

Shabbat Naso ShaLom



The Blinding of Samson by Rembrandt, 1636

by Phyllis Chesler

The years have become like months, so swiftly does time seem to fly as one gets older—and thus, all too soon, we find ourselves back again in parashat Naso, re-visiting the stories of both the outrageous [Sotah](#) ritual (about which I wrote last year) and that of the Nazirite. In yesterday's wonderful class with Rabbi Ben Skydell, I learned something surprising: That the Nazirite can end his vow but he is then obliged to bring "kurbanot," (6:10-20) sacrificial offerings to God. A burnt offering, a peace offering, a sin offering after which he shaves his head—and only then can he drink wine.

I began to wonder why, exactly, Shimshon, the most famous of our Nazirites, lost his strength when he cut his hair. (His story is contained in the haftorah chosen to accompany Naso.) Shimshon v' D'lilah, Camille Saint-Saens's opera about them has the most beautiful, perhaps the most enchanting aria ever

composed, in which D'lilah sings to him: "[Mon coeur](#) s'ouvre a ta voix" (My heart opens to the sound of your voice.)

Nechama Leibowitz quickly came to my rescue. His eyes wandered, and led by his lust for "impure" things, Shimshon succumbed to De'lilah's questions about the source of his supernatural strength. While he slept, she cut off his hair. The Plishtim then blinded him—ironically, punishing him for his wandering eyes. Medah K'neged Medah. Leibowitz dwells on what Shimshon's unnamed mother does not tell Manoach, her husband, everything the angel told her but worse, at the end, Shimshon prays that God strengthen him, "that I may be avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes." He does not seek vengeance for all Israel, who are oppressed by the Plishtim/Philistines. Leibowitz quotes Abraham Kariv, who concludes that Shimshon utterly failed his "sacred task...he forfeited his strength, his sight, freedom, life, and his mission...Samson remained a solitary character. In his place there arose one of a long line of Jewish spiritual heroes—the prophet Samuel."

Shimshon did not *choose* to be a Nazirite; God's messenger announced that he must be so while Shimshon was still in the womb. Perhaps free choice is required for one to both recognize and fulfill one's holy mission. What do you think?