



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

35 Naso — Adulterous Suspicions

Text

במדבר א

א וידבר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה לאמֹר. **ב** צו את-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וישלחו מן-הַמַּחֲנֶה כָּל-צָרוּעַ וְכָל-זָב וְכָל לִטְמֵא לְנֶפֶשׁ. **ג** מִזְכָּר עַד-נִקְבָה תִשְׁלְחוּ אֶל-מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה תִשְׁלְחוּם וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ אֶת-מַחֲנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר אָנִי שׂוֹכֵן בְּתוֹכָם. **ד** וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אוֹתָם אֶל-מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה כִּן עָשׂוּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. . . .

יא וידבר יהוה אל-מֹשֶׁה לאמֹר. **יב** דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי-תִשָּׂה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמַעַל בּוֹ מַעַל. **יג** וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שֹׁכֵב אִשָּׁה וְנִסְתֶּרָה וְהָיָה נִטְמָאָה וְעַד אֵין בָּהּ וְהוּא לֹא נִתְפָּשָׂה. **יד** וְעָבַר עָלָיו רוּחַ-קְנָאָה וְקָנָא אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהוּא נִטְמָאָה אוֹ-עָבַר עָלָיו רוּחַ-קְנָאָה וְקָנָא אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיָה לֹא נִטְמָאָה. **טו** וְהִבִּיא הָאִישׁ אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן וְהִבִּיא אֶת-קִרְבָּנָהּ עֲלֶיהָ עֲשִׂירַת הָאִיפָה קֶמַח שֵׁעֵרִים לֹא-יִצַק עָלָיו שֶׁמֶן וְלֹא-יִתֵּן עָלָיו לֶבֶן כִּי-מִנְחַת קִנְאָתָהּ הוּא מִנְחַת זִכְרוֹן מִזְכָּרְתָּ עוֹן. **טז** וְהִקְרִיב אִתָּהּ הַכֹּהֵן וְהַעֲמִידָה לְפָנָיו יְהוָה. **יז** וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִיַּם קֹדֶשׁ בְּכֶלִי-חֶרֶשׁ וּמִן-הָעֶפֶר אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּקִרְקַע הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקַּח הַכֹּהֵן וְנָתַן אֶל-הַמִּיִם. **יח** וְהַעֲמִיד הַכֹּהֵן אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה לְפָנָיו יְהוָה וּפָרַע אֶת-רֹאשׁ הָאִשָּׁה וְנָתַן עַל-כַּפֶּיהָ אֶת מִנְחַת הַזִּכְרוֹן מִנְחַת קִנְאָתָהּ הוּא וּבִיד הַכֹּהֵן יִהְיוּ מִי הַמְּרִים הַמְּאָרְרִים. **יט** וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ אִתָּהּ הַכֹּהֵן וְאָמַר אֶל-הָאִשָּׁה אִם-לֹא שָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתְּךָ וְאִם-לֹא שָׁטִית טְמֵאָה תַּחַת אִישׁ הַנָּקִי מִמֵּי הַמְּרִים הַמְּאָרְרִים הָאֵלֶּה. **כ** וְאֵת כִּי שָׁטִית תַּחַת אִישׁ וְכִי נִטְמַאת וַיִּתֵּן אִישׁ בְּךָ אֶת-שִׁכְבְּתוֹ מִבְּלַעֲדֵי אִישׁ. **כא** וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ הַכֹּהֵן אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה בְּשִׁבְעַת הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמַר הַכֹּהֵן לָאִשָּׁה יִתֵּן יְהוָה אוֹתְךָ לָאֵלֶּה וְלִשְׁבַעַת בְּתוֹךְ עַמְּךָ בְּתַת יְהוָה אֶת-יִרְכַךְ נִפְלֹת וְאֶת-בִּטְנֶךָ צָבָה. **כב** וּבָאוּ הַמִּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּמַעַיֶן לְצִבּוֹת בָּטָן וְלִנְפֹל יִרַךְ וְאָמַרָה הָאִשָּׁה אֱמוֹן אֱמוֹן. **כג** וְכָתַב אֶת-הָאֵלֶּה הַכֹּהֵן בְּסֶפֶר וּמָחָה אֶל-מֵי הַמְּרִים. **כד** וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶת-מֵי הַמְּרִים הַמְּאָרְרִים וּבָאוּ בָהּ הַמִּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים לְמִרְיָם. **כה** וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִיַּד הָאִשָּׁה אֶת מִנְחַת הַקְּנָאָתָהּ וְהִנִּיף אֶת-הַמִּנְחָה לְפָנָיו יְהוָה וְהִקְרִיב אִתָּהּ אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ. **כו** וְקִמַץ הַכֹּהֵן מִן-הַמִּנְחָה אֶת-אֲזִכְרֹתָהּ וְהִקְטִיר הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאַחַר יִשְׁקָה אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶת-הַמִּיִם. **כז** וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת-הַמִּיִם וְהִיתָה אִם-נִטְמָאָה וְתִמַּע לִמְעַל בְּאִישָׁהּ וּבָאוּ בָהּ הַמִּיִם הַמְּאָרְרִים לְמִרְיָם וְצָבְתָהּ בִּטְנָה וְנִפְלָה יִרְכָה וְהִיתָה הָאִשָּׁה לְאֵלֶּה בְּקִרְבָּה עִמָּה. **כח** וְאִם-לֹא נִטְמָאָה הָאִשָּׁה וְיָטָה הָיָה הוּא וְנִקְתָה וְנִזְרָעָה זֶרַע. **כט** זֹאת תֹּזְכֶרֶת הַקְּנָאָתָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשָּׂה תַּחַת אִישָׁה וְנִטְמָאָה. **ל** אוֹ אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבֹר עָלָיו רוּחַ קְנָאָה וְקָנָא אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהַעֲמִיד אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה לְפָנָיו יְהוָה וַעֲשֵׂה לָהּ הַכֹּהֵן אֶת כָּל-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת. **לא** וְנָקָה הָאִישׁ מֵעוֹן וְהָאִשָּׁה הָיָה תִּשָּׂא אֶת-עוֹנָהּ.

Bamidbar 5

- 1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 2 Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge and anyone defiled by a corpse. 3 Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.
- 4 The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp; as the Lord had spoken to Moses, so the Israelites did. . . .



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11 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 12 Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: □ If any man's spouse turns aside and breaks faith with him 13 in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her spouse, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her — 14 but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the spouse who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his spouse although she has not defiled herself — 15 the man shall bring his spouse to the priest. And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an *ephah* of barley flour. No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it, for it is a meal offering of jealousy, a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing.

16 The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord. 17 The priest shall take sacral water in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water. 18 After he has made the woman stand before the Lord, the priest shall bare the woman's head and place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell. 19 The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your spouse, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell. 20 But if you have gone astray while married to your spouse and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your spouse has had carnal relations with you" — 21 here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman — "may the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; 22 may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag." And the woman shall say, "Amen, amen!"

23 The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness. 24 He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness that induces the spell, so that the spell-inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness. 25 Then the priest shall take from the woman's hand the meal offering of jealousy, elevate the meal offering before the Lord, and present it on the altar. 26 The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Last, he shall make the woman drink the water.

27 Once he has made her drink the water — if she has defiled herself by breaking faith with her spouse, the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people. 28 But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed.

29 This is the ritual in cases of jealousy, when a woman goes astray while married to her spouse and defiles herself, 30 or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his spouse: the woman shall be made to stand before the Lord and the priest shall carry out all this ritual with her. 31 The man shall be clear of guilt; but that woman shall suffer for her guilt.



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Context

Parashat Naso opens with a census of the priestly families, recording the specific duties of each ancestral clan in relation to the parts of the Mishqan and their transport during the desert wanderings. After a brief statement about the exclusion from the camp of people who have contracted ritual impurity, the text turns to an extraordinary discussion of how to deal with suspicions about women's possible adultery. The laws of the Nazir – a person who abstains from wine and hair-cutting – follow. The parasha inscribes the priestly blessing, one of the most ancient Jewish texts, then gives an inventory of the identical dedication offerings brought by each of the twelve chiefs to the Levites.

Explorations

Parshat Naso contains one of the most enigmatic passages in the Torah - the circumstances of a woman suspected of adultery, a *sotah*, and the ritual performed in response to concerns about her behavior. The sages compose a full talmudic tractate inspired by this passage; there are books of midrash and ongoing conjecture about its meanings and significance. Here we touch on some of the issues raised by this unique and deep text.

The passage relates to scenarios where a man's spouse “turns aside” from him, and how he takes her to the sanctuary. There, the priest performs an elaborate ritual. He writes out a curse using the divine Name, dissolves it into sacred water along with some dust from the sanctuary floor, and gives the water to the woman and makes her drink. She swears acceptance of the procedure and drinks the special potion. If she is guilty of adultery, the water causes her stomach/ womb to swell and her thigh to fall (she might miscarry or suffer a prolapsed uterus); if she is innocent, she conceives a child. In all cases, the man is not culpable for his accusation.

The text appears to be concerned with the surveillance and disciplining of women's sexual (im)propriety. Interpreting the verse, “*she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced (5:13)*,” the sages in the gemarra use evocative, even erotic imagery to define the amount of time a married woman must seclude herself with a man for it to be forbidden for her to have sex with her spouse - the time it takes to circle a date palm tree, to dilute a cup of wine with water, roast an egg, tie a knot, take out a splinter from between one's teeth, or take bread out of a basket (Sotah 4).

Verses 14-15 clarify that the most important element is male jealousy, a point that the mishnaic sages pick up strongly:

... but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the spouse who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his spouse although she has not defiled herself, the man shall bring his spouse to the priest.

Male perceptions and emotions drive the passage more than women's behavior. Whether the woman does or does not have sexual relations with another man, the ritual comes into effect when the spirit of jealousy comes over her male spouse. The man undertakes a unilateral action



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with impunity. From the point that the text describes the woman “turning away” in verse 12, she is rendered a passive object – taken to the sanctuary, set before the priest, sworn to an oath, made to drink, and experiences the consequences.

The mishna resists this wildly free-ranging male discretion and impose buffers to limit abuses. The Mishna on Sotah opens with the following conversation about jealousy,

1. When a man is jealous of his spouse, Rabbi Eliezer says, he expresses this jealousy to her before two (witnesses); he causes her to drink (the water of instruction) on the basis of the evidence of one witness, or on his own evidence. Rabbi Joshua says, he expresses it to her before two, and causes her to drink on the basis of two.
2. How must he express his jealousy to her? If he says to her in front of two witnesses, “Do not speak with so-and-so,” and she speaks with him, he may still have sex with her, and she may still eat from the priest's due. If she enters with him into a secret place, and remains with him long enough to become impure, she is prohibited from sexual relations with her spouse, and she may not eat from the priest's due. And if he dies (before she drinks), then she must not perform a levirate marriage. (M. Sotah 1)

The sages assign precise legal meanings to vague biblical terms. The mishna requires the transformation of the man's jealousy from a fickle feeling to an observable behavior; jealousy becomes an act. The sages require that the man state his jealous feelings out loud by warning his spouse - before two witnesses. He must tell her not to speak with a specific man, stating his name. Rather than a private, unsupervised, internal and amorphous emotion, jealousy becomes a precise public ceremony, a speech act that involves members of the community in the intimate affairs of spouses. The sages derive their legal approach from the Torah passage itself. Verse 13 states a pre-condition for the man's jealousy - there is no proof, that is, there is no witness who can verify the woman's innocence or guilt.

At one point, the composure of the mishna ruptures into a violent pornographic scene, a macabre textual enactment of adultery. In a quick succession of verbs, the priest grasps and rips the sotah's garment, undresses her, loosening her hair, ogling her breasts, hair, clothing, and ornaments (Sot. 1:5). Rabbi Judah's opinion is recorded in the Tosefta, stating that her jaw is to be forced open with iron tongs if she refuses to drink the potion. Women are explicitly enjoined to witness the grotesque procedure, vicariously enduring its threatening horror, in order that they be instructed not to behave lewdly (Sot. 1:6). Melila Hellner-Asher writes of the spectacle as “sacrifice.”

These rabbinic texts indicate an obsession with enforcing control over women's sexuality. While there is no indication that the texts were performed as stated, the mishna itself records the cancellation of the ritual by the Jewish authorities several decades before the Romans destroyed the second temple on the grounds that since so many other persons were sinning in so many other ways, women ought not to be singled out for harsh treatment (Sotah 9.9, Tosefta 14.1). Nonetheless, the texts raise the question about what is at stake that would purport to



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justify such offensive attitudes toward women.

One of the implicit features of adultery is the possibility of illegitimate children. One scholar claims that the purpose of the biblical text is to resolve cases of paternity, “We have to suppose a situation where a woman is pregnant and her spouse doubts whether he is the father of the child: this is the nature of his jealousy” (W. McKane, “Poison, Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 30, 1980, 474). In the case of pregnancy, the unknowability that plagues the man is not only about the woman's uncontrollable sexual behavior but also potentially about whether he fathered the child she might be carrying.

While we can observe maternity – pregnancy and the emergence of the child from within the woman's body - paternity results from a relatively fleeting moment during intercourse. According to many analysts, patriarchal will to control women derives from the anguish of unknowable paternity. Psychoanalyst Jane Gallop expresses her view of the logical deduction of fatherhood:

The legal assignation of a Father's Name to a child is meant to call a halt to uncertainty about the identity of the father. If the mother's femininity (both her sexuality and her untrustworthiness) were affirmed, the Name-of-the-Father would always be in doubt, always be subject to the question of the mother's morality. Thus the Name-of-the-Father must be arbitrarily and absolutely imposed, thereby instituting the reign of patriarchal law. (Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 39).

The “illegitimate” children of a man's adultery are born outside of his marriage whereas a married woman bears her “illegitimate” children into her marriage. Under Jewish law, if a married man has children by another woman, the children are legitimate unless that woman was at the time married to someone else. The compulsive enforcement of female fidelity stems at least partly from a difficult and pervasive predicament of biology that I call “indeterminate paternity.” Controlling indeterminate paternity has been necessary to the stability of patriarchal society. Scholar of French feminism, Alice Jardine, lists among the narratives that have forged our sense of legitimacy in the West, “the link between father and son, the necessary paternal fiction, the ability to decide who is the father” (*Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985).

The aching lack of certainty that the man feels about his spouse, and the fact that he has no access to the “truth” seems to bring on the jealousy. Though she is the only one who knows what has transpired, the texts completely exclude the woman's own testimony of her innocence, though she is encouraged to incriminate herself. (The theoretical cuckold – the alleged adulterer is not considered in the conversation.)

Given the emotional force of jealousy, and its potential violence, the sotah ritual effectively removes the woman from the man's private domain and control, delivering her into the sacred realm, and to the kohen-priest. In some sages' minds, the Miqdash-Sanctuary turns out not to



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be a place of safe refuge, but a place where the priest performs a sexually aggressive ritual, perhaps a textual catharsis for their own violent fantasies.

The oath and potion in the Miqdash propose to solve the puzzle of women's unknowable sexuality, to reveal an ultimate secret (thousands of years before DNA testing). Regardless of our belief in the ultimate power of the ritual to give a *true* result, the practical outcome is that the man's jealousy is meant to be resolved. If the woman has conceived by adulterous sex, then the child is effectively accepted into the marriage - pregnancy is the promised positive result of the potion. If the woman is not pregnant when she arrives at the Miqdash, she is meant to become pregnant after she drinks the potion. In this connection, the text does not mention her spouse. Beyond literal interpretations of the ritual, when the *sotah* imbibes the dissolved divine Name, she conceives – an outrageous expression of the fertile potency of the sacred letters.

Questions for Discussion

1. The fact that the jealous man takes his spouse to the Miqdash, and involves the priest in the *sotah* ritual that places the woman before God implies divine involvement in sexual relationships. Earlier in the Torah portion the people are commanded to send those who are ritually impure outside the camp. Why is the *sotah* brought to the inner sacred space even while she is suspected of being ritually impure? Discuss how sacredness and divine presence relate to our sexuality?
2. The Torah prohibits adultery for men and women; the penalty is death:
If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's spouse, one who commits adultery with his friend's spouse, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. Lev. 20:10.

Yet, no parallel ritual exists for a woman who suspects her spouse of committing adultery. Discuss why not?
3. Discuss how the *sotah* ritual addresses emotional issues of betrayal, violation, and dishonesty, for whom, and how effectively? What alternatives do you recommend?
4. The *sotah* ritual is immediately preceded by a description of how to deal with a case of *ma'al* against God - someone uses something sacred for profane purposes. Consider the connection between *ma'al* against God, *ma'al* committed by an adulteress against her spouse, and, perhaps by the spouse against God, by using the Miqdash to deal with his jealousy.
5. How do you interpret the outcomes of the *sotah* ritual?



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Study Links

Naomi Ragen's book, *Sotah*, sets the biblical drama in a contemporary ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem community. The book is synopsized and critiqued both [here](#) and [here](#).

One explanation for the sotah ritual is emotional catharsis. See a discussion of catharsis – a 'cleansing' or 'purification' of negative emotions [here](#).

[This link](#) summarizes a fascinating dissertation, “Negotiating the spaces of adultery: domesticity and the feminist adultery narrative” by Kim Louis Snowden. The entire dissertation is downloadable from the site.

[Here](#) is an article reviewing the connection between jealousy and violence, particularly in domestic settings.

[This](#) is Yishai Rosen-Zvi's short version of his views about the meaning of the sotah.

Summary of Issues

Male uncertainty about faithfulness and paternity give rise to fears and jealousy. In an effort to curb these threats to patriarchal social order, many layers of texts describe imposing a ritual ordeal on women, and, possibly an unmediated encounter with the divine at the core of sacred space.

Methods & Observations

The Sotah passage in the Torah, interpretations in the mishna, and gemarra struggle with profound human questions - to what extent and by what means are human actions and relationships knowable and controllable? In these mainly male conversations, woman, her physiology and sexuality represent the mystery of the unknown, and the corruptible boundaries of family and society. To what extent the ritual described aims toward people and their bodies, or is a textual enactment that seeks to affect emotional catharsis is also unknowable.

Some of this interpretation borrows from my article, “A Study of Textual Embodiment: The Suspected Adulteress,” in *Reading through the Lens of Gender, Prooftexts: a Journal of Jewish Literary History*, Jan. 2000, 13-45.

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