

Parashat Naso: The Kiss of Death

Rabbi Joshua Rabin, Astoria Center of Israel, Astoria, New York¹

Bemidbar 5:13	
<p>דִּבֶּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹתָהּ אֲשֶׁתּוֹ וּמַעַלָּה בּוֹ מַעַל... </p>	<p>Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: Regarding anyone whose wife has gone astray and broken faith with him...</p>

1. A Tale of Two Sisters

Midrash Tanhuma, Naso 6	
<p>מַעֲשֵׂה בְּשָׁתֵי אֲחִיּוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ דּוֹמוֹת זוֹ לְזוֹ. וְהָיְתָה אַחַת נְשׂוּאָה בְּעִיר אַחַת, וְאַחַת נְשׂוּאָה בְּעִיר אַחֲרָת. בִּקֵּשׁ בְּעָלָהּ שָׁל אַחַת מִהֶן לִקְנָאוֹת לָהּ וּלְהַשְׁקוֹתָהּ מִיַּם הַמָּרִים בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם. הִלְכָה לְאוֹתָהּ הָעִיר שֶׁהָיְתָה אַחֲתָהּ נְשׂוּאָה שָׁם. אָמְרָה לָהּ אַחֲתָהּ, מָה רָאִית לְבֹא לְכָאן. אָמְרָה לָהּ, בְּעָלִי מִבְּקֵשׁ לְהַשְׁקוֹת אוֹתִי מִיַּם הַמָּרִים. אָמְרָה לָהּ אַחֲתָהּ, אֲנִי הוֹלֶכֶת תַּחְתֶּיךָ וְשׁוֹתָהּ. אָמְרָה לָהּ לְכִי. לְבִשָּׁה בְּגָדֵי אַחֲתָהּ וְהִלְכָה תַּחְתֶּיךָ וְשָׁתָהּ מִי הַמָּרִים וְנִמְצְאָת טְהוֹרָה, וְחִזְרָה לְבֵית אַחֲתָהּ. יֵצְאָת שִׂמְחָה לִקְרֹאָתָהּ, חֲבִיקָה אוֹתָהּ וְנִשְׁקָה לָהּ בִּפִּיהָ. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁנִּשְׁקָה זוֹ לְזוֹ, הָרִיחָה בַּמִּים הַמָּרִים, וּמִיד מָתָה...</p>	<p>[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...</p>

Ruth Calderon, <i>Bridge for One Night</i> , "Sisters"
<p>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 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...</p>
<p>I picture the woman who dared to plead innocent, who came to Jerusalem and stood before God, facing the holy sanctum with her secret hidden from the entire world, drinking the bitter water mixed with dust and with letters erased from the scroll. Such a woman converts the Sotah ritual into a religious act. She who is not scared off by her husband or by the priests and their warnings will attain a position of power superior to theirs. She has undertaken a sort of feminine hajj. When she arrives home, who would dare to defy her?</p>

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

Brian Britt, "Male Jealousy and the Suspected Sotah," *The Bible and Critical Theory*

One can imagine, however, the scenario in which the woman is vindicated and her uterus does not drop. The husband in this case must now face the entire community as one who gave in to the 'spirit of jealousy', whose suspicion was groundless. If, on the other hand, the husband's suspicion is affirmed, his reward is a wife (presuming he wishes to remain married) who cannot bear children. Little hermeneutical imagination is needed, then, to imagine how this ritual could 'backfire'. The logic of reversa... in which curses become blessings, presents readers of the Sotah text with the possibility that the curse may somehow become a blessing – perhaps by the humiliation of the husband and priest, who may seem ludicrous in their efforts, or by the vindication of the woman. Also, from a retrospective standpoint, when the ritual had been abandoned or at least placed at some historical distance, the high level of detail could presumably look rather silly, especially if the reader were inclined to doubt the efficacious power of such a ritual. The sheer uniqueness of the text itself exposes it to the risk of marginal status, if not outright disregard.

2. The End of the Sotah Ritual

Bavli Sotah 47a-47b

מִשְׁרְבוּ הַמְּנַאֲפִים — פָּסְקוּ הַמֵּיִם הַמָּרִים. וְרַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּאי הִפְסִיקוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "לֹא אֶפְקֹד עַל בָּנוֹתֶיכֶם כִּי תִזְנֶינָה וְעַל כְּלוֹתֶיכֶם כִּי תִנְאֲפֶנָּה כִּי הֵם וְגו'."

From the time when adulterers proliferated, the performance of the ritual of the bitter waters was nullified; they would not administer the bitter waters to the *sota*. **And it was Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai who nullified it, as it is stated: "I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for they consort with lewd women"** (Hosea 4:14)...

מִשְׁרְבוּ הַנּוֹאֲפִין כו'. תָּנוּ רַבָּנִי: "וְנִקָּה הָאִישׁ מֵעוֹן", בְּזִמְנֵן שֶׁהָאִישׁ מְנוּקָה מֵעוֹן — הַמֵּיִם בּוֹדְקִין אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ, אִין הָאִישׁ מְנוּקָה מֵעוֹן — אִין הַמֵּיִם בּוֹדְקִין אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ. וְאֹמְרִי: "לֹא אֶפְקֹד עַל בָּנוֹתֶיכֶם כִּי תִזְנֶינָה כו'."

From the time when adulterers proliferated, the performance of the ritual of the bitter water of a *sota* was nullified. The Sages taught: It states: "**And the man shall be cleared of transgression**, and that woman shall bear her transgression" (Numbers 5:31), which indicates that **when the man is clear of transgression the waters evaluate** if his wife was unfaithful, but **if the man is not clear of transgression the waters do not evaluate** if his wife was unfaithful. **And it states: "I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry"** (Hosea 4:14)...

Rashi on Bavli Sotah 47a

לֹא אֶפְקֹד - עַל גְּאוּף נְשׁוֹתֶיכֶם לְבֹדֵקָן וּמִפְנֵי מָה עַל בָּנוֹתֶיכֶם כִּי תִזְנֶינָה וְעוֹד כִּי הֵם עִם הַזָּנוֹת יִפְרְדּוּ הֵם עִצְמָן נּוֹאֲפִין כְּפָרְדִּים הֵלְלוּ:

"I will not punish" — for the adultery of your wives by examining them [to test their guilt], nor [will I punish] your daughters when they commit harlotry. And why not? Because they themselves separate together with prostitutes; they themselves commit adultery like these mules.

Meiri on Bavli Sotah 47a

אֵלָּא שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְפָרְשִׁים שְׂכָל שְׂבָבֵי בֵּיתוֹ פְּרוֹצִים בְּזִמְנָה וְהוּא אֵינוֹ מוֹחָה אִף הוּא פָּרוֹץ בְּזִמְנָה וּמֵאַחֵר שֶׁהוּא פָּרוֹץ בְּזִמְנָה חֲשָׁדָן אוֹתוֹ לְהִיּוֹתוֹ בָּא עָלֶיהָ אַחֵר הַסְתִּירָה וְכֵן כָּלֵל שֶׁהַדּוֹר כָּלּוּ פָּרוֹץ בְּעִרְוִית... וְכֵן כָּלֵל שֶׁהַדּוֹר כָּלּוּ פָּרוֹץ בְּעִרְוִית...

Rather, we explain that whenever the members of his household are sexually immoral and he does not protest, he too is considered sexually immoral. And since he is sexually immoral, we suspect him of having had relations with her after the seclusion. And so too in all such cases: when the entire generation is morally corrupt in matters of sexual immorality.