

How Far Will We Go?

This Shabbat, we read the longest single portion in the entire Torah, Parshat Naso. At the center of the portion, we read of five mitzvot that are aimed at community development, family, person, God. These mitzvot help make a more concrete communal and personal relationship to the Tabernacle. The holy place is not simply a place for sacrifices, libations, and offerings - in short, the sacred realm. The opposite; the Temple is meant to be at the center of the communal affairs.

It is interesting to note that the message is not wholly consistent. The first mitzvah lists the banishment of the ritually impure from the holy camp. God resides there; God is the God of life - ritually impurity is always associated with death. The internal contradiction that would arise - a camp that uplifts life affirming values cannot - at the same time - contain the people who embody death.

*However, the third mitzvah in the list is the commandment of the jealous husband who suspects his wife of infidelity, the *Isha Sotah*. This would seem to be a base, even petty spousal squabble. If we think of the holy realm, we think of harmony. The virtue of *Shalom Bayit*, family harmony, emerges from the first Bayit, the first home and that is the home of God. God's home is meant to be place a peace, a model of harmony. The prophet calls for the day when God's house will be called the house of prayer for all people of the world, Jew and non-Jew alike.*

*The ideal of a peaceful home draws from the peace in the sanctuary. Our homes are miniature Temples. The evil prophet Bilaam, later in the book of Numbers, understood the hidden power of the Jewish people when he looked out upon our encampment, trying to curse, but blessing us instead: 'How goodly are your tents Jacob, your dwelling places, *mishkinotecha*, Israel.' The dwelling place, the *mishkan* in Hebrew, is of course, the name of God's abode. The two homes are parallel structures - family and sanctuary are meant to be synonymous.*

Yet, the Sotah represents the breakdown of family. The fourth mitzvah in the set is the section of the ascetical Nazirite. In explain the juxtaposition of the Sotah and the Nazirite, Rashi understands the extreme separation and self-abnegation to come about as a result of the negative reaction from witnessing the Sotah. (See Rashi, Numbers 6:2) He wants to flee from the messy complications that families often face. So, he forswears wine and other indulgences; he denies his own vanity and his own familial responsibility in the face of death.

The reaction to the Sotah seems consistent with the Temple attitude. The place is holy and the goal is to create the holy family and our response to the failure of the holy family is to run toward an even more severe, more demanding holiness.

So, we wonder, what is the third mitzvah, the mitzvah of Sotah, doing in the list of these commandments? Simply put, the Sotah and the jealous husband, though they may be perilously near the precipice, are not yet a shattered family. In this respect, the Sotah belongs in the Temple. The family in trouble is not the same as the impure person. The family in disharmony can recover its harmony. In a romantic flourish common to the closing messages in many tracts of his legal code, Maimonides says that God is so committed to peace in the family that He will allow His ineffable name to be erased in the waters of the Sotah to bring about reconciliation. (Final Halacha, Laws of Chanukah.) God hopes in the family, even at the expense of some of His sanctity. How far will we go to preserve those holy ones who are dangerously close to the edge; those who are on the brink of falling out?

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,

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