

Just Like the Sotah

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Having just celebrated Shavuot, I realized that is an interesting holiday. On the one hand, we celebrate receiving the Torah from God's very mouth. This would seem to indicate that our relationship with God was absolutely faithful and strong. Yet just a short time later, the Jewish People violated one of the Torah's most important precepts by making the Golden Calf.

We did not shy away from celebrating Shavuot even though the joy of the main event was marred. Human actions are expected to be far from perfect and many of the Torah's most valuable lessons are learned from our deficiencies. Our main challenge is to grow from these lessons and not be buried by them.

In a similar vein, this week's *parashah* discusses the Sotah. If a husband becomes suspicious of his wife and warns her not to seclude herself with a certain man, and she nevertheless chooses to do so, she is brought before the Kohen to be "investigated." This priestly investigation involves bringing a barley meal-offering, and she is required to drink from the

“bitter waters.” Through the drinking of the waters, her guilt or innocence is proven (see Numbers 5:11-31).

Even if she is found innocent of her husband’s major accusation, she is still considered at fault for secluding herself with the other man. The description of the Sotah begins, “Any man whose wife goes astray” (ibid. 5:12). The word *tiSTeH* (goes astray) has the same letters as *ShoTaH* (idiot). Rashi explains that one does not sin unless a spirit of folly first enters into him or her. The Torah thus implies that a spirit of folly entered the Sotah, and she went ahead and sinned by secluding herself with another man.

Since the Sotah did something born of complete folly, she must bring an offering consisting of animal food. Just as animals act only according to their impulses, without any higher reasoning, so did the Sotah.

The *Zohar* (*Raya Mehemna, Emor*) further explains that just as the Sotah is tested through barley, so too, the Jewish people are tested through the barley of the Omer-offering.

By bringing the Omer-offering in the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot, we identify with the Sotah and with the deficiencies in our own relationship with God. We are saying, “We, too, have secluded ourselves with temptation and mindlessness; we, too, have sunken to promiscuous places. However, by waving the Omer-offering in every direction, we demonstrate that God still surrounds us and we reaffirm that our relationship remains faithful and strong.”

Interestingly, even though the Sotah is at fault for secluding herself, once she is proven innocent, she is rewarded. Our Rabbis teach that whatever childbearing issue she had beforehand will now be reversed. For example, if she previously bore children with much pain, she will now be blessed with easy pregnancy (see *Sotah* 26a). The great embarrassment she experienced while being investigated serves

as an atonement for her wrongdoing, and her wrongful act is transformed for her merit.

We all mess up. Making mistakes is part of human nature and allows for our free will. Only our souls, which are forced to live within the confines of the human body with all of its desires and physical necessities, can give God the ultimate *nachas*. By living honestly and humbly acknowledging our many faults and challenges, our shame and embarrassment can be transformed into a catalyst for blessing and our eventual success. Yes, God understands our human nature. But He waits for us to return to Him however many times we veer away. By humbly accepting our faults and mistakes, we can appreciate our shame in a positive way. The same shame that was created by our “spirit of folly” can now be transformed into a great spirit of *teshuvah* (repentance) and *nachas*. Amen.

Based on Likutey Halakhot, Birkhot HaPeirot 5