



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

*Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.*

**Shabbat Parashat Naso**  
**May 26, 2018 - 12 Sivan 5778**



**By: Rabbi Edward Feinstein,  
Lecturer in Rabbinics,  
Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies,  
American Jewish University**

### Today, I am a Man!

**Torah Reading: Numbers 4:21 - 7:89**

**Haftarah Reading: Judges 13:2 - 25**

All of five feet tall in his stiff new suit and shiny shoes, he can barely be seen over the bima. In a cracking adolescent voice, he announces, "Today I am Bar Mitzvah. Today I am a man!" Yes, you are. But what do you know about being a man? A Jewish man? What can we tell you?

His Haftarah describes the miraculous birth of Samson. Born a nazir, a holy ascetic, and blessed with superhuman strength and a voracious id, Samson's life is the diametric opposite of the Torah's ideal of righteousness. Impulsive, undisciplined, unreflective, violent, lustful, vengeful and vain, Samson is testosterone personified. He is entirely sex and violence, shamelessly pursuing his lust for women, murdering mercilessly to settle personal scores, until he is finally seduced and betrayed by the sultry Delilah whose wiles he cannot resist.

Hollywood loves this character. In 1949, Cecile B. DeMille won five Oscars for "Samson and Delilah," starring Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr. In 1996, there was a remake for TV with Elizabeth Hurley, an Australian version in 2009 with yet another big screen remake just this year. Hollywood loves Samson because Hollywood loves testosterone. To date, we've enjoyed eight "Fast and Furious" films, twenty episodes of Marvel Comics "Avengers" (Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, Captain America, et al), twenty-one DC

Comics adventures (Superman, Batman), twenty-six James Bond movies. What does our Bar Mitzvah learn of masculinity from American popular culture? On TV, in popular music and video games, even on the evening news, men use, abuse and silence women. Violence is the emblem of true manliness. Everywhere he looks, our Bar Mitzvah finds Samson's spiritual descendants.

The Jewish tradition thought differently. Though Samson was a Biblical Judge, the sages of Jewish tradition found his character troubling. Only in his sad fate do they find morality: "Samson rebelled against God through his eyes, therefore the Philistines put out his eyes," teaches Talmud Sotah.

The sages read Samson as the Shadow, the dark underside of an ideal of Jewish masculinity. Samson is a loner; each of his feats is done by himself and for himself. The Jewish Man lives a life enveloped in family and community. Samson is a warrior; his power measured in body counts, his heroism proven in bloody battle. To the Jewish Man, violence is an anathema. The Jewish Man becomes a hero by mastering Torah and mending the world's brokenness. His aggression is sublimated into Talmudic debate, his prowess demonstrated in self-control, his valor proved in selfless acts of compassion. Samson uses women, until in the end, a woman uses him and destroys him. The Jewish Man embraces an ethic of *id*, the holiness of true intimacy, sharing the creation and nurturing of a family and thereby gaining a share of immortality.

For almost 20 centuries, this was the ideal of the Jewish male – scholarly, gentle, and pious. But over time this devolved into meekness, passivity, and impotence. In 1903, Chaim Nahman Bialik, poet laureate of Zionism, was sent to report on the Kishenev pogrom. He was shocked by the vicious slaughter. But more, he was appalled at the meek submission of the community's men. In his poem, *Be-Ir Ha-haregah*, "In the City of Slaughter," he decries Jewish men who could not defend their wives from rape and their children from murder. Bialik and the Zionist revolution overthrew the tradition's ideal of gentle masculinity. They revisited Samson, reveling in his confidence and power, his physicality and vitality. The literary masterwork of Vladimir (Zev) Jabotinsky, father of Revisionist Zionism, was his play, "Samson the Nazirite," which became the core of DeMille's screenplay. (A great bit of Hollywood Jewish trivia -- Jabotinsky has a screen credit as one of the film's writers, even though he died nine years before it was released.) Zionism promised a New Jewish Man – natural and free, strong and unafraid. Following the Six Day War in 1967, we hung posters of Moshe Dayan in our bedrooms. Here was the new Jewish masculinity – cocky, brave, and strong. After centuries of fear, humiliation, oppression, and Holocaust, here was a model of Jewish manliness we could be proud of.

But just as the tragedy of Samson predicted, this exaltation of crude masculinity eventually turned monstrous. Harvey Weinstein was only the first in a long line of visible Jewish men accused of sexual abuse. A former president of Israel, among several powerful Israeli leaders, was convicted and jailed for sexual abuse of female subordinates. Samson's story concludes with murder and suicide, not *Kiddush Ha-Shem*. There was no sanctity in his life, and none in his death. That is the inevitable end of this model of masculine strength.

We owe our Bar Mitzvah boy a new paradigm of Jewish masculinity. Perhaps a synthesis of the old and the new – the gentleness of the tradition wedded to the strength of the Zionist ideal. We pray that he will have a heart dedicated to caring and mending the world and hands capable of bringing down the pillars of idolatry and evil. We pray for fierce conviction but soft hands. We pray that his eyes and his heart remain always open.

---

**Rabbi Edward Feinstein**, is senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. He has served on the faculty of the Ziegler Rabbinical School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University since 1990 and is an instructor for the Wexner Heritage Program, lecturing widely across the United States. In 1982, Rabbi Feinstein became the founding director of the Solomon Schechter Academy of Dallas, Texas, building the

school's enrollment from 40 to over 500 in eight years, and winning national recognition as a center of educational excellence. In 1990, he assumed the position of executive director of Camp Ramah in California, the largest Jewish camp and conference center in the western United States. He came to Valley Beth Shalom in 1993 at the invitation of the renowned Rabbi Harold Schulweis, whom he succeeded as the congregation's senior rabbi in 2005.



## Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Bel Air, CA 90077  
310-440-1218  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using TrueRemove®

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

15600 Mulholland Dr.  
Bel Air, CA | 90077 US

This email was sent to [michelle.starkman@aju.edu](mailto:michelle.starkman@aju.edu).  
To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.

