

PARASHAH ONE HUNDRED AND TWO
Numbers 5:11–31; Hosea 4:11–19; Ephesians 5:25–33

notes by Tim Hegg

The *parashah* before us contains the laws of “*sotah*,” taken from the word “goes astray” (שָׁטָה, also spelled סָטָה) in the opening phrase “If any man’s wife goes astray....” This word is used elsewhere in the Tanach only of harlotry (Prov 4:15; 7:25). The Mishnah has a full tractate by the same name in which the Sages attempt to decipher and explain the laws of this unusual ritual. Of course, the Sages take the whole matter much further in this tractate, extending the discussion to matters relating to the eating of the wave offering, the issue of a priest’s daughter thought to have engaged in unlawful sexual relations, and a host of related subjects. But it is clear from studying the mishnaic tractate that this *parashah* and the ritual it describes presented plenty of questions to the Sages.

Perhaps the most obvious question is why the Torah offers a husband the means of dealing with a wife suspected of unfaithfulness but is silent about what a wife is to do who suspects her husband has been unfaithful. Current feminist interpretations mark this as yet another proof that early Israelite society was essentially misogynous, treating women as property without individual rights. While it is true that ancient near eastern society in general often treated women as inferior to men and afforded them far less protection within the legal framework of society, it is unfair to characterize the Torah as equally misogynous. The Torah does legislate protection for women (e.g., Ex 20:10; 21:7–11; 22–25; Deut 21:15–17, etc.). Yet this hardly answers the question of why the Torah does not offer legal means for a wife who suspects her husband of being unfaithful to her. Interestingly, later rabbinic interpretation (cf. b.*Sota* 47a; Rambam, *Hilchot Sotah* 3.17–18) held that if the husband had been unfaithful, the ritual of *sotah* would be ineffective in determining the actions of his wife. We should also note that Yeshua spoke of a situation where a woman divorces her husband (Mk 10:12), indicating that the legal system in His day did provide some recourse for women and that He applied the same criteria to both husband and wife in the matter.

The situation described in the ritual of *sotah* is when a husband has some evidence that his wife has acted unfaithfully with another man, but where no witnesses are available to confirm that she committed adultery (v. 13). If such witnesses were available, the penalty would be death both for the woman and her companion (Lev 20:10, cf. Num 35:30). The matter of jealousy arises when a husband warns his wife not to foster friendship with a certain man, yet she does, or he knows that she has been in a private place with another man (m.*Sotah* 1:1). In such a case, the husband must express his jealousy before two witnesses, and bring his wife to the priest for the ritual of *sotah*. When he does, he must bring an offering of one-tenth ephah of barley grain as an offering for her. But the offering is not mixed with oil and frankincense as would normally be the case (Lev 2:1), since these elements symbolize consecration and joy, while this offering is given as a symbol of jealousy for his wife.

From the husband’s viewpoint, his wife has “been unfaithful to him” (וּמַעַלָהּ בּוֹ מַעַל, v. 12, literally “she has acted unfaithfully against him by an unfaithful act”). The verb מַעַל *ma‘al* is used elsewhere only in relationship to God (Lev. 5:15, 21; 26:40; 31:16; Deut. 32:51), but since the covenant relationship between Israel and God is regularly cast in the metaphor of a marriage, its use here is understood. In the same way that Israel is charged by the Prophets with acting unfaithfully to God, so the wife is accused by her husband in this case of acting unfaithfully in regard to their marriage covenant.

The text is clear that the charge against the wife relates to adulterous intercourse (שָׁכַב אִישׁ, “a man lies down with her producing emission of seed”), so it is a most serious charge, yet one that could not be proven by the necessary two or three eye witnesses. If the charge is proven, then it is clear that the wife has defiled herself (הִיא נִטְמָאָה), but this is not merely ritual defilement, which could occur even in legitimate marital relations. The defilement in this case is one that pertains to sexual abominations that defile the Land (cf. Lev 18; Deut 24:4), a defilement

that has enveloped the soul in rebellion against HaShem.

The ritual itself consists of the priest putting “holy water” (מים קדשים) into a clay vessel into which he mixes some dust from the floor of the *Mishkan*. He then requires the woman to let her hair go loose (פָּרַע אֶת־רֹאשׁ הָאִשָּׁה), literally, “let free the head of the woman,” meaning “let her hair flow down freely,” cp. 1Cor 11) and puts the grain offering into her hands. He then requires the woman to take an oath (vv. 19–20), and to respond “Amen, Amen” (an affirmation of oath-taking) to the additional oath which he recites. He then writes the oath upon a parchment and washes the ink of the parchment into the clay vessel (meaning that the Name is erased into the water, cf. m.*Sota* 1:2f), after which he presents the meal offering, and requires the woman to drink the mixture. If the woman is innocent of the charges, nothing will happen, and she is exonerated. If, however, the woman has hidden her sin (cf. v. 13), the “water of bitterness” will cause her abdomen to swell and her thigh will waste away (v. 27). If, however, nothing results from drinking the bitter water, the woman is exonerated and she will be able to “conceive children” (וְנִזְרְעָה זָרַע), literally, “retain seed”). This final notice would indicate that if the woman is guilty, she would remain barren, unable to have children. Thus, her punishment was entirely from the hand of God and not administered by human judges. In this latter case, the Sages ruled that the husband would be required to divorce his guilty wife, but since no witnesses of her guilt were available, she could not be executed. In a similar fashion, the Sages ruled that if, before the woman drank the bitter water, she confessed to her sin of unfaithfulness, she would be saved the ordeal of the bitter water, but her husband would likewise be required to give her a bill of divorcement.

The whole matter is presented under the presumption that the husband is innocent, and the Sages read v. 31 this way: “If the man is clear of sin then that woman shall suffer her guilt.” They interpret this final verse of our *parashah* on the basis of Hosea 4:14—

I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot or your brides when they commit adultery, for the men themselves go apart with harlots and offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes; so the people without understanding are ruined.

The difficulty in ascertaining the innocence of the husband, however, became a quagmire for the judges of Israel, so much so, that by the time of Yochanan ben Zakkai, the ordeal of the bitter waters was abolished (m.*Eduyot* 5.6; b.*Ber* 19a; m.*Sotah* 9.9; 14.2; cp. Rambam, *Hilchot Sotah*, 3.19) even though the Temple still stood, and the Sanhedrin was active. This historical notice highlights the fact that in the 1st Century, the wayward activity of husbands within the Jewish community was rampant. Yeshua’s teaching, that lust in the heart is the first seed of adultery, was no doubt addressing this deplorable situation. We face the same situation in our times, where the divorce rate among professing believers exceeds that of the world.

Obviously, the implementation of the *sotah* ritual is non-existent in our times, for the Temple is destroyed and the priesthood is non-functioning. Yet, what enduring principles may we glean from this *parashah* which may be applied to our own lives? Clearly, God’s wisdom is contained in a portion like this, and it behooves us to discern this wisdom and apply it to ourselves.

The issue of jealousy is one that cannot be side-stepped. If a husband or a wife believes that their spouse has acted unfaithfully, this situation must be confronted and a resolution sought. Trying to “sweep it under the carpet” only assures a breakdown of the relationship. When considered as a whole, the *sotah* ritual allowed the husband to voice his jealousy, and to deal with it by either proving his wife’s unfaithfulness, or exonerating her. But could the relationship between the husband and wife be restored if she is exonerated? Such would be possible only if the husband was truly innocent, and in his submission to God, was able to accept the verdict and receive his wife back in fulness.

But what if the wife was proven guilty? What recourse did the husband have in such a case? The Sages point to Deut 24 as giving the answer. Here, the husband has found an “indecent mat-

ter” (עֲרוֹת דִּבָּר) in his wife, but apparently not one that could be proven via eye witnesses. In such a case, he is allowed to give his wife a bill of divorcement. Is this talking about a wife who was found guilty by the ritual of *sotah*? Some of the Sages thought so (cf. m.*Sota* 6:4). In the broad scope of things, the *sotah* ritual allowed the dissolution of a marriage where sexual unfaithfulness was proven in spite of the lack of witnesses. When Yeshua was confronted with the meaning of Deut 24 (cf. Matt 19), it is apparent that the teachers of His day had expanded the application of this text far beyond its original meaning. Yeshua brings it back to the matter of sexual unfaithfulness within a marriage: “And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery” (Matt 19:9). In so doing, He adhered to the interpretation of Deut 24 in light of the *sotah* passage of our *parashah*.

There are obviously many other questions that arise from our *parashah*. For instance, what is meant by “holy water?” Presumably this was water from the laver used by the priests for washing. If this is so, the water in the clay vessel symbolized a purification. Why was an “earthen vessel” used? Most likely to distinguish it from the holy vessels made of copper or gold. The priestly vessels were used in worship to HaShem; the earthen vessel was a symbol of judgment. Moreover, if the ritual proved the woman to be guilty, the clay pot could be broken and destroyed, perhaps symbolic of the broken marriage covenant that had resulted from her unfaithfulness.

And why add the dust of the *Mishkan* floor? Does it connect to the curse upon the serpent who was destined to eat dust all the days of his life (Gen 3:14)? Perhaps it was to be taken from the floor of the *Mishkan* because it was to be from a holy place. The sanctity of God’s presence enacts the curse against sin, even as the holiness of God’s Torah is the “power of sin” (1Cor 15:55).

As suggested above, the oath, written on the parchment, and then washed off into the water, symbolized that the Name of God could be erased by the sin of adultery. The Mishnah indicates that before the priest washed the words of the oath into the water, he would say to the woman:

My daughter, much is done by wine, much is done by joking around, much is done by kidding, much is done by bad friends. For the sake of the great Name which is written in holiness, do it [confess your guilt] so that it [the Name] will not be blotted out by water (m.*Sotah* 1.4).

Indeed, the image of God in man is effaced when man acts in rebellion against his Creator.

Why was the woman’s hair untied and allowed to “flow down freely?” Two possibilities exist: either it was a sign of indecency, for a woman who let her hair down in public was considered unchaste. Or it was a sign of mourning. In all of this symbolism, the message is clear: God has given the marriage covenant as a sacred possession. Despising this covenant is therefore first and foremost a sin against God, and draws His divine retribution, for ultimately we learn that the marriage covenant is to be a public revelation of God’s relationship with His chosen people. Moreover, the greatness of God is displayed by His people as they live out His ordinances and statutes. And in many ways, this requires not only individual obedience, but also obedience at the community level. Since the building blocks of community is the family unit, and since marriage is the cornerstone of the family unit, it is obvious that any community will only be as strong as the marriages represented within it are strong. If we intend to show a watching world the power of the God we serve, we will do this best when our marriages display the same kind of love and loyalty that God has for us.

What other enduring principles may we glean from our *parashah*? Obviously, there is no priesthood that can administer the judgment of whether a spouse was guilty or innocent, as our text describes. Yet there may be cases where the guilt of a spouse is quite obvious in spite of there being no eye witnesses. Still, in such situations, the suspected spouse must be given every opportunity to prove his or her innocence, and a willingness on the part of the innocent spouse to accept the efforts of the accused one to restore the marriage relationship.

This reminds us all that we must diligently guard our marriages. Husbands and wives should

not be in a private place with someone other than their spouse. Friendships with the opposite sex must be entirely above reproach, not giving any opportunity for jealousy to arise. The best way to guard our marriages is to foster a continuing growth of friendship together as husband and wife. The enemy of our souls is crafty! What may begin as a genuine concern for someone and a desire to minister to their needs, can turn to an improper relationship if done in an unwise manner. If a man or woman seeks to help a single lady or man, they should do so as a married couple, or (if they are unmarried) in concert with others, never alone. This is simply applying wisdom to our desires to bear each others' burdens.

We may also glean some wisdom from the Sages' ruling regarding a wife proven guilty through the drinking of the bitter water:

"Just as the water puts her to the proof, so the water puts him [the lover] to the proof, since it is said, "And it shall come . . . , And it shall come . . . (Num. 5:22, 5:24). Just as she is prohibited to the husband, so she is prohibited to the lover, since it is said, "And she will be unclean . . . , and she will be unclean . . . (Num. 5:27, 29)," the words of R. Akiva.

In other words, marriage to the one with whom the guilty party committed adultery is not to be sanctioned by the community. Our Master teaches the same thing when He said: "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her; and if she herself divorces her husband and marries another man, she is committing adultery" (Mark 10:11–12). The community must not sanction the relationship which began in adultery, because to do so continues the same sin. This does not mean that one cannot repent of adultery and be forgiven. But it does mean that one who "repents" *in order to have the community sanction a marriage* to the one with whom they sinned, brings into question whether their repentance is genuine, and makes a mockery of the marriage covenant.

What of those who join a community or congregation, whose divorce and/or remarriage was not in accordance with Scripture? How are they to be received? Surely all of our failings are resolved in the courts of heaven when genuine repentance and forgiveness is sought. As we acknowledge our sins to God, and confess Yeshua as our Savior, who redeems us from the curse of sin, we are given the right to begin again, and to walk in His ways.

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come (2Cor 5:17).

No one in the body of Messiah is a "second-class citizen." All of us are trophies of God's grace, and living examples of what it means to be redeemed from the tyranny of sin. As we all strive to make our marriages a fitting witness to God's mercies, together we will demonstrate the manner in which Yeshua loves His bride.

The *haftarah* portrays Israel as Adonai's unfaithful wife, and thus the connection to the Torah *parashah* is evident. The prophet charges Israel with idolatry, i.e., spiritual unfaithfulness to her Master. But as is often the case, idolatry entails not only spiritual harlotry, it not infrequently also includes sexual deviancy. As noted above, the Sages took v. 14 of our *haftarah* to rule that the ritual of the bitter water could only be administered in the case where the husband was clearly innocent. In Hosea's day, the husbands had no claim against their unfaithful wives because they likewise engaged in adulterous acts as they visited the pagan temples of the idols. What also seems apparent is that Israel had no conscience in terms of her sin. Even though she engaged in the debauchery of idolatrous worship, she still thought she could offer acceptable sacrifices to her God. Indeed, idolatry numbs the spiritual senses.

The Apostolic portion also has a direct link to the Torah *parashah*, for it contains Paul's admonition to husbands, that they are to love their wives in the same way that Messiah loves His congregation. And what is the primary characteristic of Messiah's love? It is that He "gave Himself

up for her” (v. 25). In short, a husband loves his wife as God requires when he is willing to give up his life for her. But notice what the results are of this self-giving love (vv. 26–27):

that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the assembly in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.

The method by which Messiah brings about a sanctifying change in the assembly, which is His bride, is by giving Himself up for her: “we love Him because He first loved us” (1Jn 4:19). In the same way, husbands have the supreme opportunity to sanctify their wives by loving them with a Messiah-like love. When a wife knows that her needs are her husband’s number one priority, she willingly submits to his leadership. And in so doing, she honors the Lord who instructs wives to submit to their husbands (Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; 1Pet 3:1). All too often, husbands think that they can make their wives “buckle under” to their rule by being heavy handed. Just the opposite is true, however. The more a man loves his wife by giving himself up for her, the more his wife will be ready and eager to follow his leadership.

It is well known that very often men and women define “needs” differently. Often a husband believes that his wife’s needs are primarily physical in nature. As he provides a home, food, clothing, and basic protection, he is quite certain he is meeting his wife’s needs. But the needs a woman places at the top of her list are that of companionship and emotional support. It is not that she is unappreciative of the manner in which her physical needs are being met, but she longs for friendship and a sharing of life together. This means that as husbands, we must spend time talking with our wives, listening to her, and seeking to understand the issues she faces day by day. It is not only our happy obligation to meet her physical needs, we must also seek to nourish her soul, and to foster that unique companionship that God expects to exist between a husband and wife.

And what is often at the top of a man’s list of “needs”? To be appreciated and respected. Even though men do not like to admit it, they are not as tough as they might wish to be perceived. Words of appreciation and respect strengthen a man for the responsibilities he bears.

In our fallen natures, however, we (both male and female) seek to demand that our needs be met. A wife who seeks to control her husband so that he will meet her needs ends up frustrated and needful. A husband who demands that his wife respect him and show him appreciation will only distance his wife from himself. Love must be given. It cannot be coerced or manipulated.

Paul gives a fitting illustration of this, by noting that “no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it” (v. 29). When in the course of his work a man injures himself, everything stops as he investigates the injury and takes appropriate measures to care for himself. Since the marriage covenant makes the two (man and woman) into one (Gen 2:24), it is appropriate for a husband to care for his wife with the same tenacity he would exhibit when personally injured. Putting the needs of one’s spouse as a first priority is what fosters love.

Surely the strength of our marriages is one of the most important elements upon which to focus as we strive to build a Torah Community for the glory of God’s Name upon the earth. In our times a societal war is being waged against the family and marriage. We will only succeed in the task to which God has called us, if we diligently apply His ways in the realm of home and marriage. And as we do, we will be a testimony to a watching world of the manner in which Messiah loves His assembly, and in this, we will sanctify His Name in our world.