

Parashat Naso: The Great Enigma

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Ishay Rosen-Tzvi, "Sotah," in *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (2009)

The Torah...determines that a husband who suffers from "a spirit of jealousy" and suspects his wife must bring her to the priest at the Tabernacle. There the priest performs a series of ritual acts: he offers a "meal-offering of jealousy," an offering of ground barley without oil or frankincense, unbinds the woman's hair, makes her swear an oath that she had sexual relations with no man other than her husband, writes the oath in a scroll and erases it in water mixed with dust from the Tabernacle, and finally makes the woman drink the mixture.

This mixture, which the Torah calls "the bitter, curse-causing waters," contains the oath and the curses that accompany it, and ultimately determines the woman's fate. As the woman drinks the potion, the outcome of the trial appears on her body, confirming or refuting her husband's suspicions: If she is guilty, the water will cause the woman to become infertile (the expressions "her thigh falls" and "her belly distends" are probably euphemisms for harm to the sexual organs), but if she is innocent the water will do her no harm and even cause her to become fertile.

1. A Tale of Two Sisters

Midrash Tanhuma Naso 9

מעשה בשתי אחיות שהיו דומות זו לזו. והיתה אחת נשואה בעיר אחת, ואחת נשואה בעיר אחרת. בקש בעלה של אחת מהן לקנאות לה ולהשקותה מים המרים בירושלים. הלכה לאותה העיר שהיתה אחותה נשואה שם. אמרה לה אחותה, מה ראית לבא לכאן. אמרה לה, בעלי מבקש להשקות אותי מים המרים. אמרה לה אחותה, אני הולכת תחתיה ושותה. אמרה לה לכן. לבשה בגדי אחותה והלכה תחתיה ושתתה מים המרים ונמצאת טהורה, וחזרה לבית אחותה. יצאת שמה לקראתה, חבקה אותה ונשקה לה בפיה. כיון שנשקו זו לזו, הריחה במים המרים, ומיד מתה, לקיים מה שנאמר: אין אדם שליט ברוח לכלא את הרוח, ואין שלטון ביום המות, ואין משלחת במלחמה, ולא ימלט רשע את בעליו (קהלת ח, ח).

[There is] a story about two sisters who resembled each other. Now, one was married in one city and the other was married in another city. The husband of one of them wanted to accuse her of infidelity and have her drink the bitter water in Jerusalem. She went to that city where her married sister was. Her sister said to her, "What was your reason for coming here?" She said to her, "My husband wants to have me drink [the bitter water]." Her sister said to her, "I will go in your place and drink it." She said to her, "Go." She put on her sister's clothes, went in her place, drank the bitter water, and was found clean. When she returned to her sister's house, she joyfully went out to meet her, then embraced and kissed her on the mouth. As soon as the one kissed the other, she smelled the bitter water and immediately died, in order to fulfill what is stated (in Eccl. 8:8), "No human has control over the wind to contain the wind, nor is there control on the day of death [...]."

Ruth Calderon, "Sisters," in *A Bride for One Night* (2014)

The narrator of this story, from his masculine perspective, fails to appreciate the complexity of the relationship between the sisters. He regards their solidarity as a threat to the social order. Moreover, he is not aware that they are competing over a limited resource—the love of a man, namely him. As the story unfolds, the older sister also experiences love, and thus she, too, tastes life in all its vitality. How will she restore this vitality to her sister, to

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

whom it rightfully belongs? How will she return to the ordinariness of her own daily life? Solidarity is difficult to maintain in a harsh world with scant resources...
As this story suggests, a woman suspected of adultery in the rabbinic period could find herself divorced with a child in her womb, abandoned and penniless without even a dramatic story to share.

2. Whither the Sotah Ritual?

Mishnah Sotah 9:9	
<p>מִשְׁרְבוּ הַרְצָחִים, בְּטֵלָה עֲגָלָה עֲרוּפָה, מִשְׁבָּא אֲלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן דִּינָא, וְתַחֲנִינָה בֶּן פְּרִישָׁה הָיָה נִקְרָא, חֲזָרוּ לְקָרוֹתוֹ בֶּן הַרְצָחוֹ. מִשְׁרְבוּ הַמְנַאֲפִים, פְּסָקוּ הַמֵּים הַמְרִים, וְרַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי הִפְסִיקוֹ, שְׁנֵאֲמַר (הוֹשֵׁעַ ד) לֹא אֶפְקֹד עַל בְּנוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי תִזְנֶינָה וְעַל כְּלוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי תִנְאַפְנָה כִּי הֵם וְגו'.</p> <p>מִשְׁמַת יוֹסִי בֶּן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צֶרֶדָה יוֹסִי בֶּן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, בְּטָלוּ הָאֲשָׁכּוֹלוֹת, שְׁנֵאֲמַר (מִיכָה ז) אִין אֲשָׁכּוֹל לֹאֲכַל בְּכוֹרָה אֲוֹתָה נְפִשִׁי:</p>	<p>When murderers multiplied, the [ceremony of] breaking a heifer's neck ceased. That was from the time of Eliezer ben Dinai, and he was also called Tehinah ben Perisha and he was afterwards renamed "son of the murderer". When adulterers multiplied, the ceremony of the bitter waters ceased and it was Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai who discontinued it, as it is said, "I will not punish their daughters for fornicating, nor their daughters-in-law for committing adultery, for they themselves [turn aside with whores and sacrifice with prostitutes]" (Hosea 4:14). When Yose ben Yoezer of Zeredah and Yose ben Yohanan of Jerusalem died, the grape-clusters ceased, as it is said, "There is not a cluster [of grapes] to eat; not a ripe fig I could desire [The pious are vanished from the land, none upright are left among men]" (Micah 7:1-2).</p>

Bemidbar 5:20	
<p>וְאִתָּה כִּי שָׁטִיתָ תַּחַת אִשְׁתְּךָ וְכִי נִטְמַמְתָּ וַיִּתֶּן אִישׁ בָּךְ אֶת־שִׁכְבְּתוֹ מִבְּלַעַדִּי אִשְׁתְּךָ:</p>	<p>But if you have gone astray while committed to your husband and have defiled yourself, if anyone other than your husband has had carnal relations with you"—</p>

Ramban on Bemidbar 5:20	
<p>וְהִנֵּה אֵין בְּכָל מִשְׁפָּטֵי הַתּוֹרָה דְּבָר תִּלּוּי בְּנֵס זִילְתִּי הָעִנִּין הַזֶּה, שֶׁהוּא פֶּלֶא וְנִס קְבֹועַ שְׂעִיעֶשֶׂה בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהִיוֹתָם רַבִּים עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם... וּלְפִיכָךְ פָּסַק הָעִנִּין הַזֶּה מִשְׁעָה שֶׁנִּתְקַלְקְלוּ בַּעֲבֻרוֹת, כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמְרוּ (סוֹטָה מז): "מִשְׁרְבוּ הַנּוֹאֲפִים פְּסָקוּ מִי סוֹטָה"...</p>	<p>Now there is nothing amongst all the ordinances of the Torah which depends upon a miracle, except for this matter, which is a permanent wonder and miracle that will happen in Israel, when the majority of the people live in accordance with the Will of God... Therefore this matter [i.e., the effect of the water on the <i>sotah</i>] stopped from the time that the people became debauched with [sexual] sins, as the Rabbis have said: "When adulterers became frequent, the water of <i>sotah</i> ceased,</p>

3. The Great Enigma

Ruth Calderon, "Sisters," in <i>A Bride for One Night</i> (2014)
The ritual of the bitter waters is a ceremony that developed in response to men's primal fear of women. The womb of a woman is the most secret of interior chambers, the great enigma that can never be fully known. When a woman becomes pregnant, only she and God can know whose seed is inside her...

<p>Big Question: How do you feel about reading these texts? What do you want or wish to do in response to them?</p>
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