

SAMSON

BY
ZE'EV (VLADIMIR) JABOTINSKY
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Translated from the German by
CYRUS BROOKS



JUDÆA PUBLISHING COMPANY
NEW YORK • MIAMI

"Tell your mistress that I have a good memory, too. I remember all she said. Repeat this to her in my name: Samson does not want his wife to weep either for his troubles or her own. And tell her something more. Once she said to me: 'You need a kitten to play with, but I am not a toy.' That is true. The women of Dan were not made for a man's amusement in his leisure hours. But the women of Dan are fond of toys themselves: they love to fondle a doll or a child—or a sick man who has no will of his own. I am a toy now—for the Philistines perhaps, even for the natives, but not for Karni."

The woman was weeping, but her tears caused no pain to Samson. He was possessed by a sense of melancholy, on her account and his own, and for other reasons.

"Tell her," he said, "that a wounded eagle has never yet flown back to its nest to die. It dies in some far cleft of the rocks. There the lizards see it, and the beetles and the vultures, but not its mate."

"I am not of the race of eagles," she groaned.

"Yes, of the race of eagles," he answered.

She seized his hands and kissed them and remained thus for a long time, weeping without saying a word. Then she rose, called the children back to Samson, and followed the driver of the ass.

The second person to come to Samson was Hermesh, who had once belonged to his Jackals and had tried to raise the tribe of Dan in his defense, when the envoys from Judah came to the assembly in Zorah. He reached Samson without difficulty, for the blind giant was no longer

feared and no watch was kept on him even from a distance. He brought Samson bad and very surprising news.

The Philistines never spoke of political affairs in his presence, and so he had thought that all their disputes were settled and that they had forgotten Dan and Judah, as he himself had forgotten. But they had not forgotten. Conditions were the same as in the year following the burning of Timnath, when Samson had gone away into the rocky gorges of Etam. It was as though the wall of a beleaguered town had fallen and left it unprotected. Again companies of Philistine troops were roaming along the frontier in the neighborhood of Gimzo, intending to take the town. Again a mission had come to Zorah to demand tribute, bringing with it an armed guard. These soldiers had suddenly begun to search the houses, looking for forges and stores of iron, and although they could easily have been killed, no one had dared even to raise his voice against them. One of the elders only, a proud man named Abiram, had stood in the doorway of his house and refused to let them pass. But the Philistine emissary, Merodah, had immediately ordered him to be scourged, and the townsfolk had stood round in a circle without raising a hand to save him. He, Hermesh, had wanted to call out the young men and fight against their oppressors, but the elder, Machbonai ben Shuni, had forbidden it. All this had happened shortly before the spring festival.

Samson clenched his fists. On the day of the spring festival, this Merodah of Ekron had drunk with him on the temple steps. They had embraced each other and sung songs—and the Philistine had not once boasted that he

had recently been in Zorah and had had the elders of the town scourged.

This conversation between Samson and Hermesh took place at Mayim, on the sea-coast. Samson rose, laid his hand on Hermesh's shoulder, and walked with him up and down the strip of sand. For a long time he shook his head and said nothing.

"And how do you live here, Samson?" Hermesh enquired with diffidence.

"I live quite merrily," answered Samson, curtly; "and later on things will be merrier still."

Samson felt the muscles on Hermesh's shoulder move under his hand, and knew that he was hanging his head.

"I must go now," said Hermesh at last. "Shall I guide you to your house or call the children? They are not far away."

"Leave me here; they will come of themselves."

Hermesh grew somewhat embarrassed and asked:

"Shall I give our people a message from you?"

Samson thought for a while, and then said slowly: "Tell them two things in my name—two words. The first word is Iron. They must get iron. They must give everything they have for iron—their silver and wheat, oil and wine and flocks, even their wives and daughters. All for iron! There is nothing in the world more valuable than iron. Will you tell them that?"

"I will. They will understand that."

"The second word they will not understand yet, but they must learn to understand it, and that soon. The second word is this: a king! Say to Dan, Benjamin, Judah, Ephraim: a king! A man will give them the signal and of

a sudden thousands will lift up their hands. So it is with the Philistines, and therefore the Philistines are lords of Canaan. Say it from Zorah to Hebron and Sechem, and farther even to Endor and Laish: a king!"

"I will say it," said Hermesh.

"Go now," said Samson.

Hermesh took his hand and kissed it, and while his lips were still on Samson's hand he asked in a trembling voice:

"These two words I will repeat to all the people in your name. But have you nothing to say to us, the friends who loved you—to us and to our children?"

A warm drop fell on Samson's hand, another and still another. For a moment he was tempted to reveal to Hermesh what the dying Affite, Ankor had told him. But why? Too late! They had believed. He withdrew his hand and answered, as he turned away: "Nothing."

Hermesh went back slowly across the sand, but suddenly Samson called him. He looked round. Samson was carefully wiping the back of his hand, and he said to him:

"I have changed my mind. Tell them three things in my name, and not two: they must get iron; they must choose a king; and they must learn to laugh."



LION'S HONEY

The Myth of Samson

David Grossman

Translated from the Hebrew by Stuart Schoffman



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Edinburgh • New York • Melbourne

The Philistines take revenge upon the person whom they believe brought this disaster upon them, namely the woman from Timnah. They go there and burn her and her father. Fire for fire. Samson pays them back and 'smote them leg as well as thigh, a great smiting'. Thus from one minute to the next this strange war of one man against a whole nation becomes increasingly problematic. For here is a man destined from his mother's womb 'to deliver Israel', but it turns out that this 'deliverance' never deviates from the massive destruction of Philistines.

Here it is essential to recall what may have been forgotten in the heat of the narrative: that Samson was a *Judge*. A national leader who judged his people for twenty years. A strange judge, to be sure: when did he have the slightest contact with his own people? When did he deal with their issues or sit to adjudicate between them? After all, as anyone who has read the story knows, Samson's life and works are always directed outside, toward the Philistines, with whom he falls in love and shares a banquet table, upon whom

he takes revenge and makes war (and thus he often seems to the reader to be a character more 'Philistine' than Jewish).

Nevertheless, his tale earned a place in the Bible, where it is told at length and in detail; and if at times the Jewish tradition has read Samson pejoratively – owing to his aggressiveness, his roguish behaviour and skirt-chasing – he is also inscribed in the Jewish consciousness as a national hero and a symbol. Perhaps this is because, despite everything, in the deep structures of his personality – his loneliness and isolation, his strong need to preserve his separateness and mystery, yet also his limitless desire to mix and assimilate with gentiles – Samson expresses and implies qualities that are 'Jewish' indeed.

And this too, of course: Jews throughout the ages took pride in the tales of his heroism and yearned for the physical strength, bravery, and manliness that he represented. They esteemed, no less, his ability to apply force without any restraints or moral inhibitions, an ability which history withheld from the

trod-upon Jews for millennia, until the establishment of the State of Israel.

In Hebrew, he is almost always referred to as 'Samson the hero', and elite combat units of the Israeli army have been named after him, from 'Samson's Foxes' of the 1948 War of Independence to the 'Samson' unit created during the first Palestinian *intifada* in the late 1980s (not to mention a chain of body-building clubs called the 'Samson Institute', set up in the 1960s, by a muscle-bound rabbi named Rafael Halperin).

Yet there is a certain problematic quality to Israeli sovereignty that is also embodied in Samson's relationship to his own power. As in the case of Samson, it sometimes seems that Israel's considerable military might is an asset that becomes a liability. For it would seem, without taking lightly the dangers facing Israel, that the reality of being immensely powerful has not really been internalised in the Israeli consciousness, not assimilated in a natural way, over many generations; and this, perhaps, is why the attitude to this power, whose

acquisition has often been regarded as truly miraculous, is prone to distortion.

Such distortion may lead, for example, to ascribing an exaggerated value to the power that one has attained; to making power an end in itself; and to using it excessively; and also to a tendency to turn almost automatically to the use of force instead of weighing other means of action — these are all, in the end, characteristically 'Samsonian' modes of behaviour.

To this may be added the well-known Israeli feeling, in the face of any threat that comes along, that the country's security is crumbling — a feeling that also exists in the case of Samson, who in certain situations seems to shatter into pieces, his strength vanishing in the blink of an eye. This kind of collapse, however, does not reflect one's actual strength, and often carries in its wake an overblown display of force, further complicating the situation. All of this attests, it would seem, to a rather feeble sense of ownership of the power that has been attained, and, of course, to a deep existential insecurity. This is

connected, without a doubt, to the very real dangers lying in wait for Israel, but also to the tragic formative experience of being a stranger in the world, the Jewish sense of not being a nation 'like other nations', and of the State of Israel as a country whose very existence is conditional, whose future is in doubt and steeped in jeopardy, feelings that all the nuclear bombs that Israel developed, in a program once known as the 'Samson Option', cannot eradicate.

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After smiting the Philistines, Samson goes and establishes residence in the cave of the rock of Etam, which would appear to be located near the town of Etam in the territory of the tribe of Judah.²² There he sits by himself, in apparent retirement from society after being disappointed in mankind.

Except that now the Philistines get ready to take their revenge. They head for Judah and prepare

themselves for battle. The men of Judah, frightened by the Philistine mobilisation, come to ask why on earth the Philistines are preparing to make war upon them, and the Philistines explain: 'We have come to take Samson prisoner, and to do to him as he did to us.'

Three thousand men of Judah proceed apace to Samson's dwelling place in the cave of the rock of Etam. Samson, it will be recalled, is not a member of the tribe of Judah, and he is about to bring down upon them a war that does not 'belong' to them. 'You knew that the Philistines rule over us', they say to him anxiously, 'why have you done this to us?' Three thousand men stand around him filled with trepidation, and Samson, with simple, stubborn logic, replies: 'As they did to me, so I did to them.'

Three thousand men steal glances at one another. One can almost hear the uneasy throat-clearing. 'We have come down to take you prisoner', they finally dare to tell him, 'and to hand you over to the Philistines.' And across the gulf of centuries one can

means, I think, I believe: "to give all the keys of your soul to a certain individual; to hope that this individual will love you not only because of what you are, but sometimes in spite of what you are." Samson desperately needs one soul to reveal himself in front of her.

BILL MOYERS: He says, I believe, in the ancient Hebrew, he talks about telling her from his heart of hearts.

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes. All his heart. All his heart of hearts. He gave her the essence of his life. He gave her his secrets. Three times he was aware of her manipulations. Three times she asks him, "What is the essence, what is the secret of your strength?" And he tells her all kinds of stories. Each time he opens his eyes, and I am sure he saw the assassin sitting or standing there behind the curtain. I mean, it's so obvious. It's so obvious that she wanted to kill him.

And yet, he continues to tell her hints about his strengths, I believe, because he wanted to believe that next time he opens his eyes he will see only Delilah, without the assassin, without the foreign presence, without the hostility of the Philistines that is radiated into this room. He just wanted to be loved simply. Maybe not as a hero, just as a human being. Maybe he just wanted one single thing: to be like any other person.

BILL MOYERS: What does it say, that in the last desperate act of a violent life, when he's pulling down the Temple, killing everyone in it, his enemies, the innocent, himself, Samson believes he's doing God's will?

DAVID GROSSMAN Well, probably he is right according to the storyteller of the Biblical story. And to the editor who puts this story in the Bible. And that legitimizes it, and gave it the authority of sanctity. He is doing what God wanted him to do. We know that almost everything in the life of Samson was meant by God. So it is told to us. It's a horrible deed, of course.

But the main goal of Samson, the reason for which he existed and the reason for which he became part of the story is to fight the Philistines and to liberate the sons of Israel from the tyranny of the Philistines. And by breaking the whole building on their heads and killing them and himself, he actually believed that he did what God wanted him to do.

BILL MOYERS: Sounds an awful lot like the suicide bombers of 9-11 if you read their diaries. They felt they were doing God's will as they dove those planes into those buildings.

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes, and I mention in my book, that actually he was the first suicide killer. Samson. And I don't know about any other previous examples for someone who uses his own body in order to destroy other people's life. And, of course, there's something common to all people who are doing something like that. They are acting in a hermetic system of faith.

BILL MOYERS: A hermetic system means?

DAVID GROSSMAN It's hermetic, because it's very difficult to justify it in terms of other systems. And according to their system, they have full justification to do what they are doing. For us, people like me, I assume like yourself, who are out of this system, it looks horrible. Looks so cruel. But they can justify it according to their own terms. This is, I think, one of the most interesting questions. What was the need of us, of the Jews, to have such a hero? Such a questionable, such a dubious hero for us. When you think about the Jews throughout history, you do not necessarily think about someone like Samson. In a way he seems to us not very Jewish. On the other hand, I can tell you there are many Jewish qualities to him that I think are very important even to us today.

BILL MOYERS: Such as?

DAVID GROSSMAN Well, this loneliness. The thing that I said before that there is no one like him. And I think, you know, every people, every culture is very special and unique. But I think there is something very very unique about us the Jewish people. About our faith. About our history. About the tragedies that we went through. But more so, about the way we are regarded by other peoples, cultures and religions.

You know for years Jews have been either idealized or more often demonized by other peoples and religions. And both idealization and demonization are the different forms, the different faces of demonization. We were always regarded as a metaphor for something else, as a parable. There was always a lesson to be learned from our destiny and faith.

And I find this approach so destructive. And when a people is cornered in such a place,

when other people project on him so much stereotype and prejudices. Prejudices and faith, and superstition and myths and legends. You know in a way you find yourself trapped in this state of mind of the people. Maybe some of us even like this attention. You know there is a lot of attraction in being a larger-than-life story. It makes you feel very unique. It can justify some of the horrible things you went through. But it is not healthy as a people.

BILL MOYERS: Could this be why Samson was drawn to the Philistines? There are moments in reading your book when I think he just wants to go on the other side of the field, and sit in their stands, and watch the game from their side. And then go out and have a drink with the boys. And forget this chosen-ness and this Samson stuff.

DAVID GROSSMAN It's wonderful that you say it, because sometimes I felt that, yes, he was not in his right place, in our people. Yes. And he needed, you know, to rub his soul and flesh against other cultures. And culture that probably is more sensual than the culture he came from with all the restrictions that Jews suffered from by their own selves. By the rules and the laws of the Torah. And I can understand a person like Samson enjoying terrifically being among the Philistines. Having fun with them, making love with them, fighting with them physically. Maybe this was something that he did not find in his own place, among the Israelites.

BILL MOYERS: There's a moment in your book when you wrote, "He was weary." Was he weary of being chosen; was he weary of playing out this fate that had been determined for him in the womb by God?

DAVID GROSSMAN I believe he was. I believe it was too much for him to take. The divine grand plan was much bigger for him to shoulder. Even he, with his gigantic shoulders. He walks in this life without really understanding what is expected of him. And there is a moment, after Delilah cuts his hair, and before she calls the Philistines to start torture him. And he lies on her knees and many painters drew and painted this wonderful, suddenly silent scene in the hustle and bustle of all his life. And all the noise that accompanied him. All the violence. All of the thunderstorm of the life of Samson, there is suddenly a very peaceful moment. He lies on her knees or in her lap. He's exhausted. But there is an air of rest. An air of someone who, for the first time in his life, achieved some tranquility. And well, maybe for him being there on her lap in the heart of the ultimate betrayal on him, because in a moment she is going to give him away.

BILL MOYERS: Every woman in his life betrays him.

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes.

BILL MOYERS: Did he have a compulsive need to be betrayed? Is that why he went to their beds?

DAVID GROSSMAN I believe so. When you see which women he will choose, it will always be women that inevitably will betray him. They are doomed to betray him, and he wants them. But don't we see people like that around us? Don't we see people who are repeatedly making the wrong choices? Who, at the very points in which they need to be salvaged, they will do the wrong step? It applies to individuals, it applies to societies, to countries.

BILL MOYERS: It seems to me that Samson is the archetype. He keeps compulsively repeating destructive behavior.

DAVID GROSSMAN He is, yes. But is it a rarity? Don't you see around you people who are doing this again and again, as if they have no choice? Don't you see people acting this way? But when I look at my country, for example, or when I look at the Palestinians, at any crossroad, when we were given the chance, the miraculous chance sometimes by history, to take the right turn, the turn towards peace, towards reconciliation, towards stopping killing and destruction, we chose always the way to violence and to escalate hatred between us. You know there are so many similarities to Samson and the way Israel behaves. And one of them is the way we treat power.

BILL MOYERS: Power?

DAVID GROSSMAN Power, yeah. You know, you know three years after the Holocaust, after the Shoah, we created the state. We created an army that became immediately a regional superpower, maybe an international superpower. We are in a way like a mutation of power. From being the victims of the Shoah. From being these people who for 2000 years lived in exile, who had no power, no weapons, no army, nothing like that. We became a superpower. It's a mutation of power. And I am not sure that we really know how to deal with this enormous power.

And I think someone who experiences our situation is almost doomed, always, to choose the more aggressive way, the more vigorous way, as the first choice. And you can trace such a behavior in the history of Israel throughout the years. Now part of it is not our responsibility. Our neighbors and enemies were very productive and effective in creating this problem as well. But I am interested also in our side. What is in us that prevents us, even when we can, to come to a kind of more political definition of ourselves within borders. If you have no borders, it is like you live in a house that the walls are all the time moving. A house with mobile walls. You do not really know where you end and where the others start.

BILL MOYERS: Is this why you were attracted to the story of Samson? Trying to figure out who you are? What Israel is? What you do with power in a hostile world?

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes. I mean being an Israeli is a full time job. But, I wouldn't trade it for any other existence. I was born a Jew. I was born in Israel. I think it's a fascinating place to live. I lament the fact that we are deprived of exploring all the possibilities of living in such a state, such a combination of so many people who poured into Israel from 17 countries, and bringing in all their psychologies, mentalities, senses of humor, knowledge, manners, habits. All these could create such a wonderful place, an interesting place to live. And, at the same time, we don't get to explore it, because we just survive from one catastrophe to another.

You know I always think about this paradox of us as a people. Throughout our history we survived to lead our life. And now we live to survive only. This is not enough. We can have so much more. We are so strong as a state. We are so Samson-ite, yes? Allegedly we have 200 atom bombs, and yet we are so afraid.

By the way, like Samson, whenever he confronts a real danger, he collapsed. He cries to God like a child. Why? Because like us, we do not really believe that this power is ours. We did not really settle our relationship with this power. Because of that we are doomed to use it excessively. Because of it, we do not really create a code of behavior regarding our enormous power. Maybe if time comes, if we enjoy some years of stability and peace, if we start to trust our enemies and neighbors, if they will be trustworthy. It's also a question. Maybe then, also, our attitudes towards this power will change.

BILL MOYERS: Aren't the Orthodox, aren't the literalists, those who read the story of Samson as literally the word of God, aren't they driving the conversation in Israel? Are they just like the Christian Right and the fundamentalists here are driving our political discussions?

DAVID GROSSMAN Well, again, you touch upon a very basic problem for us as a state today: that there is too much connection between religion and state. For the last 60 years almost, Israel prioritized the political goals of religion rather than the political goals of the state. For example, many things from what has happened to us since the Six Days War, the '67 War, that drove upon the occupation of the occupied territories is highly dominated by religious aspirations. And the religious institutions are so much involved now in politics in Israel today. It's so much dominant in our politics. And it's dangerous, because, also, on the other side, on the Palestinian side, we see the same phenomenon. They are now ruled, by not-only religious people, which I can respect, but they are ruled by fundamentalists, by fanatics.

When you see, for example, the mother of a Palestinian suicide bomber and she rejoices in the death of her son, and she wishes, in front of television camera, that all her other children will follow him and become martyr like he is, like he was. Well, then I stop understanding. I cannot really understand such values. If they are values at all. When I hear that this suicide bomber, like many others, wrapped up with paper and rugs his sexual organs to protect them, so he will be able to use them with the 72 virgins when he reaches Heaven, well, I really cannot understand such a mixture of reason and faith. I think that, for the benefit of all of us, we should pay faith a lot of respect. We should be very afraid when faith mutates itself to fanaticism.

BILL MOYERS: Was the mother of that Palestinian suicide bomber, any different in her imagination, than the mother of Samson whose child was born to die for his country.

DAVID GROSSMAN In a way not. In a way you are right. Again, this is the nature of our area. You know for so many years Israeli women, when they bore a child, when they bore a son, one of the first things that they used to say after the birth, "Here I gave birth to another soldier to our army." And it was said with pride, you know. And I thought, "It's horrible." If you destined your child, from womb almost, to the army, which means to be killed in the end. This is the danger that awaits individuals and people who are undertaking such a total mission, or who are formulating themselves in such absolute

Bill Moyers on Faith & Reason . Bill Moyers and Anne Provoost and David Grossman . July 14, 2006 | PBS terms. They know the will of God. They were chosen. I think that total belief, total behaviors, hermetic, absolute terms in which one defines oneself, are dangerous. They are lethal.

BILL MOYERS: Absolute truths destroy absolutely.

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes. Exactly. We sense it now in the Middle East. In the violence and in the fundamentalist approach of so many groups there, which make the achieving of peace almost impossible.

BILL MOYERS: At the end of Samson's story and the end of your book, there's the apocalypse. Samson dies. The Philistines die.

DAVID GROSSMAN Yes.

BILL MOYERS: Who wins?

DAVID GROSSMAN No one wins. But that's the nature of such conflicts, that's the nature of violence. No one wins. This is something that Israelis and many among the Palestinians started to understand now. It's a no-win situation. And the only thing that can be productive is this very painful compromise.

BILL MOYERS: David Grossman, thank you very much.

DAVID GROSSMAN Thank you. Thank you.

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