

"And Also Some Women" Episode #002: Bad Girls of the Bible (Interview with Rivka Gheist)

Anne: Can you briefly introduce yourself?

Rivka: My name is Rivka Gheist and I'm a shul-going, kosher-keeping former dominatrix, as well as a writer and editor, focusing on Jewish life. You can find my essays and poems in the Odyssey Monthly and in Strange Fire from Ben Yehuda press. I'm extremely excited to be here and to talk about probably one of the most mysterious women in the Bible, Delilah.

Anne: Could you give a brief overview of the Samson and Delilah story?

Rivka: We all know the popular rendition of Samson and Delilah, which is boy meets girl, boy is a Nazarite judge of Israel, girl is a Philistine prostitute, boy falls in love with girl, girl gets bribed to betray boy, nags boy to reveal the secret to his Godly strength. Boy lies, girl pouts. Boy reveals the secret to his miraculous strength is in his unshorn Panteen locks to get her off his back, Girl cuts his hair during nap time, thus breaking his vow and depleting his strength. Girl sells him out to the Philistines and vanishes into the ether of Biblical infamy, while Boy is tortured, used as a dancing bear and lodestone by the Philistines and their courts until his hair begins to grow back, and in an act of self-sacrifice, he begs the Lord for his strength back once more, so He can bring the stone court of the Philistines down on everyone inside, killing the Philistines and himself, and thus fulfilling the prophecy that he would be the saviour of the Israelites and the deliverer of them in their struggles from the Philistines.

So that's the very very basic bare bones. That's the popular rendition. Now, a lot of this actually comes not from the text of Judges itself, but actually from the Talmudic discourse, and the midrash, meaning kind of the folk tales in the extended universe of the Torah, much later. Obviously Judges and the writers working on the Talmud are actually different people, and almost certainly did not know one another. So what gets lost in translation? What gets inferred and implied is actually, really, I think where a lot of the interest of this story really lies.

Anne: So what does it mean for Samson to be a Nazarite judge? What does that term mean?

Rivka: I'm so glad you started with that, because that's actually really the foundation of this story. So, first things first, Samson is born a Nazarite, meaning that his parents took the Nazarite vow - which, by the way, this is in Numbers six, if you want to look it up - on his behalf before he was even born. An angel appears to his mother and tells her that she is going to be the mother of someone very special, of a Nazarite who will deliver the Israelites from the Philistines.

Now his birth is in Judges 13:7, so you can look that up if you're also interested in that, meaning that this man from his infancy possessed an enormously privileged status with God

for just a few simple sacrifices, lifelong, simple sacrifices. One, that he may never consume grapes or any foodstuffs made with grapes, meaning no wine and no dolmas, which is kind of a bummer. That he may not make himself ritually impure by touching or handling corpses. And thirdly, that he may not cut his hair. Those are the big three elements of the Nazarite vow, and breaking one and or all of them could corrupt or nullify his status as a Nazarite, and all of the powers and the elevation that come with that.

Now, one of the key things about understanding Samson, I think, is that Samson has never known life not as a Nazarite. So we can infer from his behaviour throughout Judges that he kind of takes his status for granted. He literally has no other point of reference. We see him in Judges 15 attend weddings and feasts, presumably loaded with wine. He was surrounded with corpses on the battlefield. He handles the corpse of a slain lion to retrieve the honey, earlier in this, in his, in his narrative. We see him repeatedly playing fast and loose with his vows, and we see him marry a Philistine woman in Judges 15, against the warnings of his parents, during a time when interethnic marriage was deeply frowned upon, This is a man who is not careful, he is not humble, he is perhaps overconfident in his favour and status with God, and in some ways I really read this story as less a fable about the dangers of foreign women, and way more about the fallacy of pride and overconfidence in one's favour with God, as well as a fable against the carelessness with one's gifts from God and obligation to God.

Anne: I'd love it if you could even just talk a bit more about how immature he is.

Rivka: Well, yes, being a Nazarite judge means that he is endowed with this incredible position of basically enforcing a Biblical law on the Israelites, and you're dead on the money, he's very much a man child. This is a guy who, again, he makes a lot of really rash decisions. His first wife, who is never named, she's only described as a Philistine woman, he decides to marry her literally at the drop of the hat, and in Judges 15 he says she looks right, she is pleasing to me, I want that one, with no compunctions about it. And even after his parents and people in his community are like, I don't know, man, this doesn't seem like a good idea, he absolutely dismisses their criticism and their cautions out of hand. He does this repeatedly.

He also keeps a lot of secrets. I don't know if you noticed that, but he is very much a secret-keeper. He does not tell his parents about the lion, and the Bible is very clear on mentioning that he withholds the story about the lion's corpse and the honey from his parents, which is interesting. Like, why would that be a secret? Why would that be something that he feels he needs to keep private? My inclination is to think that it probably does violate the rules of his vow, of his Nazarite vow.

However, there are a couple of different kinds of Nazarite vow, and some of them are, in fact, allowed to handle corpses. Now, we are never given clarity within the text of Judges what kind of Nazarite vow he is being held to by God. It's entirely possible that he is being held to the vow that other soldiers of God are held to, which means that in the throes of battle, he absolutely may come in contact with corpses, and he won't nullify his abilities or his status. But again, we're never actually given confirmation of that.

I think that, as I mentioned earlier, because this is a status and a privilege that he has literally had from the moment he was born, he really doesn't know what life is like without it, he doesn't know what life is like as a mere mortal. He doesn't understand the sheer scope of the abilities and the privilege that he has been granted by God. And so he's very ungrateful, and very selfish, and very thoughtless about how this sets him apart, and how it renders him more obligated to the community, than had he just been born a normal dude and then taken on these vows at a later time in life, which was actually far more common.

There are other others who have taken the Nazarite vows who do so in adulthood, which is interesting to me. It's kind of the difference between getting baptized when you're a few days old, and getting baptized, being born again and baptized as an adult. Those are two very different trajectories, morally. And I think he's really, if we're going to make any kind of comparison, he's very much on that first track.

Anne: Can we talk a bit about how he's such a nightmare to women?

Rivka: Yes, and one of the things that I think is interesting about him is his inability to take accountability for his mistakes for his blunders, and I think that's actually a really good illustration of that exact behaviour. He makes a really rash decision that does not work out well for him in marrying a Philistine woman, who he barely knows, and then getting into it with the whole riddle saga with her kinsman. And then he drops her and annuls the marriage.

He's - goodness gracious - he's just such a darn mess. What's so interesting about that is that if we are to posit, then, that Delilah is a Philistine woman, it's pretty clear to us that he hasn't actually learned his lesson. This is not a man who has learned his lesson in the interim, between his first wife and Delilah.

There's another woman. There's a third woman, there's a Gazite prostitute. I believe whore-woman is the actual more literal translation. Right? Well, this is ancient Israel. That is the more direct translation of the term that is used, that he just hits it and quits it. This is not a man that values women. This is not a man who views women as anything other than a passing pleasure.

And one of the things I think is so interesting about this story, and Samson's ongoing saga, is that Delilah is the first woman who's named, and she's the first woman that we are actively explicitly told that he loves her. He's infatuated with his first wife very briefly, but when she becomes a burden, he immediately casts her off. He gets very briefly involved with this Gazite prostitute just to satiate his physical urges, we presume, and then he immediately moves on to the next conquest. Delilah is the first woman who is named, is the first woman that we are told he has any real affection for, and we're told so in no explicit terms. I believe the phrase itself, is that it happened upon afterwards that he loved a woman in the Valley of Sorek, and her name was Delilah.

Anne: And what do we know about Delilah just from the text and then what are the projections that have been put on her since then?

Rivka: Oh, my God, Yes, yes, so I'm so glad you mentioned that, what do we know from the actual text of Judges versus what's been projected on to her? Because I very firmly believe that what the text doesn't tell us about Delilah is absolutely as important as what it does.

The popular interpretation casts her as this, for lack of better description, a voluptuous Philistine whore, which, within the text of Judges, she's actually, you pointed out, she's never clearly identified as either an Israelite or a Philistine, or as a sex worker, which is interesting because there are other figures in this chapter that are really frankly identified as such. Samson himself, he sleeps with that Gazite prostitute. As mentioned previously, he has the ill-fated marriage to a Philistine woman. So we know that this is not a book of the Bible which has any compunctions about clearly identifying people by their less than ideal, less than savoury qualities. But it never does so with Delilah, and that, I cannot help think, that that is intentional.

I mean, the most obvious answer to this is that she was neither a prostitute nor a Philistine, and that that is all stuff that was rendered or projected onto her in the Talmudic text in the Midrash. I want to say that this interpretation, my personal interpretation, goes against the overwhelming majority of interpretation.

Now, I think it is still perfectly likely that she was. And because of his prior relationships with both prostitutes and Philistines, that was kind of a foregone conclusion. Of course, we've already established he is terrible to women. Of course, he's going to go for the Grand Poobah of women who are bad for him. The Philistine whore. But again, it never tells us that directly now, and that's just so interesting to me. And it really, it kind of folds into which - to what I think is actually the greater point of this, this story, which is that he gets involved in situations where he actually just - he doesn't - he's out of his depth and he doesn't know what he's doing.

Now, Delilah seems to kind of exist behind almost a veil of misdirection. So here's the thing. The name Delilah is Hebrew, but there are plenty of non-Jewish characters with Hebrew names throughout the Tanakh. That's not really a deal-breaker. Now, she lives in Nahal Sorek, which is right on the border between the Philistines and the tribe of Dan. So we never get a physical description of her, nor do we get any details about her parentage or her affiliations. In the Bible. It's quite common to hear, you know, we have Mary, the daughter of Avraham, or something like that. It's quite common to identify women by their closest male familial relationship. That's never done anywhere. She is simply Delilah in this story, no one's daughter. She's no one's wife, or sister, or mother.

We don't know her intentions, her allegiance, and we don't know the means of her survival or her priorities. All we can derive directly from the text is that she is a woman who never verbally reciprocates Samson's declarations of love, and who delivers the man who adores her to the hands of his enemies for eleven hundred coins, and who is willing to leverage his love for her to do it. That's all we really know concretely from the text of Judges.

Now, as I mentioned before, in some parts of the Talmud, in the extended universe with regards to Samson and Delilah, it says that they actually had children together. In some places it identifies her as his wife. Other places, it says that they were never married. So

there's actually a lot of mixed messaging surrounding what exactly her role in the community was, and what her relationship with Samson was.

As I said before, the only thing that we really, really know about her role in the community is that she has a relationship with probably the highest ranking Israelite in the region, and that the Philistines know that she is involved with Samson. That's all we know about her placement in the community. We don't know if she's respected or really well-known in the community. We don't know how involved she is in matters of state, or even in his judicial responsibilities. She could be existing on the outskirts of town as a prostitute or a woman of ill repute who has happened to score like the biggest fish in the region, or she could be a moneyed and well-known courtesan who only caters to the wealthiest and most prestigious of clients. We simply don't know.

Anne: And I think what's interesting is that, at least from a modern perspective, the reading of her as a Philistine, or the reading of her as a sex worker, are much more sympathetic readings in a way.

Rivka: I could not agree more. If she were an Israelite, it would be a much bigger betrayal, a *much* bigger betrayal. She sells out her own people and the leader of her people for eleven hundred coins, which is one of the reasons I actually think it is more likely that she was a Philistine, although, again, it's never clear. I really think that in this story, the omissions are intentional to paint her as a mysterious figure. I think the whole point is that Samson doesn't know. I don't even know if Samson has ever asked her, hey, are you a Philistine? Are you an Israelite? It's very possible that that is simply not a subject that ever came up, because he is so rash in his relationships with women and who he decides to live to align himself with throughout Judges.

And you're absolutely right that if she is a Philistine, we can absolutely characterize her as just doing right by her people. And if she is an Israelite, then we can characterize her as probably one of the biggest traitors in the Bible. Now, a number of scholars have said that she is probably a Philistine, because it is unlikely that the writers of the Bible would have painted an Israelite woman in such a negative light. However, one thing that I do want to point out is that the narrative of caution and fear of the foreign woman is such an interesting play of contrast in the Tanakh and in Jewish thought and Jewish teaching. We are told repeatedly and explicitly to not marry, to not get romantically involved with members outside of our group. And this is considered to be one of the biggest narratives and cautionary tales about that exact thing.

Now, what's really funny and strange about that is that there are actually plenty of examples in the Tanakh of intermarriage happening with absolutely no fallout whatsoever. There are plenty of examples of non-Jews marrying Jews, even among our major patriarchs. For example, David, King David, he absolutely had wives that were not Jewish, and that posed no great threat to the kingdom. We can even make the argument, I think, and some scholars will disagree with me on this, that Moses' wife Zipporah was not actually Jewish when he married her. She was of a tribe that he had settled with after he fled Egypt. So it's actually a very mixed bag. We also have Ruth who converts into Judaism and is actually kind of the foundation of our Jewish practices of conversion.

It's a very mixed bag, and it's one of those situations where I really feel like Judaism is saying as a whole, do as we say, not as we do, and in some ways I kind of feel that this particular story has been retconned in a way to serve that particular that particular agenda, as opposed to taking this on its own merits, which is about a very reckless, immature, cautionless man making rash decisions, not being discreet in his in his personal life, being proud, and then betraying God and betraying his vow through that pride, and through that recklessness and losing the very privileges and powers that God has given him. Because of that, I just think it's so interesting that we continually try to blame Delilah for things that are very ultimately Samson's fault.

Anne: It's interesting to me Delilah is very upfront about what she's asking Samson. She's not sneaky about trying to learn the secret of his strength, she outright asks him and then follows through on what he says. If anything, he's the one trying to trick her!

Rivka: What's so funny about it is Delilah never lies to him. She, Delilah, never once lies or misrepresents anything to Sampson. She's very clear: tell me how you can lose your strength. She's very blunt, very forthright, and he's the one who lies and kind of jokes around with her, and she calls him on it. She says you're mocking me, stop mocking me. If you love me, you will not mock me. And he eventually acquiesces.

Now. In the Talmud, it is said that she continually asks him, day and night, and even during sex. I also want to point out that nowhere in the actual text of Judges does it say that they have a sexual relationship. That is just that is heavily inferred, it is heavily implied, but it is never actually explicitly said, which is again very interesting. Because in other parts of this book it's very clear when sex is, in fact, happening. Not so with this.

But, you know, I completely agree that, you know, he's kind of the jokester, he's the one who's really kind of pulling the rug out from under her. And you're absolutely right that, you know, she follows through on her threats. Each and every time she brings the Philistines, each of the three times with the thongs, with the ropes, with everything. She continually tells him, Samson, the Philistines are here and he betrays himself and his own lies to her.

One would think that a cautious, wise man would eventually wise up to what exactly is going on. But here's the thing, we don't actually know that Samson believes or knows in his bones that if he cuts his hair he will lose his strength. I think that throughout his rather reckless and devil-may-care life, he's probably skirted the rules more than a few times and has never actually been punished for it, so I wonder if he is under the impression that he is kind of invincible, or that the rules don't apply to him at this point.

That's another thing that I think kind of gets glossed over when we talk about Samson in Delilah. So, before Delilah is even introduced, we're told that Samson has been judging or ruling the Israelites for twenty years. So this is no spring chicken. This is a man who has been in power, keeping the Philistines at bay, settling disputes for decades now, this is a man who is very accustomed to his powers, who has come to rely on them and probably doesn't have any real inclination of losing them any time soon. I don't think he thinks that the haircut is going to be what makes God say, "That does it, no more for you. We're done, you screwed up enough."

Anne: Absolutely. Could we talk a little bit about how gender plays out in this story? Samson is this very hyper masculine guy, and in our popular understanding of Delilah, she's kind of this very hyper-feminine, over-sexed woman. But then she is the one who emasculates him.

Rivka: Absolutely. I think the gender rules in the Tanakh are actually very, very clear. So in the Tanakh, and with the six hundred and thirteen commandments that Jews are obligated to fulfil, a tremendous number of them are gendered, meaning that there are many that are only applicable to cisgender men, and there are others that are only applicable to cisgender women. Now there's a third state of this that actually parses out these obligations in these commandments according to intersex status, but that's a conversation for a different time. We're just going to focus on the cisgender ones.

So in this world, in this Israelite world, things are gendered very, very clearly, and social roles and cultural expectations of those gender roles are extremely explicit, which makes her status as a woman without any real clear connection to men and men's families even more unmooring and unusual, because of the nature of the ancient Israelite world. Women were primarily identified by their relationships with men, and in subservience to men. In this story, as we mentioned previously, she has no husband, she has no explicit father, she has no explicit male family member. She doesn't have any kinsmen, which makes her such an enigma, which makes her sexuality and her gender expression such an enigma. In the ancient Israelite world, there was really no place for a woman like her.

Which is why I think she's so harrowing and such a threat to the ancient Israelites, and why she is being used as a kind of a scarecrow, as a tactic of scaring people away from maybe getting involved with women, not necessarily Philistine women, but women whose background and connections you do not know. We know very little about Delilah. We know very little about her role in the community. That's really what the threat is - that even if someone is different from you, as long as you know their Intentions, and you know them very well in their connection to the community, you know where they fit into your world. That is much less of a threat than a woman who, you know, we don't know anything about her.

So I think that gender roles, particularly in this time and in this place, and in the scope of this story, rely very heavily on her positionality within the community, and because she quite simply doesn't have any explicit positionality within the community, we can't categorize her. She is a bit of a shapeshifter, and I think that's ultimately the real cause of his downfall and the real threat to the status quo and the organization of the Israelite community.

Anne: There's so much chaos in Judges! Can you speak a bit to that?

Rivka: You're absolutely right that Judges is deeply chaotic, and some of the chaos, I think, is just frankly manufactured by Sampson himself. I mean, this guy is a bit of a drama queen, and absolutely will cause himself problems on purpose.

So, you know, we have the Israelites and the Philistines, who are living side by side. There are about five Philistine settlements in this area, and there's a lot of cultural tension. There is almost definitely some cultural diffusion, meaning there almost certainly is some intermarriage. There almost certainly is some intermingling. This is not an apartheid state as we would know it today. But Samson is absolutely reigning over what is probably a high

stakes, high volatility situation, and he is ruling it alongside Philistines, who are very opportunistic, very devious, and who have clearly identified him as public enemy number one, to themselves and their people.

Now, among the Israelites, he's trying to build a secure kingdom in the image of God and God's commandments. That is pretty explicitly his mission, and that's the role of a Nazarite judge. In fact, he is the last Nazarite judge before we start bringing in the kings. So, in that sense, his obligation is to try to enforce God's law to the utmost ability, and to keep them safe from the Philistines in doing so.

That is a huge amount of responsibility for anyone, if they had divine gifts or not, and we can kind of see from the text that he's not actually given the gifts of wisdom, or even particular intelligence, that he is simply given just a lot of physical strength, which has served him very well in protecting the Israelite people. But that doesn't necessarily translate to good leadership abilities. So there's a real question as to whether or not he's actually any good at his job, or whether the Israelite kingdom, in this time, in this place, especially twenty years into his reign, is in any kind of disarray, or whether things are relatively peaceful.

We can guess that he's probably not facing too many major military threats from the Philistines. We see earlier that he's handily able to defeat an entire army using nothing but a donkey's jaw, which is quite the choice of weapon. But what we don't know is how well he has governed the Israelite people since then. I think we've all seen the kind of military rulers who don't necessarily translate well to civilian life and authority. And I think this, I suspect that this may be one of those cases, where he's very good on the battlefield, but maybe not the best actual judge, or maybe not particularly well-equipped for the job. One of the reasons why I do think he seeks relief and has such a submissive tack with Delilah, is simply because him being in power 24/7, ruling over the Israelites, keeping the Philistines at bay. That's got to be exhausting. That has to be a really high stress, high pressure role, and it has to be a tremendous relief for him to be able to go to someone that he absolutely adores and just be a little baby sleeping in a lap.

Anne: I feel like you and I are of an age where a good Samson piece of media we might both enjoy is the Regina Spektor song.

Rivka: Yes, and I think that's actually really interesting, because we think about, what if Samson hadn't been a Nazarite? What if he had not had this tremendous burden placed on him literally from the time he was a fetus? He was always, from birth, destined to be this great Nazarite judgement. and perhaps we can understand that part of his rashness, and part of his irresponsibility, was actually, perhaps subversively, maybe a little bit of a rebellion against this massive responsibility and rule that was foisted on him from birth.

He never got a choice. He was always meant to be a Nazirite judge. And maybe there's a parallel universe in which maybe it was just a guy. And maybe he met a girl and he loved the girl and he decided to marry the girl. As I mentioned earlier, there are actually parts of the extended universe of the Tanakh - the Midrash, and the Talmud - where she is described as his wife, and it is actually said that they have children. Now again, this is all quite ahistorical, this is all just kind of conjecture, but I personally like to think that there's an alternate universe where that story, as reflected in the Regina Spektor song, is exactly what

happened. What if he's just a guy and he just met a girl and she cuts his hair? Which, actually, in the story in Judges, she doesn't do. She has a servant do it. She out-sources the dirty work. She doesn't get her hands dirty.

But maybe she cuts his hair and they just settle down on the border town between the Philistines and these Israelites, and they have a rowdy couple of kids, and they're all strong like their father. And, you know, maybe she's a nag, but he loves her, and maybe they just weave baskets together. And maybe she continues her work. Maybe she is a prostitute. Maybe it doesn't bother him.

What's so interesting about the story is it could unfold a million and one ways, just based purely on Samson's choices, and each time he chooses probably the most chaotic and high risk strategy he possibly could. "I'm going to marry the Philistine woman against the wishes of my parents and my community, I'm going to keep butting into weddings where it's really easy for me to get a hold of some wine or some grapes that would break my vow, I'm going to tell this mysterious woman I'm besotted with that, if she cuts my hair, then I'll lose all the God-given strength, and I think that's not going to happen, that nothing bad's going to happen here, I'm with God, God hasn't left my side yet, why would he leave my side now?"

And that's ultimately what is his downfall, because then she hands him over to the Philistines. They torture him. They use him as kind of a workhorse, and they use him as a dancing bear in their courts, and I think through that he actually learns the humility to appreciate the gifts that God had given him. He was a slave. He was a Nazarite judge of Israel in an extremely prestigious role, and now he's reduced to literally hauling bricks and mortar and dancing in court for the people that are his sworn enemies. That's humiliating, and I think through that experience he truly learns repentance. He learns humility, and he asks God once more for his strength back, and when that happens, God sees that he is repentant and that he has truly learned his lesson, and God says, "Okay, you can have your power back." Just permits it for a little bit.

And he chooses to sacrifice himself, a thing that he has never actually done before. He's never really put himself in any serious risk before this, and he decides to sacrifice himself, brace himself against the pillars of the Philistine court, and bring the whole darn thing on to everyone's head, killing himself and the Philistines. And Judges says this is the most number of people, the highest number of people he's ever killed in one go. And in so doing, he fulfills his vow of defeating the Philistines, and delivering the Israelite people from their oppression and antagonism, and he doesn't actually fulfil that mission and that prophecy until he humbles himself enough to appreciate the gifts that God gave him from birth. And I really think that is the point of the story.