

Parashat Naso: Understanding the Sotah Numbers 5:11-31

Source Sheet by Shani Cohen

Rashi on Numbers 5:13

(4) ונסתרה AND SHE WAS ASIDE SECRETLY with him such a period of time wherein there was a possibility for her to become defiled by intercourse (Sotah 4a). (5) ועד אין בה AND THERE BE NO WITNESS AGAINST HER — But if there was even only one witness against her who stated that she was defiled she did not drink the מים המאררים, but was henceforth forbidden to her husband (Sotah 2b).

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(ד) ונסתרה. שְׁעוֹר שְׁתִּרְאָה לְטִמְאַת בִּיאָה: (ה) וְעַד אֵין בָּהּ. הָא אִם יֵשׁ בָּהּ אֶפְלוּ עַד אֶחָד שָׁאֲמַר נְטִמְאַת לֹא הָיְתָה שׁוֹתָה (סוטה ד'):

1. What is the purpose of this Sotah ritual? Why do you think adultery is the only sin that is dealt with in this way?

Rashi on Numbers 5:18

(5) המרים THE BITTER [WATERS] — They were called bitter waters because of their final effect, viz., that they proved bitter for her (Sifrei Bamidbar 11; Sotah 20a). (6) המאררים means, the waters that make her disappear (pine away) from the world. It has

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(ה) המרים. עַל שֵׁם סוּפֵן, שְׁהֵם מְרִים לָהּ (שם כ'): (ו) המאררים. הַמְּחַסְרִים אוֹתָהּ מִן הָעוֹלָם, לְשׁוֹן "סִלּוֹן מִמְּאִיר" (יחזקאל כ"ח), וְלֹא יִתְכַן לְפָרֵשׁ מֵיָם אֲרוּרִים, שְׁהֵרִי קְדוּשִׁים הֵן, וְלֹא אֲרוּרִים כְּתֵב הַכְּתוּב, אֶלֶּא מְאָרְרִים אֶת

the same meaning as, (Ezekiel. 28:24): “a removing (ממאיר) brier” (one that removed some of the flesh). It would not be correct to explain מים המאררים as מים ארורים, “cursed waters” for actually they are holy (cf. v. 17). Besides, even if the meaning has anything to do with “cursing”, Scripture does not write ארורים, “waters that are cursed”, but מאררים — “that bring a curse to others”; and Onkelos, too, does not render it by ליטיא — “cursed waters” but by מלטטיא — “waters that show a curse on the body of this woman”.

אַחֲרַיִם, וְאִף אֲנִקְלוֹס לֹא תִרְגְּמוּ
 — "לִיטִיָּא" אֶלָּא "מְלִטְטִיָּא"
 שְׁמֵרָאוֹת קִלְלָה בְּגוֹפָהּ שֶׁל זֶה:

2. Why do you think earth and water are the ingredients used for this magical potion?
3. What do you think the Torah means by the "*mey hamarim*," waters of bitterness?
4. What relevance might the Sotah ritual have for us today?

Alice Bach, "Good to the Last Drop" from *Women in the Hebrew Bible*:

"The challenge here is to stir up a new brew, where men's attempts to control women's bodies are reread as male vulnerability--the first of woman engorging male power through her enveloping sexuality...the Sotah is a unique vehicle for envisioning what is denied, repressed, and silenced in ancient Israelite culture." (504-505)

"Because the concern with ensuring paternity was so strong in Israel, a ritual was devised to further protect the husband from the possibility of a 'wandering wife,' and its attendant loss of prestige. The Sotah ritual described in Num. 5:11-31 is constructed around suspicion of adultery, rather than proof of the crime in which two witnesses were required in order to pass sentence of death. The horror of trial by ordeal applied to the woman accused indicates the social view of adultery. Further, it reflects the patriarchal attempt to assure a husband that his honor could be restored if he had so much as a suspicion that his wife had been fooling around. Female erotic desire, then, was understood as erratic, a threat to the social order. By drowning such desire, the traditional order was assured of continuing dominance over women's bodies." (506)

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