

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

A commentary on *Parashat Naso*

By Rabbi Benji Stanley

Parashat Naso, Numbers 4:21-7-89, includes the ritual or ordeal of the *Sotah*. A woman suspected of having gone astray into adultery is, according to 5:11-31, to be brought by her husband to the priest who makes her drink a potion, the “waters of bitterness”, which, if she is guilty, we are told, will cause her belly to distend and her thigh to sag and cause her to “become a curse among her people” (5:27). If a woman has not committed adultery and yet “a spirit of jealousy” (5:14) comes upon her husband such that he suspects her anyway, she may be forced to undergo the ritual, but it will, we are told, clear her name: “she shall be acquitted and retain seed” (5:28). Whatever the outcome of the case, no Israelite woman is safe from this ritualised act of male jealousy.

How do we respond to such a passage in our Torah? We can revert to apologetics, hopeful defences of the text to make it alright. Some suggest that the “waters of bitterness” would have never worked, causing any physical harm, and so the ritual would have always

acquitted the woman, safely purging the community of male jealousy whenever it arose.

I do not know if this is the case.

The Rabbis of the Mishnah explore the ritual of *the Sotah* in its own devoted tractate and they do not approach the text with

apologetics, rather they seem to expand and relish in its violence. Michael Satlow in his article ‘Texts of

Terror’ points out how Mishnah *Sotah* adds to the Torah’s aggressive threateningness in three ways. It insists that the ritual be public: “*anyone who wants to see comes and sees* (Mishnah *Sotah* 1:4). It adds details of violent humiliation: “*The priest grabs her garments- if they rip, they rip; if they tear open, they tear open*” (*Sotah* 1:5). Thirdly, it presents the details of the ritual as part of a moral universe in which the punishment fits the crime: the ritual will afflict her thigh and belly because “*she began the transgression with the thigh and afterwards with the belly*” (*Sotah* 1:7). Satlow explains that, while the *Sotah* ritual was not done in Rabbinic times, the Mishnah itself can be seen as an attempt to threaten women, or entrench threatening attitudes towards women, through words, in order to effect controlling submission.

There is a third approach to the ordeal of *Sotah*. When we encounter a difficult Torah text we may avoid either apologising or embracing it, but rather, we can preach or teach against it. Our *Parasha* may force us to confront a contemporary world in which “according to the best available statistics, one out of every three women worldwide has experienced either physical and/or sexual violence”¹. *Parashat Naso* and the discourse of human rights could push us to be more keenly aware of, and able to stand up against, violence and all discrimination against women, systemic and incidental.

A woman has “the right to life” (Article 2 of the Human Rights Act), the “right not to be subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment” (Article 3 of the Human Rights Act) or the threat of it, the “right not to be discriminated against” (Article 14 of the Human Rights Act). There is a principle that comes up, in, of all places, in *Tractate Sotah* of the Babylonian Talmud: “The beginning and end of Torah is the act of loving kindness”. The ordeal of the *Sotah* should teach us to build a fairer, kinder society.

1. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/vaw/the-issue>

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