Jabotinsky’s ‘Samson’

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Vladimir Jabotinsky was one of the greatest Jewish novelists. He is better known, however, as the founder of ‘Revisionist Zionism,’ a movement in opposition to Labour Zionism, which held that the aim of Zionism should be the creation of a Jewish majority in Palestine and the reestablishment of a Jewish state there; nothing short of that. After being banned from Palestine in 1929 by the British, Jabotinsky organized the Irgun to drive them out, although he died (in 1940, on a fundraising trip to New York) before his hopes were realized. Menachem Begin succeeded him as head of the Irgun. The Israeli Likud Party is the direct descendant of Jabotinsky and his followers.

Born in Odessa in 1880, Jabotinsky was the rare political leader who was also a distinguished novelist. The slim roster includes Benjamin Disraeli, Gabriele D’Annunzio, Mario Vargas Llosa, and who else? When the Guardian gathered the ten best novels by politicians, Jimmy Carter and Newt Gingrich had to be enlisted, along with an obscure political allegory by Sir Winston Churchill, because otherwise ten could not have been found. Jabotinsky was left off the list, even though the great Ruth R. Wisse had enshrined Samson in The Modern Jewish Canon nine years earlier. Even before that, Maxim Gorky was reputed to have complained that Zionism stole Jabotinsky from Russian literature.

Samson appeared first in serial form in 1927 in a Russian-language journal published in Paris. In book form, it was published in Russian in 1928 and in two separate German editions later the same year. (Whether Jabotinsky, who was fluent in German, rewrote his own novel or it was translated by a second hand is a riddle I have been unable to solve.) At all events, it was the German version that was translated into English in 1930.

As closely as possible, given the scarcity of detail, Jabotinsky follows the biblical tale of Samson (Judg 13–16). What attracted him to the tale is the prophecy that is foretold before Samson’s birth: ‘He will be the first to save Israel from the Philistines’—the people who conquered coastal Canaan in the twelfth century B.C.E. and occupied it for the next six hundred years, ruling over the descendants of Israel. Jabotinsky’s Samson is transformed by painful experience from a gang leader to a lone ‘brigand,’ gradually developing the rudiments of a political consciousness. He is keenly aware that the Philistines have acquired the knowledge of iron smithing, which is the source of their power. Samson makes it his life’s purpose to obtain iron for the scattered and disunified tribes who are not yet called Jews.

Unlike the Bible’s Samson, Jabotinsky’s is not a chieftain, a settled leader (shofet in Hebrew, misleadingly translated ‘judge’) with a political seat. What Jabotinsky recreates is the chaotic period between the death of Joshua and the establishment of the monarchy when the Israelitish tribes were led by a succession of champions, who would throw off an occupying power until a new conquerer would descend upon them, requiring a new champion. Jabotinsky’s Israelities live from hand to mouth, having been robbed of ‘their land, their speech, their customs, their art, their gods, and finally even of the will to live their lives in their own way.’ And his Samson is a fighter.

Everyone remembers the ‘young lion’ that roars at Samson out of nowhere when he is on the road to Timnath. Samson tears the cat apart with his bare hands. Jabotinsky
dwell upon the anecdote, spinning it out into an adventure. In the novel, the young lion
becomes a panther, and Samson leaps upon its back, interlocking his limbs with the cat’s:

Sneezing, snarling and howling, they rolled over on the ground together, and it
was hard to distinguish the cries of the man from the cries of the beast. But the
panther could do no further harm. It struck wildly at the air with its paws,
throwing cascades of earth and stones in all directions. Its case was oddly similar
to that of a cat with a bell tied to its tail. Its bellows of fury changed gradually to
howls of pain, for Samson was slowly wrenching its fore-legs out of joint by
turning his elbows outwards and pressing down the beast’s neck with his clasped
hands. This took some time, but at length the characteristic sound of cracking
joints was heard, and the panther howled in a tone common to all great beasts of
prey in their death agony—a tone which makes it difficult to recognize the species
of animal. Its fore-legs now hung limp, as though only loosely attached to its
body. Once more it reared up on its hind legs, and threw itself backwards in an
effort to crush the devil that rode it; but Samson’s fingers were already choking its
throat on both sides. Soon the snarls and howls died away, and nothing could be
heard but the death-rattle of the throttled beast, the menacing hiss of breath
between the man’s clenched teeth and the heavy, regular beat of the long tail.

This passage may seem as if it belongs in a boy’s book or a swashbuckler (if there
can be swashbucklers without swords), but it has a firm intention behind it, both literary
and political. If the Jewish writer, as Isaac Babel wrote at about the same time in his
Odessa Tales, is a man with ‘glasses on his nose and autumn in his heart,’ then
Jabotinsky wanted to give Jewish writing a good shake, although he too wore glasses. As
he wrote in 1938 to a young man who was contemplating suicide over antisemitic
bullying at school, ‘Surrender is the dirtiest trick in creation; and suicide, being the
symbol of surrender, is like a call for universal betrayal.’ His writing is like a call to
action. Jabotinsky wanted to rouse a generation of Jewish heroes, even among the
bespectacled intelligentsia. He wanted to dispel autumn from Jewish hearts.

But Samson is also an exciting novel—a heroic novel—because Jabotinsky was
not writing a Tendenzroman. Some Jewish critics, according to his biographer Shmuel
Katz, were struck by what they detected as a militaristic subtext in Samson’s farewell
message to his people:

Tell them two things in my name—two words. The first word is Iron. They must
get iron. They must give everything they have for iron—their silver and wheat, oil
and wine and flocks, even their wives and daughters. All for iron! There is
nothing in the world more valuable than iron. . . . The second word they will not
understand yet, but they must learn to understand it, and that soon. The second
word is this: a king! Say to Dan, Benjamin, Judah, Ephraim: a king! A man will
give them the signal and of a sudden thousands will lift up their hands. So it is
with the Philistines, and therefore the Philistines are lords of Canaan. Say it from
Zorah to Hebron and Shechem, and farther even to Endor and Laish: a king!
Jabotinsky was disgusted by the insinuation that Samson was an obvious costume for his political views. ‘I am getting angry with all the Jewish critics who see in it a tendentious novel,’ he wrote to a friend. ‘Even if the author were a pacifist Samson in his day would have had to dream of iron and a king.’

It may be true that Jabotinsky was drawn to his subject by Samson’s combative antipathy to the Philistines, but once the subject was chosen, the novel Samson is distinguished before anything else by its adherence to the conditions of that particular story. Thus Samson could not be the sworn ideological foe of the Philistines, because—in the words of the biblical book of Judges—his hatred for the Philistines is founded upon a taanah, a pretext for a quarrel (14.4). He was born to fight the Philistines.

In the Bible, Samson’s hatred grows out of a wrong that is done to him. His father-in-law gives his Philistine bride to another man, and offers her younger sister (‘more beautiful than she’) in her stead (15.2). Jabotinsky expands this incident with grisly and hair-raising detail. Samson refuses the younger sister, who has always desired him (it is she, not his future wife, whom he had noticed among the Philistine women in Timnath); he kicks her in the face to get away from her; then he seeks out and destroys the house of his rival, while his wife flees in terror and confusion. Samson agrees to leave Timnath after his father-in-law agrees to bring his wife to him in his own village of Zorah. But in reprisal the Philistine who has cuckolded him murders Samson’s wife and father-in-law, rapes the younger sister and burns down their household.

With that the enmity between Samson and the Philistines is sealed forever. But Jabotinsky slyly weaves in another strand of the story, which otherwise—as in the Hebrew Scriptures—might stand as a separate and unrelated chapter. In Jabotinsky’s version, the younger sister reemerges as Delilah. This is the only twist of his plot that was retained in the 1949 film Samson and Delilah for which Cecil B. DeMille had purchased the rights to Jabotinsky’s novel. After Samson confuses her for her older sister (‘Then you didn’t die? Or did you die and come back again?’), she conceives a jealous hatred for Samson. It is her appearance in the Philistine temple in Gaza, many weeks later, after Samson has been captured and blinded, that occasions the final destruction. She is holding his child, and taunts him with it:

It will grow brave and strong like its father and I, since my milk has turned to poison, shall teach it to hate its father’s race. And so, out of the judge and protector will come an enemy and destroyer.

Instead, in the well-known denouement, Samson pulls down the temple, killing the future enemy of Israel along with his present tormentor and the most prominent of his people’s oppressors. The collapse of the temple is narrated by an Egyptian survivor, who witnessed it firsthand. His conclusion is that Samson possessed ‘that intangible quality, dwelling in the soul of a whole people, that distinguishes it from all other nations of the earth’—the quality that would come to be known as ahavat Yisrael, the Jews’ love for the Jewish ‘race,’ which would lead them against all odds, and no matter who opposed them, to seek a country of their own, where they could protect themselves against enemies and destroyers. Jabotinsky’s magnificent novel gives voice to the unconquerable spirit within Zionism.
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