

There is a curious juxtaposition in this longest of all parashiot: the trial procedure for the *sotah*, the presumed adulteress; and the laws governing those who wish to set themselves apart by making a *nazirite* vow, which immediately follow. To better understand, we first need to translate both of these words. The root טש means to stray, to wander from the path. An Italian word, which opera lovers know well, is *traviata* – wayward woman. The root נזר means to refrain from, or deprive oneself of (something). The *sotah* is a woman whom her husband, in a fit of jealousy, suspects of having committed adultery. In the ensuing trial, the wife is made to stand in front of the assembly, her hair is uncovered, a meal offering is placed in her hands, she is placed under oath, and then she is forced to drink sacred water mixed with dirt from the *mishkan* floor and a pulverized parchment upon which a curse in the name of HaShem has been written. If she is guilty, “her belly will swell, and her thigh will rupture. ... But if ... she is clean, she shall be exempted and bear seed.” (5:27-28) It is noteworthy that the man’s feelings of jealousy are the main focus of the trial. The woman is not interrogated; instead, she is subjected to a humiliating and potentially life-threatening procedure. Maimonides taught that a guilty wife would have confessed immediately and accepted divorce and ostracization, rather than risk the dangers of the trial. However, since no specific incident is mentioned in the Torah, and despite an entire Talmud tractate devoted to its implementation, it is doubtful that this trial ever took place as described in our parashah. In fact, due to the increasing prevalence of male adultery, the early Talmud sages eventually abolished the practice. “And it was Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai who nullified it, as it is stated: ‘I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, not your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery, for they [men] consort with lewd women.’ (Hosea 4:14), meaning that when the husbands are adulterers, the wives are not punished for their own adultery.” (Sotah 9:9) Unfortunately, there is no indication that this was done in the name of equality. Instead, in this and other rulings, the sages were simply acknowledging the declining morals of their time. Our Haftarah reading deals with the birth of Samson, whose hitherto barren mother is visited by an angel, instructed to raise her future son as a *nazir*, and in preparation, to become a *nazirit* herself. But the Haftarah is not only connected to the *nazir* discussion in our parashah, it also stands in direct contrast to the *sotah* passages. Samson’s mother, who is only known as the wife of Manoah, is alone when visited by “a man of God” whose name she does not think to ask. When she relates this to her husband, he is not the least bit suspicious. Even when she tells him she was visited a second time when “she was sitting in the field, and Manoah her husband was not with her” (13:9), he remains calm, and actually speaks with the “man” concerning his upcoming duties toward the child. There is no hint of jealousy here, even when he still thinks he is speaking with an ordinary man like himself. Both he and his wife are the epitome of tranquility and acceptance. In fact, his very name can be translated as relaxed, at peace. Our juxtaposition is one of a troubled marriage versus a harmonious one. But there is yet another strand to weave into it: the assumption that all women want to bear children, as seen in the reward for the *sotah* who is proven innocent. From Rachel to Hannah, barren women despondently cry out to HaShem in their desire for “fulfillment.” But this is not the case for all women. In the Book of Judges, both Deborah and Jael appear to be childless and there is no mention of it upsetting them. And Sarah never really mourns her barrenness; in fact, rather than shedding tears of joy, she laughs almost disdainfully when told that she is to become a mother. Talmud tractate Yevamot 64 postulates that both Abraham and Sarah were originally *tumtumim*, people whose external sexual organs are either concealed or indeterminate. Another sage in the same chapter claims that Sarah was originally an *alyonit*, a sexually underdeveloped woman, whom HaShem miraculously enabled to become pregnant. All three women had eschewed childbearing, either willingly or because of a physical condition, dedicating themselves instead to serving their people. But even in the absence of children, they are called “mothers.” Sarah and Abraham “acquired souls in Charan,” i.e., made and nurtured converts. Deborah, both judge and prophetess, refers to herself “as a mother in Israel” (Judges 5:7); and she lauds Jael as “blessed above women in the tent” (5:24), i.e., not burdened with childcare, she was able to act, lulling Sisera to sleep with milk, the food of babies, in order to kill him. Another apparently childless woman, whom the Torah never calls wife or mother, is Miriam. But because this uniqueness was obviously too difficult to accept, the historian Josephus says she was the wife of Hur, while the Talmud sages portray her as the wife of Caleb and the mother of Hur. The juxtaposition of *sotah* and *nazir* is not so strange after all. It points to a potential means for women to enjoy at least a modicum of autonomy. “A man **or woman** who sets himself apart by making a nazirite vow to abstain for the sake of the Lord.” (6:2) Although the passage continues in the masculine form, women are granted a choice, albeit small and limited by the dominance of fathers and husbands, but still, an important beginning.

Shabbat shalom!