

There is a point in the Samson story – the moment when he falls asleep on Delilah’s lap – that seems to absorb and encapsulate the entire tale. Samson withdraws into his childish, almost infantile self, disarmed of the violence, madness, and passion that have confounded and ruined his life. This is, of course, also the moment when his fate is sealed, for Delilah is clutching his hair and the razor, and the Philistines outside are already relishing their victory. In another moment his eyes will be plucked out and his power extinguished. Soon he will be thrown into prison and his days will be ended. Yet it is now, perhaps for the first time in his life, that he finds repose. Here, in the very heart of the cruel perfidy that he has surely expected all along, he is finally granted perfect peace, a release from himself and the stormy drama of his life.

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In those days, apparently the end of the twelfth and beginning of the eleventh centuries BCE, there was not yet a king in Israel, nor any central authority. The neighbouring nations of Midian, Canaan, Moab, Amon, and Philistia took advantage of the weak Hebrew tribes and launched campaigns of conquest and pillage against them. Every so often there would arise, in one tribe or another, a person who would know how to lead his tribe, sometimes several joined together, into retaliatory battle. If he won, he would become the leader and judge, and be called *shofet*. Such were Gideon and Jephthah, Ehud the son of Gerah, Shamgar the son of Anat, and Deborah, the wife of Lapidot. Thus the Israelites swung cyclically between periods of oppression and redemption that corresponded, as recounted in the Book of Judges, to their sins and their atonement. First they would worship idols, then God would muster the murderous neighbours as punishment. They would cry out to Him in their affliction, and He would elect from among them a person who would save them.

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In the midst of this turbulence lived a man and woman of the tribe of Dan. They lived in Zorah in the Judean lowlands, an especially violent region, as in those days it was the boundary between Israel and the Philistines. For the Israelites, it was the first line of defence against the Philistines; for the Philistines, it was the essential first step in any attempt to conquer the Judean hill country. The man was called Manoah, but the woman's name is not known. It is said of her only that she was 'barren and had borne no children', which is enough to suggest that, along with the hardships of the frontier, their marriage had also been filled with pain.

But anyone familiar with the semiotics of biblical storytelling also knows that the very mention of a barren woman almost always foreshadows a momentous birth. And indeed, one day – during one of those periods when 'the Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord' – when the woman is alone, without her husband, an angel of God appears before her and tells her: 'You are barren and have

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borne no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son.’ And immediately he gives her a list of instructions and warnings, and also good news: ‘Now be careful not to drink wine or other intoxicant, or to eat anything unclean; for you are going to conceive and bear a son; let no razor touch his head, for the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.’

She goes to her husband and says, ‘A man of God came to me.’ And the reader’s ears prick up, because the woman does not use the same word as that of the biblical narrator – ‘an angel of God *appeared* to the woman’ – but rather ‘came to me’, a charged phrase rich with double meaning, which more than once in the Bible refers to the act of copulation itself.

The husband’s ears probably prick up too, and his wife quickly describes the stranger. ‘He looked like an angel of God, very frightening,’ she explains. ‘I did not ask him where he was from, nor did he tell me his name.’ And between her words one can hear,

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it seems, a note of apology – so frightening was the man's appearance that she didn't have the nerve to ask where he was from, or even his name.

And the husband, Manoah, how does he respond, and what does his silence say? Maybe he furrows his brow in puzzlement, trying to fish out a question from the confusion so suddenly thrust upon him by his wife, but she doesn't wait for him to ask, and quickly, anxiously, continues to pile on new information: The man of God told me 'you shall conceive', and promised I would have a son and commanded that I not drink wine or liquor, or eat anything unclean, because the boy would be a Nazirite from the womb until his dying day . . .

There, she has told him everything. She has freed herself from the burden of the encounter and the extraordinary news, yet the text does not tell us a thing about any emotion that flows between them, nor of any smile or tender glance. And this should come as no surprise, since as a rule the Bible rarely records the feelings of its heroes. The Bible is a history of actions and events, and leaves to us, to

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each and every reader, the task of speculation, an exciting task but one that carries the risks of exaggeration and fantasy. Nevertheless, let us dare to do, in the pages that follow, what many generations of readers before us have done, men and women who have read the spare biblical text according to their faith, the conventions of their age, and their own personal inclinations, and attached meanings and conclusions (and sometimes wishes and delusions) to every word and syllable.<sup>1</sup>

And so, with necessary caution, but also with the pleasure of guesswork and imagination, let us try to fix in our mind's eye the encounter between the man and his wife, she speaking and he listening, she going on at length and he not saying a word. And there is no knowing what is welling under that silence, excitement and joy perhaps, or maybe anger at the wife who converses so freely with a strange man; and we may also wonder whether she, as she speaks, looks him straight in the eye or averts her gaze downward, away from the husband to whom, for some reason, an angel

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did not appear. And even if only a small part of what we have pictured actually took place, there is no doubt that the news they have received will shake them both to the core, will stir up his deepest feelings about her longtime barrenness and startling pregnancy, and maybe also hers about him, about the weakness and impotence that, it would seem, are hinted at in this brief scene.

And we, peeking in, are so captivated by this highly charged family moment that we almost fail to notice that what the wife reports to her husband is not quite the same as what she had been told. Two central details are missing: she does not mention that a razor must not touch the head of their unborn son, nor does she tell her husband that this son 'shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines'.

Why does she omit these crucial details?

One might argue that in her excitement and confusion she simply forgot the matter of the razor. She was doubtless quite agitated; and perhaps assumed that Manoah would be aware that, if the

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boy was to be a Nazirite, the well-known restrictions would apply, including the prohibition against the cutting of hair. But how to explain the second omission? How can it be that a woman withholds – even conceals – from her husband such significant information regarding their future son, news that would surely give him satisfaction and pride, and perhaps a measure of compensation for all those bitter, barren years?

To comprehend this, to understand *her*, we need to go back and read the story through her eyes. Recall that the biblical text does not even reveal her name. The word ‘barren’ is all that is said of her, and is even redoubled: ‘barren and had borne no children.’ And this emphasis suggests that she had been waiting long years for a child who never arrived. She has probably given up on the possibility that she will one day have a child. And it is quite likely that the ‘title’ *’akara*, ‘the barren one’, has been conferred upon her by others, in the family, in the tribe, in all of Zorah. And who knows, maybe even her husband, in moments of anger, flung at her now



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and then the searing epithet *'akara*, and between them, too, the word became her name, the barb that stings her every time she thinks about herself and her fate.

And now, this same 'childless one who has not given birth' is suddenly graced by the appearance of an angel who brings her the news that she will bear a child. Yet at this very instant, as her dream is fulfilled and her joy is boundless, the angel adds: 'For the boy is to be a Nazirite to God from the womb on. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines.'

And she plunges into a dizzying maelstrom of thoughts and emotions.

A son will be born to her. To *her*. Until this moment she knew nothing of this, of course. The angel knew about it first and told her the news. And perhaps at the moment of the telling she feels an unfamiliar twinge inside (angels know that revelations work best with concrete proof). And she is doubtless very proud that her son will be the one to save the Israelites: what mother wouldn't be proud

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to produce the saviour of his people? But maybe, in a hidden corner of her heart, her happiness is less than complete.

For another recognition, painful and still repressed, is beginning to gnaw at her: she has not conceived her own private, intimate child, but rather some ‘national figure’, a Nazirite of God and the redeemer of Israel. And his uniqueness is not something that will develop slowly, over the years, so that the two can grow comfortably together into their roles – to be a saviour’s mother is also a position of responsibility – but instead this is happening now, suddenly, already, in a fixed and inexorable manner: ‘For the boy is to be a Nazirite of God from the womb on . . .’

She tries to understand. This child, this long-awaited child, at the moment he has been given to her, has begun to sprout within her, has already been touched, it turns out, by some other, strange entity, and this means – and here she feels a sharp, alien sting – that he will be a child who will never be hers alone.

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Does she understand this immediately? There is no way of knowing. The whole episode has surely overwhelmed her, and it is perfectly possible that at this moment she is filled only with joy over the pregnancy, and pride over the special boy who will be born to her – to *her*, and not to all those in the village and the tribe who saw her only as *'akara*, the childless one . . . But we may surmise that, deep down, Samson's mother knows, with a deep womanly intuition – a knowledge that has nothing to do with any religious faith or fear of God – that what has been given to her has also been taken away in the same instant. The moment of her greatest intimacy – within herself, as a woman – has been confiscated and made into a public event, shared with strangers (including we who interpret her story after thousands of years), and for this reason, in an instinctive gesture of distancing and denial, she pushes away part of the disturbing news.

And here we are reminded of another woman of the Bible, whose fate was the same as that of Samson's mother: Hannah, who tearfully prayed and vowed

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that, if a son were born to her, she would give him to God as a Nazirite, and following that vow, Samuel was born, and she was obliged to turn him over to Eli the high priest. Both these tales of extraordinary pregnancies carry with them the uncomfortable implication that God has somehow exploited the despair of these mothers, who thirsted so avidly to conceive and give birth that they were willing to accede to any ‘suggestion’ regarding the destiny of their child, even – in the language of our own day – to serve as ‘surrogate mothers’ for God’s great plans.

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The wife of Manoah goes to her husband and tells him about the encounter, and we have already observed that her report sounds almost apologetic and overly detailed: ostensibly revealing all, but in fact omitting much. It is worth mentioning here that any number of commentators on the story – including poets and playwrights, painters and novelists

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who over the years have explored the character of Samson – have hinted that Samson was born of a liaison between his mother and the ‘man of God’. Others, notably Vladimir Jabotinsky in his wonderful novel *Samson the Nazarite*, went so far as to raise the possibility that Samson was the product of a romance between his mother and a flesh-and-blood Philistine.<sup>2</sup> According to this reading, the business of the ‘man of God who came to me’ was simply a cover story that she invented in order to explain away her embarrassing pregnancy to Manoah. This hypothesis, of course, adds extra spice to the saga of Samson’s complex relations with the Philistines. But we, tempted though we are, will trust instead the version given by Samson’s mother, since we shall soon discover that, even if she spoke the whole truth, her great, fateful betrayal was not, in the end, at the expense of her husband.

For, after she announces to Manoah that they will have a son, she recites to him the second bit of the angel’s message – which, it will be recalled, she quotes with less than complete accuracy. She omits

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to mention the prohibition of hair-cutting; likewise the boy's future role as national saviour. 'The boy is to be a Nazirite of God from the womb', she says, and concludes with a few words of her own: 'until his dying day'.

And this is surely a strange addendum: a woman, who has just learned that she will bear a child after long years of infertility, tells her husband what will be expected of their son – and then speaks of *his dying day*?

Even someone who is not a parent, who has never experienced that special moment at which the expectant couple gets the good news, knows that on such an occasion there is nothing farther from their hearts and minds than the 'dying day' of the unborn child. And even if many anxious parents are preoccupied, even to the point of obsession, with the dangers and disasters that lie in wait for their children, they are nonetheless not inclined, on the whole, to imagine their youngster as an elderly person, decrepit, nearing the end – and certainly not as dead. To construct such a mental picture

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requires a strenuous, almost violent act of estrangement that would appear antithetical to the natural instincts of parenthood.

A woman who thinks and speaks out loud about the dying day of the child that is only beginning to take shape in her womb requires a remarkable measure of grim sobriety. Such a woman, at a moment like this, assumes a posture of cruel alienation – from the child, from the father who hears such words, and, no less, from herself.

What, then, has driven Manoah's wife to add these words?

Again, let's 'rewind the tape' and try to examine what exactly has happened. The angel brings the woman the news, then vanishes. She hurries to her husband, as the mixed message swirls inside her: she is, or will soon become, pregnant; but the child – how to put it? – is not completely hers, is not as other children are to their mothers. He has been deposited within her, as it were, for safekeeping, and she knows that things that are deposited must, in the end, be returned.