**Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at American University**

February 2025 Shorts Study Group

**Ego, Impulse, and Flawed Leadership: the Case of Samson**

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**Syllabus**

The biblical story of Samson features extraordinary examples of flawed leadership starring a high-powered demagogue who resists efforts from all sides to control his impulses. What theological message could possibly be encoded in such scandalous episodes as blatant violation of sacred vows, liaisons with ladies of the night, and violent outbursts featuring a roaring lion, an uprooted city gate, and the jawbone of an ass? And what do these stories tell us about ourselves? We will bring fresh eyes to a close reading of the story of Samson in order to uncover the interplay of Divine will and human perversity in this troubling tale of seduction, destruction, murder, and other mayhem.

Our primary text will be the book of Judges, chapters 13-16. We will be using the JPS translations, available in print editions, and also available for free on Sefaria.org.

[Please choose the gender-sensitive JPS translation on Sefaria, and please access the biblical text on a different device from the one you use to Zoom our session.]

**Two Sessions:**

**Session 1**: Judges 13-14

The annunciation and birth of Samson and the Divine plan; Samson's coming of age, his marriage, and its disastrous outcome.

**Session 2**: Judges 15-16

Samson's attempt to reconcile with his bride, Philistine retaliation, and Samson's vengeance; Samson, Delilah, and the Lords of the Philistines; Samson in the Temple of Dagon and the Divine plan fulfilled.

**QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:**

As you read, you might choose to consider the following questions for each episode along with others that may occur to you:

1) What is the overall message of this story?

2) What is the message about leadership? Whom does the text advocate as leader? Whom does the text condemn or criticize, either implicitly or explicitly?

3) What is the message about parents and progeny or other mentor/disciple relationships?

4) What is the message about women, autonomously and in all their roles [daughter, wife, mother, lover, etc.]?

5) What is God’s role in human life, according to the episode? What makes you think so?

6) What elements of the stories add ‘entertainment value’ or contribute to memorability? What message(s) might be highlighted or emphasized by means of these elements? [**questions for consideration continue next page**]

**Questions for Consideration**, **The Case of Samson** [cont'd]

7) As you work, you might reflect upon the following literary considerations, and note where you see them:

-Do you notice any outstanding or recurring themes in this narrative?

-Do any relationship types recur?

-Does any language strike you as odd or emphasized?

-Do any of the language or motifs remind you of other episodes elsewhere in the Bible? If so, how do these episodes "speak" to one another?

-If characters are named, what form does the name/naming take? What do those names

mean?

-If characters are anonymous, who are they (role? function?) and what might their anonymity suggest?

**FURTHER READINGS:**

No further readings are required for class sessions, but you may find the following of interest [check availability on Google Scholar]:

Greenstein, Edward L. “The Riddle of Samson.” *Prooftexts* 1, no. 3 (1981): 237-60.