

D'var Torah: Parashat Naso

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I'd like to jump to this week's haftara about the birth of Samson, where we learn that Samson never gets to choose for himself whether or not to become a nazir ['a nazirite', i.e., a man or woman who practices asceticism – in this case, drinking no wine, eating no grapes, cutting no hair]. In striking contrast to parshat Naso with its list of temporary obligations for the nazirite, the haftara makes it clear that Samson is to become a nazir "from the womb onwards," for his entire life.

In the JPS Torah commentary, Jacob Milgrom elaborates on what we might call un-chosenness – that is, what happens when a demanding life path is foisted on a human being and not chosen by him or her. Milgrom juxtaposes parshat Naso's nazirite with Samson, noting that the nazir in the Torah is someone who can "make purposeful decisions and express his or her devotion to God through restraint, perhaps even rebalancing his or her spiritual life" in the process. "Samson, on the other hand, embodies the force of destiny that marks a person with un-chosen obligations." Milgrom further argues that Samson will "devote his transformed condition to self-centered and isolated acts of revenge. The haftara introduces an all-too-human self in whom the 'spirit' of supernatural energy reverberates. Samson's private passions will fuel and direct his service to the community. Only derivatively and accidentally will they benefit others."

So Samson's private passions, as Milgrom calls them, are acquired before birth. And although Samson will eventually learn a little about the source of his outsized strength, he doesn't know how to control it short of a haircut. Here is a man at the mercy of what Milgrom has aptly called "the force of destiny." If we extend Milgrom's line of reasoning, we not only understand that Samson is driven by forces hidden from others but as such, demonstrates the futility of trying to change another human being.

Some of us know people like Samson – self-centered and isolated, driven by hidden forces that we cannot possibly understand fully. Some of us are even attracted to partners like Samson who, although they turn out to be difficult, deeply troubled, or even dangerous people, we believe we can change, even rescue. Indeed some of us believe that it is our job to nurture the seeds of goodness that seem to be mostly hidden. Some of us, my younger self included, see our partner's desire to serve humanity and then see ourselves as the only one who can turn that desire into an action plan for our partner. Some of us even stake our own lives on trying to nurture such a person. Some of us are fortunate enough, eventually, to see the futility of trying to change another human being. But some of us get stuck in the fantasy that we're doing the right thing, carrying the burden of another person's chaos all by ourselves.

So if you meet a woman who implies that she is mostly to blame for her partner's bad behavior, if she wonders what she can do differently to fix her problem, please listen carefully. She may actually be telling you that, having experienced very little in the way of security in her own childhood, she needs to control the present. She may be trying to do that by attaching herself to a partner who can become her 'project,' someone whom she feels sure can change, but only with her help. As our Jewish tradition emphasizes, however, real change is about changing oneself. And even that is a painstaking process.