

I don't know how to give you sensible, comforting words of Torah tonight. I asked you all to come together in our community so that we could comfort each other.

I spent the better part of the day wrestling with the Torah portion and the haftarah today, seeing what sense the tradition could give us.

I looked at the *nazir*. The person who makes a vow, according to Number 6, 1-11, to abstain from all intoxicants, all grape products - not just wine, but also vinegar and even raisins. The nazir does not cut his or her hair, and is to avoid any contact with a dead body. This is a voluntary vow, that any adult could make. It didn't have to last forever; the Torah provides what to do at the end of the term of the vow. Some *could* take the vow their whole lives. Some of the traditional commentators posit that people took this vow because they had previously indulged to excess, and the vow helped restrain those impulses. My father, Rabbi Jonathan Rubenstein, posits the Nazirite vow may have functioned like a twelve-step program, which is to say that maybe people didn't make vows of abstinence in order to become a nazir, but rather, people might have become *nazirim* in order to have a structure for abstinence.

Our haftarah, the prophetic reading, is thematically tied to the Torah portion through the concept of the *nazir*. In Judge 13, an angel appears to the wife of Manoach, and tells her that she will conceive a son. He instructs her to refrain from drink while pregnant, to never let a knife touch his hair - "For behold," says the angel, 'He will be consecrated as a *nazir* to God from the womb.'

In the haftarah, the vow of the *nazir* is imposed on an unborn child, for the duration of his life. That unborn child grows up to be the strongman Samson. Though the haftarah ends with his birth, the story of his life, continues, four chapters describing poor impulse control and episodes of murder and mayhem. In the famous episode of his death; Samson, chained up on the temple of Dagon, a Philistine God, yanks the pillars to the ground, killing himself and taking three thousand Philistine revelers with him - not for the sake of any great glory, but in vengeance for personal injury.

What can we say about Samson? Our commentators have always been slightly uneasy with his passion, his poor impulse control. But what can we say about Samson, celebrated strongman, mass murderer of Philistines, after Orlando?

Medieval commentator Abravanel, describes, in *laudatory* terms how Samson's *nazir* vow from birth functioned to shape him. Abravanel says,

First. . . It was necessary for his diet to be pure and free from taint, in order to ensure the purity of his character, to make him allergic to the depravity of the Philistine temperament debauched by wine and impurity, and make him ever ready to wreak on them the vengeance of the Lord.

Second, the Almighty knew he was destined to perform unusual things and so as not give the impression that they were prompted by drunkenness He commanded him to be a teetotaler from the womb.

To paraphrase Abravanel, the *nazir* vow functioned to turn Samson into a fanatic.

The nazir vow, which in Torah, seems to be pretty clearly designed to curb impulses, in life of Samson is warped to exacerbate the violent impulses.

So Torah tells me that Torah itself has unpredictable results. That the structures that are designed to keep us safe, to keep our society sane, whether the laws of Torah or our own country's constitution, can be warped, and can lead to the exact opposite of their original intent.

We are living that. Torah is holding up a mirror to our reality, showing us the uncomfortable choices that exist in every generation, but Torah cannot mitigate the stark effects of the choices that our society makes today.

So I will not ask Torah to do that tonight. I will not ask Torah to comfort us.

We have to comfort each other.

I am going to turn from the words now, which can't take me any further this evening.

With your permission, I'm going to move us beyond words, and we'll spend the next few minutes singing Joey Weisenberg's Lincoln niggun, which was composed as a chant of mourning and witness.

Please sing with me.

Mourning and witness is sometimes the best we can do.