



Choosing to Live

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Parashat Naso 5785

There are moments in life where things have gone so wrong that we cannot see a way forward.

That may be what has happened to the woman who chooses to drink the *sotah* waters.

While in the Torah itself there is no indication that the woman may choose to refuse to drink the waters which will prove whether or not she committed adultery, the Mishnah asserts that she is given a choice whether to confess or to drink:

משנה סוטה א:ה

אם אָמְרָה טְמֵאָה אֲנִי, שׁוֹבְרֶת כְּתֻבָּתָהּ וְיוֹצֵאתָ. וְאִם אָמְרָה טְהוֹרָה אֲנִי, מַעֲלִין אוֹתָהּ לְשֶׁעַר
הַמִּזְרֵחַ שֶׁעַל פֶּתַח שֶׁעַר נִקְנֹר, שָׁשִׁם מְשַׁקִּין אֶת הַסּוֹטוֹת.

Mishnah Sotah 1:5

If she said, “I am guilty”—[she gets] a receipt of her marriage payment and is divorced. But if she said, “I am innocent”—they bring her up to the Eastern Gate that at is at the entrance of the Gate of Nicanor, for there they gave *sotah* women the waters.



It is obvious why a woman would choose to drink the waters if she is innocent: they will prove that she has done nothing wrong. There is no reason, though, if she believes in its power, for the *sotah* to drink the waters if she is guilty.

No reason, that is, unless she wants to die.

Maybe after everything that's happened she cannot see another way out. Maybe she can't live with the shame of admitting what she did. Maybe she cannot imagine the possibility of starting a new life from the ruins of the one she's destroyed. Maybe in some deep, terrible place in her soul, she believes she deserves it. Maybe drinking the bitter waters seems like the only solution.

Before she can drink, though, the *kohen* speaks and tries to convince her that life is still possible—and worthwhile—after all:

משנה סוטה א:ד

היו מעלין אותה לבית דין הגדול שבירושלים, ומאמיין עליה כדרך שמאמיין על עדי נפשות.
ואומרים לה, בתי, הרבה יין עושה, הרבה שחוק עושה, הרבה ילדות עושה, הרבה שכנים
הרעים עושים. עשי לשמו הגדול שנכתב בקדשה, שלא ימחה על המים.

Mishnah Sotah 1:4

They used to bring her to the great court that is in Jerusalem, and they intimidate her just like they intimidate the witnesses of a capital case. And they say to her, “My daughter, much wine does, much levity does, much youth does, much bad neighbors do! Act for the sake of His great name, so that God’s name, which is written in sanctity, shall not be erased in the water.”



The Mishnah's language "and would intimidate her" is frightening. Read closely, however, the words the *kohen* says are less of a threat than an exhortation to choose life.¹ The words the *kohen* uses in his "intimidation," the same kinds of exhortations that were used to threaten witnesses in capital cases, are about the importance of each human life:

משנה סנהדרין ד:ה

הוּו יודעין, שלא כְּדִינִי מְמוֹנוֹת דִּינִי נִפְשׁוֹת. דִּינִי מְמוֹנוֹת – אָדָם נוֹתֵן מָמוֹן וּמִתְכַּפֵּר לוֹ. דִּינִי נִפְשׁוֹת – דָּמוֹ וְדָם זִרְעֵינָהּ וְתַלְוִיָּין בּוֹ עַד סוֹף הָעוֹלָם... לְפִיכָךְ נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי, לְלַמְדָּךְ שְׁכָל הַמֵּאֲבָד נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב כְּאִילוֹ אֵיבַד עוֹלָם מֵלֵא. וְכָל הַמְקִיִּים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב כְּאִילוֹ קִיִּים עוֹלָם מֵלֵא.

Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5

Know that monetary cases are not like capital cases. Monetary cases—someone pays money and is atoned; capital cases—their blood and the blood of their descendants depends on them until the end of the world... Therefore, Adam was created alone to teach you that anyone who destroys one life² Scripture considers them as if they destroyed an entire world. But anyone who upholds one life, Scripture considers them as if they had upheld an entire world.³

In the context of capital witnesses, this warning emphasizes the weight of what they are about to do. Their testimony will determine whether the accused lives or dies, and that life or death is the life or death of an entire world. For the *sotah*, the warning's purpose is similar. The

¹ There is another reading here that the *kohen*'s words are designed to bully innocent women by assuming that female sexuality is prone to sin. For those that read the *mishnayot* that way, this material is very painful. I try to offer a different pathway here, one that focuses on what the *kohen* says and imagines the woman's inner experience, even as I value and honor the pain that other readings of these text produce.

² In modern editions, this *mishnah* says "one Jewish life" (נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל). This is an unfortunate error that has crept into the text. All the medieval manuscripts here do not have the word "Jewish" (מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל), and it makes no sense in the context here which is about the universal value of human life.

³ This could be read either as an additional *derashah* appended to the primary statement, or it could be the continuation of the statement itself.



difference is that the life the warning emphasizes is of infinite value is not someone else's—it is her own.

Even if your life does not matter to you right now, the “warning” states, it matters to God. You may feel that what you have done makes you worthless, but that feeling is not the truth. You are a person who contains an entire world within you. You are not defined by what you have done. Like the world itself, your soul teems with possibility. If you choose, there is a path forward.

For some women, these words might be enough to convince them that their lives are still worth living. For others, though, too consumed by self-loathing to believe the *kohen's* imperative to value their own lives, the text adds another exhortation: “Act for the sake of His great name, so that God’s name, which is written in sanctity, shall not be erased in the water.”

On one level, the *kohen's* words are a way to up the stakes: if your own life is not worth saving, at least save God’s name from being erased. It is a simple value proposition, one that offers the woman something that may be a greater incentive, at this moment, than her own life.

But read differently, in instructing the woman to act for God’s name, the *kohen* may be offering the accused woman a chance to rediscover her own life’s value. “You may think you are beyond redemption,” the *kohen's* words imply. “But even now, in the worst moment of your life, you have the ability to do something great. In this moment, when you may see yourself as beyond God’s love or care, you have the opportunity to make a choice to act for God’s name.” The words “act for God’s name” are an offer of spiritual heroism. They are proof that a good life—a life that sanctifies God’s name—is, even now, within reach.



We are all, at some point in our life, the *sotah*, staring at the consequences of a choice so painful that we cannot see a path forward. In those moments, the *kohen*'s words hold out hope: as long as we are alive, our lives are worlds of possibility.

No matter what we have done before, with each breath we take, we have the chance to act for God.

