

## **Parshat Naso: Blessed be the Sota Michal Kohane**

176 is the number of the verses in this week's portion, the longest in the Torah, same as the longest Psalm (chapter 119) and as the longest tractate in the Talmud (Bava Batra with 176 *dapim*, pages). The parasha opens with the orderly travel of the Children of Israel in the desert and ends on the day the *mishkan* is erected and dedicated, and Moses hears "The Voice" speaking to him there (Numbers 7:89).

With such "bookends", we might wonder, what else is in this parasha? Surprisingly, we find here such obscure topics as the removal from the camp of *metzo'ra'im* (Torah lepers), description of the *zavim* (people with "impure" bodily excretion) and other *t'me'im* (spiritually impure people). Some suggest this is due to the need to explore and clarify critical distinctions of holiness which were not previously discussed.

It is here that we also find the Sotah, a married woman suspected by her husband of adultery. Because of his suspicion, she is asked to undergo the "ordeal of bitter water", (or "ordeal of jealousy", Numbers, 5:11-31). The woman is brought to the priest and given a "magic potion" that will reveal the truth: if she indeed had an affair, the water will have a horrific effect on her, similar to a forced miscarriage. And if not, nothing will happen. They can go back home, living "happily ever after".

In an effort to begin unpacking this often unpopular teaching, let's travel back to pre-Temple days, to the little stone home of Isha and Ish. For some time now, Ish has been wondering how Isha is spending her time when he's away, and with whom. He might ask. She might tell. But he doesn't believe her. We've all experienced this in one way or another. What's fascinating is not that there is jealousy in the world, but that the Torah devotes prestigious attention to it.

The next time Ish or Isha is away from the other, he warns her, specifically about her interactions with the other guy. He also asks his friends to watch if she's spending the kind of time that can lead to "something" with the man, as nothing can be done without (a warning and) legal witnesses.

But things don't get better. We can imagine that both are upset, maybe heartbroken too. At this point, there is no court in the world that can settle their dispute and feelings of distrust. What is needed is a miracle, and that's what the Torah has. Throughout the tanach, miracles happen only to prophets and only for the benefit of the public. And here, a miracle reserved for a *halachik* resolution, between a couple (in stark contrast to how the rabbis rejected resolving *halachik* challenges with miracles when it was Rabbi Eliezer's idea in Bava Metzi'a 59:b)

The couple's relationship reaches an impasse. Divorce is an option: if it's his initiative, she will get her *ktuba* (marriage contract) money; however if it's her initiative, she won't. She will also lose her ability to marry the other man, if there was a "something" between them (and by the way, if there really was "something" and the two of them were caught, they would both be "put to death", Leviticus 21:18). The unacceptable situation festers. And festers. I'm wondering about family and friends? community leaders? anyone around them? After what must be an unbearable time, they both agree (yes, they must both agree) on heading to Jerusalem, to see if perhaps this can be cleared and the relationship -repaired.

It's interesting to compare the use of miracles to check individuals' innocence in other cultures. Professor Yaakov Licht (Jerusalem 1985) conducted an extensive research and found other cultures who use miracles; who, for example, have their accused walk on hot iron (if the person is not guilty, the burn will heal), or swallow large amounts of bread and cheese (if the person chokes, he's guilty). By contrast, the Sotah drinks water with a little mishkan dust and ink. Unlike the others, this is designed to ensure that any results will be through divine intervention. In addition, the walking, touching or swallowing of hot iron, for example, would scare an accused to admit just about anything, while the Sotah has to agree to go and the water itself is not naturally harmful.

One of the disturbing aspects of the ordeal is the "asymmetry": She's going through it, and what about the men involved?

The Torah does view men and women as different in certain aspects, but in this case, the rabbis too, were bothered by this. Thus, regarding the husband, Rambam says (Hilchot Sotah 82:8 based on Numbers 5:31):

*...וכל הדברים האלו (שהמים בודקין את האישה) - בשלא חטא הבעל מעולם...*

*And all these things (that the water check the wife) – only work if the husband never sinned...*

And regarding her paramour, the Mishna (Tractate Sotah 27:b) says:

*מתני' כשם שהמים בודקין אותה כך המים בודקין אותו...*

*Mishna: Just as the water checks her fidelity, so too, the water checks his, i.e., her alleged paramour's, (involvement in the sin.... (so that whatever happens to her, happens to him*

The Sotah ordeal was abolished with the destruction of the Temple, and some say due to the fact that there were too many adulterers (note that husbands were then advised "simply" not to be envious, as opposed to, for example, advising wives not to cheat and "behave better"!), but it did stay in the Torah, even though the procedure includes erasing God's name, because if God can give up on "His kavod" (honor) in order to bring about peace, we should consider it too.

Last but not least, shortly after the Sotah, in this parasha, we find the beautiful priestly blessing, "*birkat hakohanim*", which many of us recite weekly when blessing our children. After God's name was erased, the priests are asked to bestow God's name anew on the people, to convey protection, light and peace, and do so – with love. At the end of the day, love is always an option.



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