Dvar Torah

Three Views of Sotah

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The accident of one's birthday can be a tough burden for some bar and bat mitzvah kids. So many of the weekly Torah readings from Leviticus and Numbers are troubling to a modern sensibility. What are bar and bat mitzvah adolescents to make, for example, of the lengthy chapters on animal sacrifices? Of the commandments to eradicate the inhabitants of Canaan? Or of the regulations for dealing with women in menses? And of all these tough chapters, the portion in Numbers dealing with the Sotah—the ordeal of bitter waters for an unfaithful wife—must rank among the most troubling.

So I was surprised and even a bit disconcerted when my sister told me that my niece's bat mitzvah would occur on *parshat Naso* (NUMBERS 4:21–7:89), in which the Sotah ordeal appears. It struck me as appropriate, in an unexpected and unintended way, that my niece would be compelled to grapple with a Torah reading that would not fit easily into contemporary sensibilities, particularly feminist sensibilities. For her bat mitzvah service was to take place in a hotel rather than in the traditional Orthodox synagogue her family regularly attends, in order to give my niece the opportunity for full participation in services that her own shul would not allow her. But since my sister's family and community are, in fact, religiously observant, the service was designed to be as halakhically correct as possible. However, the gender roles were reversed. All parts of the service were led by women, and the men sat behind the *mechitzah*, the traditional separation between the men's and the women's section. Most of the women who read or were called up to the Torah or led the davenning did so for the first time in their lives. The Shabbat

morning services were filled with singing and joy, occasional fumbling, and much intense emotion. The bat mitzvah turned out to be an extraordinary and empowering event, particularly for the women of the community.

The structure of the services—attempting to stay within the tradition but forced outside the physical confines of the shul—mirrors our dilemma in reading Sotah. How do we engage material such as Sotah while being forced outside the tradition by the logic of a modern sensibility? In my own Shabbat community of Fabrangen in Washington, DC, we struggle each year with Sotah and other difficult portions, sometimes more successfully than others. Not long ago, the reading of Sotah at Fabrangen evoked such strong reactions that several members walked out of the service in disgust and protest.

My sister asked me to give the drash at her daughter's bat mitzvah. My niece, Adina Davies, seemed pleased when I agreed. But she cautioned, "Just don't talk about Sotah!"

And she had a point. Why talk about Sotah at all? After all, the ritual itself is obsolete, it was abolished at the end of the Second Temple, and some scholars wonder if it was ever carried out at all. The ritual was sexist and degrading to women, and even reading about it feels objectionable. Why subject ourselves to hearing this material? Why make it a focal point, according it additional attention by delving into it?

The Sotah ritual appears in the Torah (NUMBERS 5:11-31) as follows: If a woman has been unfaithful to her husband but he has no proof of it, or if a husband is simply jealous of his wife, he takes her to the priest, along with an offering. The priest mixes water with some of the dust from the floor of the Tabernacle. He makes the woman stand forth, bares her head, and places the offering in her hand. He tells her that if she has been a faithful wife, she will be immune to the bitter waters. But if she has been unfaithful, God will curse her. The bitter waters will then cause her thigh to sag and her belly to swell. To all this the woman must say, Amen, Amen. The priest then writes down these curses, and rubs them into the water. He makes the woman drink the water and presents the offering on the altar. If the woman has been unfaithful, all these curses come to pass. But if she has been faithful, she is unharmed by the waters and is able to have a child.

What a strange ritual this is! Unlike other civil and criminal cases, where evidence is weighed and a decision reached by human judges, here there is only suspicion and jealousy. Judgment is rendered presumably by God, through a type of physical oracle of the woman's body—she drinks murky waters to settle a murky situation.

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The Sotah ritual is unlike the trials by ordeal that we know about from ancient cultures, such as prolonged immersion in water. Most of these ordeals were designed to result inevitably in the death of the accused. But, as Rachel Biale has pointed out in her book, *Women and Jewish Law*,[1] how bad can it be to drink some water mixed with dust and ink? If survival here equals innocence, the likeliest outcome in Sotah is the proven innocence of the woman. Biale suggests that the ordeal of bitter waters helped to lay to rest the irrational suspicions of jealous husbands. Alternatively, if the woman was unfaithful, the psychological impact of the ritual, rather than the physical effects, might have led her to reveal the truth and suffer the punishment.

It's not clear, though, what the Torah suggests actually happens to the guilty wife. The traditional understanding is that the unfaithful woman suffers a variety of afflictions and dies as a result of the ritual. Yet the words used in the Torah—her belly swelling and thigh sagging—have also been interpreted as foretelling a miscarriage. This seems to balance the compensation promised to the innocent wife who may "retain seed" and bear a child.

This smooth allusion to a child seems to imply that the woman brought to the ordeal was, in fact, pregnant. This casts a new light on the Sotah ritual, placing it in the context of a pregnancy where the husband isn't sure the child is his. If so, the ordeal might have been a way of compelling the husband to assert paternity for a baby of suspicious parentage without damaging his self-respect. The Sotah ritual would have kept women and their newborn children from being cast out of their homes and

communities with no means of support, or being subjected to violent revenge. Thus the ordeal might have served not only as a means of protecting women from the power of male jealousy, but of assuring a place for unexpected offspring.

From traditional Jewish readings of Sotah, though, you certainly wouldn't guess that the ritual was designed to favor the woman. Much of the midrash on Sotah and the traditional commentaries on the passage in the Torah offer quite the opposite sense. Rabbinic commentators seemed to take an extra degree of pleasure in enumerating the imagined sins of the woman, and showed in excruciating detail how each measure of abuse heaped up on the woman during the ritual was measure for measure, *middah ke-neged middah*, for her sins with her presumed lover. Thus, in Midrash Rabbah [IX, 24]:

> *She painted her eyes for his sake, and so her eyes bulge. She plaited her hair for his sake, and so the priest dishevels her hair. She beckoned to him with her fingers and so her fingernails fall off. She put on a fine girdle for his sake, and so the priest brings a common rope and ties it above her breasts. She extended her thigh to him and therefore her thigh falls away...She gave him to drink choice wine in exquisite flagons, therefore the priest gives her to drink the water of bitterness in a piece of earthenware...*

What about women who were innocent and whose husbands had a fit of jealousy? That concept has almost vanished from the framework of the rabbis.

This transformation of the Sotah ritual is codified in the Talmud, which devotes an entire tractate to the subject, even though by the time the Talmud was written the ritual itself had long been abolished. The Talmud does its best to normalize the wild and mystical ordeal of the Sotah into a legal framework, narrowing its focus to a highly specific, albeit largely unlikely set of circumstances. For example, the Talmud specifies that the husband must have warned his wife not to be secluded with a particular man, and there must be witnesses that she spent a certain amount of time in private with that man. Where the Sotah ritual in the Torah is precisely about the lack of evidence, the Talmud reinterprets it to require that there be evidence and witnesses to *something*, even if it's only the woman's seclusion with a man, not adultery.

At the same time that the Talmud narrows the focus of the transgression, it also makes the ordeal much more humiliating to the woman than in the Torah. In both places, the woman is denied due process, or any real voice in the proceedings. But the Talmud adds a number of measures designed to publicly humiliate the accused woman and treat her like a prostitute or an adulterous woman, exposing her in a disheveled, possibly semi-nude state to the assembled crowd. For example:

> *...they would bring her to the Eastern Gate...and a kohen would grab hold of her garments and rip them until he uncovered her heart and then he would let down her hair...And then he would bring a rope and tie it above her breasts [to keep her garments from slipping down]. And all those who wanted to see could come and see.* (M. SOTAH 1:5, 6)

And all this was supposed to happen even before she underwent the ordeal to determine if she was innocent or guilty!

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Judith Hauptman, in *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice*,[2] calls the description in the Talmud "both strange and suggestive," in that it "feeds the sexual fantasies of the bystanders, in particular the young priests." But she argues that this passage represents an older, more callous strand of Talmudic material which was later bracketed by more reasonable statements. Such statements indicated that the rabbis were disturbed by the injustice of the Sotah ritual and sought to ensure that the circumstances in which it might be carried out would virtually never occur.

And yet, as we have discovered in our own day, graphic sexual material carries a weight, a vividness, a power that overrides more subtle explanations, qualifications, and interpretations. How unfortunate that the Talmud maintained this "older strand" of offensive material, which through the centuries must have titillated generations of Talmud students, guiding their imaginations through the systematic humiliation of a woman as penalty for her imagined illicit sexual activity.

The Talmud represents one transformation in our understanding of Sotah—a sad one, I would argue, and one that became the official line in subsequent centuries. Other interpretations developed, too. For example, in some parts of the midrash, the rabbis interpret Sotah as a metaphor for another episode in the Bible—the story of the golden calf. Recall that when the children of Israel went astray in the desert and built a golden calf, Moses burnt the idol, ground it into powder, and forced the Israelites to drink the water mixed with the powder.

The rabbis spend several chapters in Midrash Rabbah correlating each phrase in the Sotah passage with the golden calf episode. For example:

> *And the priest shall take* (NUM. 5:17): "priest" alludes to Moses... *And of the dust:* this alludes to the dust of the gold which he had ground (EX 32:20). *That is on the floor of the Tabernacle (mishkan):* for, owing to the Calf, Israel who had worshipped it sank as low as the floor and became pledges *(nitmashkenu)* in the hands of death... *And the priest shall cause her to swear:* This alludes to the oath which he made them take that they would observe the Torah...Moses said to them: If you have kept the oath of the covenant, *If no man has lain, etc.*, if, that is, you have not gone astray after idolatry, and have not bowed down to it; *And if you have not gone aside:* if you have not sacrificed impurely and have not made merry before the Calf, *You will be free from this water of bitterness...* [IX, 46-7]

On the face of it, this reading seems more palatable than the previous understanding of Sotah. Understanding Sotah as a metaphor that encompasses the whole of Israel helps to mute the sense of injustice towards women that the ritual embodies. The adultery of women is like the idolatry of the entire community. Indeed, the equation of adultery and idolatry is a pervasive theme throughout the Prophets, the dark side of the image of Israel betrothed to God as a wife to a husband. However, the use of Sotah as a metaphor serves to engender the story of the Golden Calf, and to mark negative behavior as innately female.

Perhaps, though, we can find another approach to transforming the Sotah story embedded in our tradition. I'd like to consider the Haftorah that accompanies *Naso* as a form of rabbinic commentary.

The selection of Haftarot has always been shrouded in mystery, but it seems clear that the rabbis looked for some relationship between the Torah portion and the Haftorah. Usually the link is an obvious similarity of words or images or story lines. But often, there are multiple links between Torah and Haftorah portions that operate at different levels.

The Haftorah for *Naso* comes from Judges [13:2-25] and tells of the annunciation of Samson—the appearance to his mother and then his father of an angel who informs them that Samson will be born to them. The obvious links between Haftorah and Torah portions are the laws of the Nazir (e.g., avoiding wine and not cutting one's hair) which are explained in the Torah portion, and the story in the Haftorah of the most famous biblical nazirite, Samson.

But a closer look at the Haftorah shows something else: a barren woman (Samson's mother) visited by a strange man, and shortly thereafter becoming pregnant. According to the text, her husband Manoah is not aware that the strange man is an angel.

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This situation mirrors the circumstances that, in the Torah portion, lead to the explosive jealous rage of Sotah. And yet, what happens in the Haftorah? Instead of an accusing husband and a silenced, humiliated wife, the Haftorah depicts a respectful, honest husband seeking to understand what has happened, placing the best possible light on the situation, not the worst. Manoah prays: "Let the man of God that you sent come to *us* again." And Manoah's wife is not flustered or guilty or sullen or submissive, but strong and self-assured, utterly competent and confident that her experience of the divine will be validated. The man of God who visits Samson's mother empowers her, because he appears first to her rather than her husband, and because he confirms to her husband that she accurately reported what he told her. Thus the angel affirms the woman's connection to the divine in marked contrast to the acted-upon woman of Sotah.

What a different direction this story line has taken, and what a different vision of married life: that men and women may trust each other even in an ambiguous or emotionally charged situation, that humiliating one's wife is no way to handle anger or jealousy or feelings of inadequacy.

Were our sages trying to send a subtle message by selecting this story as the Haftorah portion? Certainly not on any conscious level; in fact, the rabbis held Manoah up to scorn for consulting with his wife, and because he was not granted exclusive conversation with the angel. But what was beyond the ken of the rabbis can still be a useful countermodel for a modern reader.

There are layers in our tradition that offer a hopeful vision of human relations. But there is much to be gained by not shying away from the problematic parts of Torah. These parts are uncomfortable precisely because the underlying reality of jealousy and sexual passion and adultery is messy and uncomfortable, and because we are still trying to solve the human condition in our own imperfect ways. In the end, these difficult readings prove an unexpectedly opportune way to welcome a new bar or bat mitzvah to our perennial struggle (and dance!) with our texts and tradition—with the hope of better understanding the parts that hurt and recovering the parts that heal.

1 Shocken Books, 1984, pp. 184-9.

2 Westview Press, 1998, p. 21.

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