless prize tugged between the (impotent) husband and all-powerful father, does not take into account that the beginning and the end of the Samson narrative are marked by the awareness of his Nazirite status "from the mother's belly" (Judges 13:5; 16:17; emphasis mine). Crucially, those statements appear when Samson's savior status is prophesied and when he consciously identifies his uniqueness in a conversation with Delilah.

⁵⁵ Judges 13:25. The root *pa'am* (*peh, ayin, nun*) only rarely occurs as a verb in the Bible. Various commentators understand its meaning as "from time to time" (Rashi) or "irregularly," imitating the movement of a *pa'amon* or bell (Rabag).

⁵⁶ Stein's *Heroic Knowledge* presents a different understanding of the role of knowledge in the Samson narrative. According to Stein, Samson's "heroic knowledge" allows him, through "the terrible knowledge of guilt and... suffering" to rise above individual despair and act in affirmation of his religious beliefs and national identity. In Stein's words, "despair convert[s] itself into a necessary transition to humility" (p. 210), which in turn brings with it "a heightened vitality and clarity of vision" (p. 208; cf. on this topic esp. pp. 206–215).

⁵⁷ In Aviva Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 210–213, the author highlights the theme of "not knowing" as a motif indicating human limits.

beings are restricted not just by their limited ability to correctly evaluate the information made available to them. In addition, they themselves adversely affect the outcomes of their own projects by deliberately minimizing the knowledge that they make available to their own people, and even to their own families. Samson purposely does not tell his parents of his miraculous encounter with the lion or of the resultant provenance of the honey; certainly none of Samson's women openly reveal their own arrangements with the Philistines. Ironically then, the riddle that appears to be a perverse use of language, obfuscating instead of communicating clearly, in fact precisely mirrors the true state of human language and of human perceptions as they actually occur. The uncanny and misleading language used in the riddle exactly imitates the nature of dialogue in the entire Samson story, as the surface exchanges of words yield no true meetings of the mind. Samson and his parents, no less than Samson and his women, hold conversations, but little of import gets transmitted between the two sides. In terms of the quality of discourse, the Samson narrative reveals that the nature of its interpersonal relationships—on the personal level between parents and children, among the partners within a linked couple, or on the communal level between leader and people—is anomic instead of responsive. At the end of the Samson narrative, a national discourse among the Israelites has yet to be established.

The perceived dissonances in the Samson story stem from the disjunction that develops between the structural role that Samson plays in the narrative—he is the leader who is destined to begin to save the Israelites—and the content of that role which, at the very least, must include the partial revelation of salvation to the people that he will at least begin to save. Complicating the matter still further, as we have seen, Samson himself at times appears curiously unaware of the larger implications and goals of his own actions. At one level, as already noted, this is explained by the indeterminate quality of divine influence on Samson. The text references this negatively, recording the moment when Samson is unaware that the spirit of God is no longer with him. For the reader of the text, it is logical to conclude that if Samson does not realize when God has left him, it follows that he also does not know when God is with him.⁵⁸ The intermittent manner in which God's spirit descends upon Samson is figured in an unusual way in the text itself, in an elliptical verse that may be read as a meditation on the extent of divine intervention in human history. The verse itself appears unexceptional at first glance,

⁵⁸ Judges 16:20.

seeming to explain why Samson's desire to marry a Philistine woman is misunderstood by his parents:

And his father and mother did not know that this was from God, as he sought a pretext against the Philistines; for at that time the Philistines had dominion over Israel.⁵⁹

This verse seems to mean that Samson's parents do not appreciate that Samson's desire to marry the Philistine woman derives from God, and that God had set up the situation so that Samson would seek an excuse to aggravate matters with the Philistines, who at that time had "dominion over Israel." However, careful attention to the language in the verse reveals that the antecedent to, and therefore the referent for, the word "he" is actually not "Samson," but "God." Read in that way, the verse delivers another, or additional, message: God is seeking a pretext against the Philistines. He is setting up a situation in which Samson will marry a foreigner in order to bring to a head a predicament in which he, God, might intervene.⁶⁰

The image of God debating whether or not and in what measure to intervene in human affairs is both mystifying and energizing. The biblical text portrays God as being held hostage, as it were, to human imagination and actions: God is waiting for the Philistines to act in a certain fashion so that he may, in turn, respond in a way that would ease the situation of Philistine domination in Israel. The biblical casting of God's projected actions in this relational manner—as opposed to the more conventional portrayal of divine actions as absolutely autonomous—implies a trenchant questioning of the nature and extent of divine action in human history. Interestingly, this text is not the first to question elliptically the nature of God's actions. The Midrash records that in the course of Moses' ⁶¹remonstrations with God about the ramifications of his mission to Pharaoh to free the enslaved Israelites in Egypt, he says to God: "I know that you will save them [that is, the Israelites], but what of those set under the building!"⁶² In this midrashic reading, Moses does not deny the efficacy

⁵⁹ Judges 14:4.

⁶⁰ Here the correct translation of the term *mevakesh* is important. The English word "seeking" conveys some of the tentative quality of the root *bakesh*, which implies in this context that God *might* intervene, but that this divine intervention is not guaranteed.

⁶¹ Cf. Low, *Blaze of Noon*, where the parallel between Moses and Samson is developed. Low argues that Samson, like Moses, performs extraordinary feats as a warning to the Philistine nation to end their enslavement or exploitation of the Israelites (pp. 118–123).

⁶² Exodus Rabba 5:22. The translation is adapted from Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, p. 37. The reference here is to the Israelite children who, in the midrashic recounting of events, were deliberately asphyxiated by the Egyptian taskmasters in the walls of the storage cities that the enslaved Israelites were forced to build for the

of God's future salvation, but questions its ability to redress past moral wrongs. With these words, Moses queries—and perhaps even doubts—the ability of the divine act (at least, this one in particular) to pass beyond the restrictions of time.⁶³ In the Samson narrative, it is not just the extent of God's ability and intervention in human history that is at issue. The nature and exclusivity of Israelite nationhood are likewise questioned and put at stake, and by none other than the person who is supposed to be the instrument of national salvation. The irony of these questions is highlighted by another midrashic text that points to Samson as a failed messianic figure.⁶⁴ In view of the earlier questions advanced by Moses, the paradigmatic figure of salvation, the biblical text appears to suggest that salvation is configured by radical questioning coupled with unswerving devotion to the national good.⁶⁵ Crucially, salvation is not equated with success in any particular national or personal endeavor; neither Moses nor Samson actually complete their respective tasks of salvation. For the Bible, it seems emblematic of salvation that it is never fully attained, and that it never is ascribed to the actions of any one particular individual.

In the more restricted context of the Samson narrative, the indeterminate quality of both the narrative and the discourse that it encompasses also emphasizes the extent to which events are murky and ambiguous. This makes the elucidation of human deeds, as well as of divine actions, a complex activity. In view of the inability of the protagonists even to conceive of or to appreciate the larger forces propelling their destinies, the attention of the reader in arriving at a judgment of these same characters naturally takes on a reflexive cast.⁶⁶ After all, to what extent can we

Egyptians (see the commentaries of *Yalkut Shimoni* and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* cited in Zornberg, *Particulars of Rapture*, pp. 39–40).

⁶³ The succeeding verses of the text do not directly answer Moses' charge (which, as we have already noted, is itself not set forth explicitly in the text), but one may read those verses, which speak of the covenantal promise that God had established with the forefathers of the Israelite nation, as a hint that its fulfillment will result in a new discourse about, and consequent understanding of, past historical events. For more on how discourse can change the understanding and even the reality of past events, see Mira Morgenstern, "Joseph and the Creation of Common Discourse," forthcoming.

⁶⁴ Genesis Rabba 98:14, cited in Gershon Weiss, *Samson's Struggle* (New York: Kol HaYeshiva, 1983).

⁶⁵ The biblical text relates these questions in the context of Moses' concern for the safety of his people. Similarly, the Samson narrative reveals a leader who never demands anything of his people relating to his own comfort; on the contrary, he is willing to be presented ignominiously to the Philistines as a captive in order to avoid Philistine retribution against his people (see note 43 above).

⁶⁶ See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 179–326, esp. pp. 209–213, where the author analyzes the ambiguity of the biblical text, which requires the moral involvement of the reader.

as readers of the text ever be certain that we can evaluate properly the actions of leaders like Samson? Can we be sure that he accomplishes nothing during his twenty-year stewardship? Does he retain his conventional image as an oversexed buffoon lacking in any redemptive value?⁶⁷

6. THE NATION AND THE OTHER

In answering these questions, it is well to consider another aspect of Samson's riddling. This refers not to the content of the riddles themselves, but rather to the riddles' outcomes and the way in which these are utilized. On a superficial level, the consequences of the riddling act seem always to involve a measure of violence, ranging from Samson's killing of thirty Philistines⁶⁸ to his burning of a portion of the Philistine harvest.⁶⁹ While it is easy to attribute this to an overwhelming predilection for violence on Samson's part, this interpretation fails to take seriously Samson's position as judge, itself an office of public stature, as well as the characterization of Samson as savior (and not as strongman) by the divine messenger at the beginning of the Samson narrative.⁷⁰ The aftermath of the riddles, and especially Samson's reaction to the Philistine response to the riddles' consequences, can be more fruitfully understood, and more directly integrated into the thematic topoi of the Samson narrative, if we view them as the demonstrations of the logical reactions to the exploits of each riddle's subject.

In this context, Samson's responses to the Philistines may be considered not just as personal expressions of his fury, but also as practical examples of the ultimate outcome of the Philistine rule of terror over the Israelites. In other words, Samson's seemingly erratic reaction to what he perceives as Philistine trickery illustrates the inherent consequences of the arbitrary violence that the Philistines, by their harsh domination,

⁶⁷ See note 1 above.

⁶⁸ Judges 14:19.

⁶⁹ Judges 15:5.

⁷⁰ See also Low's evaluation in *Blaze of Noon*, p. 186: "Samson's inward suffering, depicted so vividly by Milton, is left by Judges largely to the reader's imagination." On this point it is well to cite Erich Auerbach's mention of the laconic quality of the biblical text in the chapter called "Odysseus' Scar" in his *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), esp. pp. 6–12. Low further notes that "While he mentions only what appears to be a device for personal vengeance, a higher spiritual motivation cannot be ruled out..." (pp. 186–187). Low cites Samson's position as judge and designation as savior as the basis for his conclusion: "As Judge of Israel, Samson has the right to execute vengeance on any who persecute or tyrannize over his nation, attack its religion, or seduce the people from their God. He is... commissioned by God... to bring back her (*sic*) people into the right way" (pp. 193–194). See also notes 49 and 52 above.

perpetrate upon the Israelites. By his actions, Samson invites the Philistines to consider the ways in which their own enforced supremacy over the Israelites⁷¹ may elicit violence on the part of that oppressed nation. But like Samson, the Philistines do not recognize that they too are the subject of the riddles that they fail to solve. Thus, they do not respond to this invitation with intense scrutiny of their own activities.⁷² Instead, they view Samson's frankness as tantamount to a declaration of war by Samson against them, to which end they demand that he be delivered up to them.⁷³ Eventually, the Philistines meet the challenge that Samson poses to them through the machinations of Delilah, by out-riddling the riddler. This enables them to neutralize the threat of violence that Samson presents on the personal level, and thus to subvert the greater logical and national challenge that he embodies.

The Philistines are not the only group that misreads Samson's riddles and the consequences that they engender. The Israelites do not understand Samson's riddles either. To be sure, one may well ask: What riddle does Samson ever ask the Israelites? What is it that they have to misunderstand? And in truth, Samson does not ask them to solve any specific riddle, although in fact the Israelites do face a riddle that Samson poses. The mystery that the Israelites fail to grasp is the same one that eludes Samson: the riddle of Samson himself. The Israelites do not understand the nature of his leadership and the goals toward which he is striving. Interestingly, the Israelites are given the opportunity to compensate for this omission. This is evident when the Philistines demand that the Judaites hand over Samson to them at Ramat Lehi:

Then the Philistine army came up... and ranged themselves against Lehi. And the men of Judah said, "Why have you come up against us?" And they answered, "To bind Samson..." And three thousand men of Judah went to... Eitam and said to Samson, "Do you not know that the Philistines rule over us? What have you done to us?... We have come to bind you that we may give you over to the Philistines." And Samson said to them, "Swear to me that you will not harm me..." And they bound him with two new cords... and they melted off his arms... And he slew one thousand men.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Cf. the terminology of the Judaites in Judges 15:11 and the implications of the verb *moshel* in the Malbim's analysis of Genesis 37:8. See also note 79 below.

⁷² In *Blaze of Noon*, Low argues that the Philistine failure to analyze their own actions explains their defeat by a miraculously revived Samson. See Low, *Blaze of Noon*, pp. 122–123.

⁷³ Judges 15:9–14.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 15:9–15.

Potentially, this situation could have provided an opportunity for the Judaites to reflect on Samson's actions and on their own political situation. It could have afforded them the occasion to think about the meaning of their national existence and to open a collective discourse on the quality of their national life. Instead, the Judaites automatically adopt the Philistine interpretation of events and consign Samson to capture and, for all they know, death. Samson manages to escape the machinations of the Philistines in this instance, but his failure to establish among his people a robust discourse on topics of national import marks his lack of effectiveness as a leader. To be sure, one may note that Samson is not destined ultimately to redeem his people; he is charged only with beginning their salvation. Still, the question naturally arises: why can Samson not even begin to redeem them?

One answer to this question may well be that Samson does not redeem his people—that is, he is not successful in inviting them to join him in a national discourse—because ultimately, as we have already noted, Samson is himself stumped by the riddle that he represents. This may be because Samson's personality appears to defy traditional categories. Samson is the embodiment of strangeness. The biblical text reveals that the social structures among the Israelites and among the Philistines, as well as the realities of political power that form their respective existences, are singularly ill-equipped to deal with the challenges of difference. Samson continually breaches the boundaries of proper social etiquette and of expected political performance. Consequently, Samson's enactment of performative strangeness continues to mystify all of his interlocutors, Israelites and Philistines alike. Even in the contemporary era, which is more cognizant of the political significance and moral justification of difference, modern critical evaluations of Samson have focused on the extent to which the flamboyance of Samson's actions seems to polarize people along the lines of mutually exclusive dualities. In this reading, Samson's alienating actions, which highlight the "otherness" of the adversary, are themselves the problem.⁷⁵ This understanding attributes Samson's failure to a purely

⁷⁵ Bal, in *Lethal Love*, p. 43, expresses the polarization this way: "a tension develops between *own* and *alien*." Exum, in *Fragmented Women*, p. 72, argues that the Samson narrative represents a structuring of reality as "binary opposition." Many critics impute to this what they consider to be the narrative's misogynistic tone. Thus, for Bal, "[T]he Philistines now receive a clear meaning. They represent the feminine. On the other side, and at the end of the episode, is the masculine occupying the arbiter position" (*Lethal Love*, p. 64). Similarly, Exum writes of the "negative image of the foreign woman" (*Fragmented Women*, p. 68), although the account given of the Timnite woman is substantially different from that of Delilah, who is portrayed in the text as an autonomous woman who cuts her own deals with the Philistine chieftains (Judges 16:5).

practical reality: a leader who demonizes and radicalizes his opponents is not a likely candidate to effect salvation.⁷⁶

However, notwithstanding the morally deleterious effect of deliberately rendering people “other,” it is important to note that the category of “otherness” is not displayed in so simplistic a fashion in the text itself. The actual structure of the narrative reveals that the “other” is not automatically demonized as the Philistine enemy because, often, the “other” is the Israelites themselves. On the individual level, the first person to be declared “other” is Samson, who receives Nazirite status even before his birth. The ongoing characteristics of the Nazirite status—the prohibition of ever cutting one’s hair, for example—mean that these differences continue physically to manifest themselves throughout Samson’s life, thus increasing his sense of “otherness” and alienation.⁷⁷ By the same token, the continuing bewilderment of Samson’s parents regarding the actions of their son reveals that even for his parents, Samson remains “other.” Finally, the political situation plays itself out as a deliberate demonization of the “other” by the Philistines, as the Philistines render the Israelites alien in their own land.

Importantly, the sophistication of the Samson narrative is evident in that it does not enact a crude evaluation of “otherness”: it does not automatically declare all manifestations of “other” to be inherently suspect and therefore by definition to defy salvation.⁷⁸ Events in the narrative make

More specifically, Exum writes, “[T]he Philistines are enemies, alien, the other. Women are also enemies, alien, the other. Philistine women are doubly other... the Philistines are permanently identified with otherness... and they appear more negatively in the story because women are their representatives in their most important dealings with Samson...” (*Fragmented Women*, pp. 76, 85).

⁷⁶ This is not to say that polarizing leaders make bad military leaders. On the contrary, history is replete with leaders who excelled in leading their people into battle, encouraging them by demonizing their opponents. Carrying over these attitudes to the postwar structuring of peace, however, often resulted in laying the foundations for the next war (the roots and causes of World War II are the paradigmatic examples of this for the twentieth century). Thus, polarizing leaders by definition cannot bring about salvation.

⁷⁷ In his commentary on Judges, Abravanel describes Samson’s unshorn locks as serving symbolically as Samson’s “cloak of mourning” for the oppression suffered by the Israelites at the hands of the Philistines. Abravanel, *Commentary on the Bible* (Jerusalem: Torah ve-Da’at, 1955), p. 133. [Hebrew]

⁷⁸ A similar distinction underlies the narrative in the book of Ruth. A major source of the tension in the book of Ruth concerns the place of difference in Israelite national life: should it be automatically incorporated or rejected? The varying reactions of the people in Bethlehem to this issue may be read as a range of possible opinions on that subject. In the end, difference retains an important place in the construction of Israelite national life, although it never does receive an absolute moral value, either positive or negative. As in the Samson narrative, the question remains one of context. (In this connection, Exum’s

it clear that difference and sameness are not correspondingly “bad” and “good” characteristics. To the extent that difference may exacerbate tensions, Samson does try to bridge boundaries and resolve differences, even if not always successfully (his marriage with the Timnite woman is one example). Ultimately, the biblical text’s subtle analysis of the various characteristics of difference and sameness emphasizes that each permutation of these elements must be judged in its own context. Seen in that light, the Samson narrative presents both individual and communal existence as enterprises of ongoing moral and political discovery.

In this context, the Samson narrative treats the concept of “otherness” in a distinctly political manner; that is, as central to Samson’s understanding of the integral requirements of leadership. In his role as a leader, Samson operates as “other,” that is to say, in an inexplicable and nontraditional fashion, because by Samson’s era, the problem that he faces—the brutal domination of the Philistines over the Israelites—has become the status quo. As such, the nature of the situation is by definition morally and politically ambiguous. It is not obvious to everyone—or perhaps, even to anyone—who or what the problem is. The text⁷⁹ reports that the Philistines dominate Israel at this time, but this fact is not greeted with universal consternation. In fact, when there is a clash between Samson and the Philistines, the Judaites parrot the Philistine reading of events.⁸⁰ In such a situation, being the recognized savior of the Israelites is not a secure position to occupy.⁸¹ Thus Samson must profile himself as “other”—as different—because he is forced to operate at a time when the meaning of salvation, and even its necessity, is not universally acknowledged. At that level, the very maintenance of the struggle against the Philistines in the face of Israelite quiescence is a great achievement.

remark in *Fragmented Women*, p. 68, that “exceptions [to the negative image of foreign women] like Ruth only prove the rule” overlooks many of the nuances of the biblical text and to a large extent, itself misses the point.) For more on this issue, see my “Ruth and the Sense of Self: Midrash and Difference,” *Judaism* (Spring 1999), pp. 131–145.

⁷⁹ Judges 13:1.

⁸⁰ One could argue that the Judaites, like the Timnite woman, are constrained by Philistine domination, and are obliged to accept the Philistine version of events. Still, if another reading of events (that of Samson, for example) were accepted, they might have engineered an alternate approach to the Philistines, instead of agreeing to hand Samson over to the Philistines exactly as demanded.

⁸¹ In his commentary on the Samson story, Abravanel adduces that as the reason Manoah’s wife did not reveal to her husband that the unborn child would (begin to) deliver the Israelites from Philistine oppression (see Abravanel on Judges 13:5, in Abravanel, *Commentary*, p. 134).

Samson's failure to establish a national discourse that includes and thus unites all the Israelites leads to an intensification of his "otherness." As a result, Samson must devise an alternate method of fighting for Israelite freedom without letting the Philistines discover his true aim. This requires a leader who does not look like a leader, who behaves erratically, in self-directed ways that seem to belie his primary concern for his national task.⁸² Samson therefore chooses to fight an "undercover" revolution for Israelite freedom. This "stealth" insurrection has the advantage of fooling both the Israelites and Philistines regarding the very real political and military changes taking place in their midst, while at the same time protecting the Israelites against the Philistine vindictiveness that they would have suffered⁸³ if the Philistines had perceived any challenge to their domination over the Israelites. Samson operates as a disguised deliverer, as a masked bearer of salvation. By accepting the brunt of Philistine ire upon himself, Samson protects the Israelites, whose contemporary sense of national identity and military knowledge is still quite untested.⁸⁴ In figuring himself as strange (the indeterminacy of the biblical text leaves ambiguous the degree to which Samson specifically intends this result), Samson implicitly runs the risk of alienation from his own people, in order to safeguard their existence on all levels: individual and physical, communal and national.

In this context, the episode of Samson and the Judaites at Eitam or Ramat Lehi is important not only insofar as it reflects the Judaite state of mind, but also for its commentary on the alienation of a leader from his people. The situation is complicated by the fact that in this case, the people do not even recognize Samson as their chief. Instead, they are

⁸² Abravanel remarks that at times, God chooses to act through people who are not perfect (cf. Abravanel on Judges 14:1 in Abravanel, *Commentary*, p. 136). In this regard, Abravanel is sensitive to the amorphous quality of the Samson narrative, an aspect that has received attention from modern commentators as well. Thus, for example, Crenshaw (*Samson: Secret Betrayed*, p. 73) points out that the designation of a name in the Samson story does not necessarily connote positive importance (e.g., Delilah), while the absence of such designation does not necessarily signify a lack of importance (cf., for example, Samson's mother). Likewise, Sternberg (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*) draws attention to the indeterminacy of the biblical text (pp. 176–179, 228, 326).

⁸³ The measure of Philistine vindictiveness is revealed by their treatment of the one prisoner that does fall into their power. Philistine treatment of Samson reveals not a decision to dispose of a feared enemy (in that case, the Philistines simply would have killed him), but rather a conscious effort to humiliate and torture a person who represented an idea that they deemed culturally inferior. That is why the grand celebration takes place in the House of Dagon, to whom the Philistines attribute their victory; that, too, underlies their call for the blinded and enslaved Samson to "play/make merry before them" (Judges 16:24; 25).

⁸⁴ Cf. in this connection Malbim's commentary on Judges 14:4.

politically and morally passive before the realities presented to them by the Philistines. Thus the Judaites make no attempt to evaluate morally the actions of either side. Instead, they accept automatically the version presented to them by the Philistines—blaming it all on Samson⁸⁵—even though it is clear from the text that the Philistines exert their domination on the Israelites by force and not by consent.⁸⁶ Similarly, the Judaites never question the justice of an entire population being made to suffer for the actions of what appears to be an individual renegade. Despite this, Samson does not remonstrate with his fellow Israelites. His innate sympathy for their plight and his understanding of how the situation must have appeared from their distinct vantage point allow him to accept the humiliation of being bound and handed over to the Philistines (although in the end, the bonds dissolve so easily as to render laughable the entire notion of subduing Samson).

This episode, contained as it is in a few laconic verses, reveals a concept of force and political power that flies very much in the face of both contemporary exhibitions of Philistine military might and the future manifestations of monarchical power in the Israelite kingdoms. The example of Samson, who closes the period of the judges in Israel, stands as a warning to all those who view political power as a source of personal prerogative. For all of his individual strength, Samson utilizes his power to serve his people, and not as a source of personal aggrandizement. Contemporary Philistine and future Israelite monarchical exercises of might would be accompanied by far greater arbitrary demands for even more power based not on political or military necessity, but as expressions of personal will. Thus, when the Israelites in the future demand that Samuel anoint a king, he meets their request with precisely such warnings of capricious royalist exploitation that would occur at the expense of the Israelite people.⁸⁷ In direct contradistinction to this, Samson's approach to power, historically placed so as to serve as a warning to future kings of the Israelite kingdom, is symbolized in Samson's name, whose root derives from the verb denoting "service."⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Judges 15:11

⁸⁶ The root *moshel* indicates rule that is forcibly exerted; in contradistinction to *molech*, which indicates rule that is accepted by the people (which thereby invests it with legitimacy). For further elucidation of this point, see Malbim's commentary on Genesis 37:8.

⁸⁷ I Samuel 8:11–17.

⁸⁸ Abravanel derives this reading from the root-analysis of Samson's name (cf. Abravanel's commentary on Judges 13:24, in Abravanel, *Commentary*, p. 135). This is in contradistinction to the approaches that claim that Samson's name is rooted in an antique solar myth (Crenshaw, *Samson: Secret Betrayed*, p. 16). For an opposite approach,

Despite Samson's appreciation of power in its best Socratic sense—in terms of the interests of its object—the fact that the Samson narrative ends with a description of his place of interment, instead of with an account of Samson's political and historical legacy, indicates that Samson himself brings about little concrete political change. To a large extent, Samson is caught in a double trap of alienation:⁸⁹ he is alienated from his own people, who do not perceive him as their leader, and he is consequently estranged from the realization of power in the fulfillment of his national objectives. Ironically, this double alienation comes about as a result of the *lack* of emotional distance between Samson and the Israelites (as manifested by his overpowering sympathy for them in the Ramat Lehi episode). Because Samson cannot communicate politically with the Israelites, he becomes politically estranged from them and is not accepted as their leader. Consequently, he is not perceived as invulnerable (as indeed he is not), and thus is prevented from completing the process of political liberation.

The estrangement exhibited both by Samson (exemplified in his marriage to the Timnite woman) and the Israelites (who give him up to the Philistines) finds its expression in the talmudic assessment of Samson's character, which links Samson's rationale for his actions—"for she is right *in my eyes*"⁹⁰—to his eventual downfall (being blinded by the Philistines).⁹¹ In this context, Samson's moral exceptionalism may serve as a warning both for designated leaders and ordinary citizens. In the book of Judges, this has salience for the common run of Israelite life, which is portrayed as dominated by a morally atomistic attitude. In the text, this is articulated by the formulaic expression: "each man would do what was right in his own eyes."⁹² In addition, the moral tone of Samson's personal

cf. Zakovich, *Life of Samson*, pp. 70–71. Greenstein, understanding Samson to be "everyman," similarly reads his name as a play on the Hebrew word for "name." Cf. Greenstein, "The Riddle of Samson," pp. 241, 248.

⁸⁹ This parallels and is a manifestation of the phenomenon of the double estrangement of the leader described in Mira Morgenstern, "The Leader's Dilemma," in Morgenstern, *Conceiving a Nation: The Development of Political Discourse in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 11 (forthcoming).

⁹⁰ Judges 14:13; emphasis added.

⁹¹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sota 9b.

⁹² Judges 17:6, 21:25. Although the two incidents cited in these verses are found in the last chapters of the book of Judges, there is a textually based linguistic reason to locate the actual occurrence of these incidents already at the beginning of this period. Textual evidence for this interpretational move includes the fact that the tribe of Dan had not yet been assigned its land portion at the time that the incident of the graven image of Micah takes place, which would seem to locate this episode toward the end of Joshua's life or at the very beginning of the period of the judges. Similarly, the fact that

life, reflecting the community-wide moral atomism of the time, functions also as a warning to future Israelite monarchs who would justify with impunity their disregard of the legal strictures placed upon them by arguing that those laws were rendered moot by the individually unique and extraordinary circumstances in which they found themselves.⁹³ In this reading, Samson's failure on precisely those grounds—his substitution of personal desire for revealed law, replacing known moral directives by ephemeral sentiment—reveals the biblical view of the moral and logical weakness of that rationale.

It may seem obvious to interpret Samson's tenure as a judge exclusively as one of failure and missed opportunity. Not only has salvation not been achieved, but it does not seem even to have begun. However, rethinking the essence of that promise of deliverance suggests a different evaluation of Samson's life. The human condition of imperfection and lack of closure, reflected in the charge and promise that heralds the beginning of Samson's life, is also encompassed in the talmudic remark, "all beginnings are difficult."⁹⁴ The story of Samson alerts us to the fact that new beginnings are hard because they are not recognized as beginnings. At the time of its unfolding, the new beginning appears as an assemblage of phenomena that makes no sense. Because it is not clear that something new is being experienced, it is easy to misunderstand the ensuing circumstances. Thus Samson's lack of achievement may be interpreted as emblematic of the existential human struggle to attain a larger context for meaning and comprehension. In that context, the beginning of salvation is all that can be promised, because once salvation has been achieved, there is no further need for human action. At that juncture, the only response can be death.⁹⁵

Pinhas, son of Elazar (son of Aaron) is the high priest at the time of the story of the concubine in Giva indicates that this episode must have occurred fairly early within the era of the judges (cf. Abravanel's commentary on Judges 17:1 in Abravanel, *Commentary*, p. 141). In sum, the tendency to pass atomistic moral judgment seems to characterize both lay Israelites and their judges or leaders. In this connection, it is important to note that the text does not condemn using one's own judgment. Rather, it is the use of one's own judgment to the exclusion of what the biblical text deems the divinely mandated priorities that corrupts human motivations and actions.

⁹³ Thus, for example, Solomon is charged with having too many wives, in contradiction to the Deuteronomic strictures (Deuteronomy 17:16–17). According to the text in I Kings, these wives in fact do turn Solomon's heart away from God, which in turn God adduces as the reason that Solomon's son would inherit only a reduced kingdom (I Kings 11:1–13).

⁹⁴ *Babylonian Talmud*, Ta'anit 10b.

⁹⁵ Indeed, Samson is buried in the grave of his father, whose name, Manoah, fittingly means "resting place."

The Samson narrative does end with death. But it is the death of an individual only, not of a nation or of the idea embodied by that nation. Fittingly, the person who during his life considers himself to be exceptional, and who exempts himself from many of the requirements of Israelite law and practice, dies admitting his own loyalty to that tradition. In saying, “let my soul die” (*tamot nafshi*), Samson harks back to an ancient distinction (mentioned already in Genesis) between the “life-soul” (*nefesh*) and the “life-spirit” (*neshama*).⁹⁶ At his moment of death, Samson acknowledges that while his physical life is over, the idea for which he had been fighting his whole life—the unique nature of Israelite nationhood—will survive him. The story of Samson is a valedictory to this early stage of Israelite nationhood in preparation for its future strong and complicated expression on the national scene.⁹⁷

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⁹⁶ Compare the creation of animals, *nefesh haya*, in Genesis 1:24, with the creation of human beings, *nishmat hayyim*, in Genesis 2:7.

⁹⁷ Cf. Greenstein, “Riddle of Samson,” pp. 238–241.