YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARSHAT NASO**

**The Special Drink for a Woman Suspected of Adultery**

**I. The Water and the Dust**

In *Parashat Naso* we encounter a system that does not appear anywhere else in the Torah.

Generally, if there is uncertainty regarding a halakhic question in the interpersonal realm, humans are the ones who are entrusted with clarifying it. In the case of a halakhic question concerning a ritual matter, the question is brought before a rabbi, and in the case of an argument between people about a monetary matter, the question is brought before a court. This is based on a fundamental Torah principle: "It is not in heaven" (*Devarim* 30:12, according to *Bava Metzia* 59b). From the time the Torah was given to Israel at Sinai and onwards, the decision making process rests in the hands of humans.

However, our *parasha* describes a case of halakhic uncertainty that is clarified not by man, but by Heaven. I am referring, of course, to the section dealing with a *sota*, a woman whose husband suspects her of adultery. Here, the way to clarify the uncertainty involves giving the woman suspected of adultery a special “bitter water” to drink. This water has three components: holy water; dust from the Temple; and a scroll containing the Torah passage about a *sota*, which is erased in the water (including the name of God that is found therein). According to the plain sense of the text, the purpose of this drink is to clarify whether or not such an evil deed was in fact done in Israel:

And when he has made her drink the water, then it shall come to pass, if she was defiled, and had acted unfaithfully against her husband, that the water that causes the curse shall enter into her and become bitter, and her belly shall swell, and her thigh shall fall away; and the woman shall be a curse among her people. And if the woman be not defiled, but be pure; then she shall be cleared, and shall conceive seed. (*Bamidbar* 5:27-28)

This passage is shrouded in mystery. The mystery begins already with the fundamental question raised above: Why is a Divine clarification necessary here? And of course, there is another obvious question: How does the mixture of water, dust, and scroll clarify the actions of a suspected adulteress?

It is clear that the case is decided by way of a miracle, but we must try to understand why it is precisely in this manner that God clarifies what really happened.

**II. An Allusion to the Woman's Actions and Her Reward**

The Mishna (*Sota* 2:2) explains that the water used in this ritual would be taken from the laver; this is why it is called "holy water" (*Bamidbar* 5:17). Given this source of the water, a *midrash* explains how various items used allude to the woman's actions and the sins of which she is suspected:

And why would he give her to drink from the laver? Because the laver was made exclusively of the brass mirrors of the upright women in Egypt, as it is stated: "And he made the laver of brass, [and the base thereof of brass, of the mirrors of the serving women that did service at the door of the tent of meeting]" (*Shemot* 38:8); and this woman sinned and did not follow in the path of those upright women, who cherished their husbands; therefore she is examined by way of water from the laver. And why in an earthen vessel? Because she would give the adulterer to drink in fine utensils of silver and gold; therefore he would demean her and give her to drink in an earthen vessel. (*Midrash Aggada* [Buber], *Naso*, chap. 5)

The need to remind the woman of her actions as part of the clarification process can stem from one symbolic reason or another, but there may also be a more practical purpose here. The woman stands before a striking display of the difference between the actions of the women who contributed the brass mirrors to the sanctuary – women who remained faithful to their husbands even in much more difficult places and times – and her. She once again remembers her bad deeds when she drinks from the earthen vessel and realizes that the gold vessels that she had used were not really as shiny as they had seemed. Thus, not only does the water help administer a test, but it might stir her to repentance.

Furthermore, the Gemara in *Sota* (17a) sees the dust as an allusion to the woman's reward: if she is found innocent, she will be blessed with a child like Avraham, who stated "Behold, I have begun to speak to my Lord, and I am but **dust** and ashes" (*Bereishit* 18:27). Here too, we find a symbolic allusion that does not fully explain the meaning of the ceremony.

**III. Justice and Mercy**

We find a different approach in the words of Rabbi Menachem Recanati. According to him, the water and the dust combine two basic elements in the world – justice and mercy:

The reason for taking the water and the dust… the water is needed, for if she is innocent, the water of mercy will gain in strength and she will conceive by way of its power. And the dust is needed, for if she is defiled, the attribute of justice will gain in strength and judge her. (Recanati, *Bamidbar* 5:17)

The Recanati seems to understand that the purpose of the water given to the *sota* is to clarify the truth: did she in fact commit adultery, so that she deserves to be punished, or not? The combination of these two elements allows for both options, judgment on the one hand and mercy on the other.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, at great length, puts forward a similar principle:

Here with the *sota*,the fact was to be brought home to one who had incurred the suspicion of moral impurity, that although the earthly body is “dust,” and is gifted with powers of motherhood and natural urges to accomplish that purpose – like the mother earth that longs to create fruit – nevertheless, she is also compared to "holy water": the aim of her fundamental essence is purity of moral holiness, for which the bodily senses belonging to its earthly nature were only to be an external trait, apparent on the outside, but in reality to be held aloft and mastered by the true internal self. But this clear pure real self must never be made muddy by being mixed with the other trait. (Rabbi S. R. Hirsch, *Bamidbar* 5:17)

In his typical manner, precise and awe-inspiring, Rabbi Hirsch explains each and every detail in the passage and in the *sota* ceremonyin line with this principle.

**IV. In the Garden of Eden of Old**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* offers an original and surprising explanation for the *sota* ceremony. We will try to understand his explanation and learn a few things from it about the relationship between a husband and wife.

In order to explain the passage dealing with the *sota*, the *Or Ha-Chaim* takes us back to the creation of the world, from which he derives two principles that will guide his interpretation of the entire passage:

We may be able to explain the subject of the *sota* in light of what we explained in *Parashat Bereishit* regarding the innerness of the Torah in connection with *Bereishit* 2:1 on the line, "And the heaven and the earth were finished." I explained there that every creature harbors a desire to be reunited with the living God. This desire is felt in all things, each in accordance with the measure of spirituality instilled in it by the Creator to ensure its continued existence and to enable it to praise its Creator. As it is stated (*Mishlei* 16:9): "The Lord has made everything for His own purpose." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Bamidbar* 5:15)

The first principle is taken from the *Or Ha-Chaim's* commentary to *Parashat Bereishit* (2:1).[[1]](#footnote-1) There, the *Or Ha-Chaim* establishes a principle regarding the innerness of the Torah, according to which the purpose of all the created beings is to desire to return to the source from which they were hewn, i.e., to God. This point of desire was actually the purpose of creation, such that all creatures yearn to cleave to their Creator and the whole world is oriented towards this purpose.

The second principle goes in the opposite direction. While the first principle deals with the desire of all creatures to acquire for themselves a dwelling place in the upper world, the second principle speaks of God's desire to establish for Himself a dwelling place in the lower world:

Furthermore, God has demonstrated to us that He desires to establish a dwelling place in the lower world, from the days of Adam. Due to Adam's sin, the earth was cursed, and the throne of God, which is the source of blessing, was raised to higher spheres, until the revelation at Mount Sinai when God once again agreed to take up residence on earth. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

On the face of it, these two principles seem contradictory, but in fact they complement each other: the fact that the creatures of this world desire to cleave to their Creator causes His name to be heard and to be established in the physical world in which they live.

Following the second principle, the *Or Ha-Chaim* explains the relationship between Israel and God throughout history. When the people of Israel sin and fail to utter God's name in this world, the residence that the Creator desired no longer exists. We can understand the purpose of the *Mishkan* in this light:God, as it were, did not hold Himself back, but desired to rest His *Shekhina* upon Israel even before they came to the Land of Israel. In the wake of the sin of the golden calf, that same *Shekhina* retreated. The rest of Israel's history can also be explained along these lines.

**V. The Upper and Lower Waters**

The lower waters are called "crying waters." Why are they called crying waters? Because when the Holy One, blessed be He, separated the waters, setting some of the waters above and some below, the lower waters began to cry. This is what is meant by the verse: "He binds the streams that they trickle not" (*Iyov* 28:11). Rabbi Abba said: The lower waters separated from the upper waters in tears. They said: Woe to us that we did not merit to ascend to the celestial regions where we would be close to our Creator! What did they do? They acted with daring and split the deep and tried to ascend, until the Holy One, blessed be He, reproached them, as it is stated: "Who makes a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters" (*Yeshayahu* 43:16); "He rebukes the sea, and makes it dry" (*Nachum* 1:4). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: Since it was for My glory that you did all this, the upper waters may not commence with their song of praise until they have obtained permission from the lower waters to do so. As it is stated: "Above the voices of many waters, the mighty breakers of the sea" (*Tehillim* 93:4). And what do they say? "The Lord on High is mighty" (ibid.). Moreover, God promised the lower waters that when the time would come for the Israelites to offer sacrifices to Him on the altar, these would be accompanied by both salt and water libations. (Rabbeinu Bachya, *Vayikra* 2:13 [based on *Vayikra Rabba*])

This *midrash* attests to a tension that exists between the lower waters and the upper waters, in the wake of the two principles that we learned from the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim.* While the upper waters are in their place and do not constitute a dwelling place for God in the lower world, the lower waters that are in this world yearn to ascend to God. This is why they are called "crying waters," and in exchange for their lofty intent, they merit sanctifying the name of God in this world by way of the water libations; moreover, the upper waters can recite their song of praise only after having received permission from the lower waters.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* uses this *midrash* as a basis for explaining the ceremony in which a suspected adulteress drinks a water-based mixture:

In order to understand the subject of *sota*, we must keep all the foregoing in mind. God commands regarding a husband who suspects his wife that he should investigate her regarding this act in a place where God resides. I have already explained (elsewhere) that this place is called the "higher" earth, on account of the *Shekhina's* residence there. It is not in the category of “cursed,” i.e., subject to God's curse because of man's sin. Also, the waters in that area, their eyes do not drip with tears – for why would they cry or be distressed? God commanded that these "holy waters" be taken for this procedure, waters which are called “holy” because of their proximity to God, holy and awe-full is His name… The Torah also commanded the priest to use dust specifically from the floor of the Temple because it is the closest to God's residence. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The Temple, and the dust and the water that are taken specifically from the place of the *Shekhina*, symbolize closeness to God, i.e., the longing that rests in the hearts of all creatures.

The reason that God commanded for the dust to be added to the water and not vice versa is based on the water having been created before the earth during the process of creation. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Even the order in which the water and the dust are arranged is significant; it is the natural order, indicating that the hand of man has not touched them and they are still strongly bound to God who created them.

What we have here is essentially a desire to create a primordial reality, with the emphasis not on what was first and earliest, but on being closer to its source – to the Creator of the world.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues by sending us once again to the story of creation, this time to a slightly later point in the account:

The Torah also commanded that the meal-offering for a *sota* consist of barley. The reason is to represent the lesser offering that Kayin brought at the beginning of the world. This inferior offering was brought about (indirectly) by the sin committed by Adam and Chava. This is what the Torah means when it speaks of "a reminder of sin" [i.e., the original sin] that caused the water to cry and the land to be cursed. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid)

The story of Kayin and Hevel perpetuates the reality of sin in the world. In this story, the world encountered murder for the first time, a murder committed by one man against his brother. The foundation of this terrible act lies, according to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, in the sin of Adam. The sin of Adam removed man from the Garden of Eden, from the complete and perfect reality in which he lived, and sent him into a world of sin. This was reflected already in the bringing of the sacrifices, which began after the departure from the Garden of Eden, and continued in the act of murder, which reflects sin in "all its glory."

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the combination of a primordial reality, which characterizes the Garden of Eden on the one hand, and the meal-offering, which symbolizes the post-Eden world that yearns for God, on the other hand, is the mystery underlying the process of having the *sota* drink. He goes on to explain:

When the *sota* drinks this mixture of water, dust, and the residue of the holy name of God which dissolved in that water – if she is guilty, the name of the meal-offering as "reminder of sin" is most appropriate. It will recall also earlier sins. When the waters become aware of this, they will become bitter, for they will remember their suffering and tears.... Thus, the woman who was defiled brings about their bitterness, and the bitter waters “enter into her and become bitter” (*Bamidbar* 5:24); the waters will then take their revenge on this woman who has caused them all these tears and they will ruin the woman's intestines. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid)

The "perfect" water symbolizes the Garden of Eden. When it encounters sin, it complains of the distance created between it and the upper waters, and it sees the woman who was unfaithful to her husband as impairing its ability to return to its superior position; and hence, her punishment.

**VI. The Garden and the Sin**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* interpretation here is very picturesque and original, but it may not immediately appeal to readers as an explanation of the text. It is an interpretation that doesn't quite accord with the plain sense of the verses, but rather tries to explain in a midrashic manner how the water works.

It seems to me that when you take a deeper look, there is a great allusion here to a simple principle in the relationship between a husband and wife. In the *sheva berakhot* that are recited at a wedding, we bless the couple that they should merit to be happy: "As You bestowed gladness upon Your created being in the Garden of Eden of old" (*Ketubot* 8a). The joy of the Garden of Eden is the perfect joy. True perfection exists when the man and the woman are alone in the world, and there is no one else. Such a reality does not allow for any thought of damage to the relationship or setting one's sights on other places.

This is also true in the relationship between man and his Creator: when all a person knows is his Creator, and he sees Him openly and directly, it is very difficult for him to sin. But after the sin, man was expelled from the Garden of Eden and thrown into a world where God is concealed. In this world, not only is the relationship between man and his Creator undermined, but so too the relationship between husband and wife. There is no longer a heavenly pairing like that of Adam and Chava; there may even be other options that a person sees as better for himself. Here comes the temptation and the possibility of sin.

This possibility parallels the "lower waters," which the *Or Ha-Chaim* likened to the water given to a *sota* to drink. These waters can remain lower waters if they fall into places of sin, but they can also ascend. Indeed, in the water libation, we offer the lower waters and thus turn them into "upper waters."

The water in the laver was also "lower waters," but they were transformed into "holy water." The same water reminds the man and the woman that they too, through their actions, can resemble the "lower waters" and remain in a place that yearns and longs for a perfect reality – but they can also be "upper waters." They can be like water that takes an imperfect reality and, precisely within that reality, succeeds in creating an island of perfection.

When a man and a woman succeed in maintaining a good relationship, the waters become sanctified and the relationship is blessed. But when, God forbid, things are not like this, the waters remains lower waters and do not succeed in their mission to establish a dwelling place for God in the place where they are found.

The words of *Chazal*, that "a man and a woman, when they merit, the *Shekhina* is between them; when they do not merit, a fire consumes them" (*Sota* 17a), relate to this very point. According to the Torah, the relationship between a man and a woman can be the most sacred thing, upon which the *Shekhina* rests. But it can also involve one of the most serious prohibitions. The subtle distinction between establishing a residence for God in the lower world and being drawn into the lowest levels of this world – that makes all the difference.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See the *Or Ha-Chaim's* expanded discussion there. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)