

There is a curious juxtaposition in this longest of all parashiot: the trial procedure for the *sotah*, the presumed adulteress; and the laws for 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 שוט 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 – and according to a Mishna in Bavli Tractate Sotah, her “bosom” is uncovered and her hair is unbraided – unless she is beautiful, since the object is to make her “repulsive,” not attractive. Then, 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. Midrash Tanchuma teaches that the meal offering of simple barley flour without oil or frankincense is a further humiliation: Barley, primarily the food of animals, because she has “conducted herself in the manner of animals.” There is no oil because oil is light, and she “loved the darkness.” And no frankincense because frankincense reminds us of the matriarchs (referring to Shir haShirim 4:6: “Until the sun spreads and the shadows flee, I will go to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.”), and “this woman separated herself from their path.” If she is guilty, “her belly will swell, and her thigh will collapse. ... But if ... she is clean, she shall be exempted and bear seed, i.e., conceive.” (5:27-28) It is noteworthy that the man’s feelings of jealousy are both the cause and the focus of the trial. Without interrogation, the wife is subjected to a humiliating and potentially life-threatening procedure. Maimonides taught that a guilty wife would confess immediately and accept divorce and ostracism, rather than risk the trial. However, since no specific incident is mentioned in the Torah, and despite an entire Talmud tractate (Sotah) 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, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai eventually abolished it sometime in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Sotah 9:9) Unfortunately, there is no indication that this happened in the name of equality. In this and other rulings, the sages simply acknowledged the declining morals of their time. Our Haftarah reading deals with the birth of Samson, whose hitherto barren mother is visited by an angel, who instructs her to raise her future son as a *nazir*, and in preparation, to become a *nazirit* herself. The Haftarah is not only connected to the *nazir* discussion in our parashah, its narrative is also the polar opposite of the *sotah* discussion. 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 ask; and when she relates this to her husband, he is not the least bit suspicious. Instead, he prays to HaShem to send the “man of God” again to teach them how to raise their son. And when she tells him she was visited a second time he actually speaks with the “man” concerning the child’s upbringing. There is no hint of jealousy here, even when he still thinks he is speaking with an ordinary man like himself. In fact, his very name can be translated as relaxed, at peace. What can the juxtaposition of these two narratives teach us? I believe it underscores the dichotomous view of women both in the TaNaKh and in the writings of our sages. On the one hand, women are vital to family life because of their compassion, their organizational abilities, and their handiwork and business skills. And the Torah establishes special laws to protect their rights in marriage and widowhood. On the other, they are far from autonomous, since they pass from the jurisdiction of their fathers to that of their husbands and in matters of sex they are little more than chattel. Rabbinic literature is ambivalent about women, but generally views them as a threat when they transgress supposed boundaries. For example, in a debate in Mishnah Sotah 3, Rabbi Eliezer says that anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her wantonness. Sadly, this view still holds today in certain circles, as we see each month in the egregious behavior of Ultraorthodox radicals toward the Women of the Wall. Perhaps the most important takeaway from this juxtaposition is to demonstrate that the ideal marriage is founded on *shalom bayit*, a peaceful household. Our sages concluded that since this is the only instance in the entire TaNaKh of requiring the Divine Name to be blotted out, the overarching purpose of the *sotah* ritual was to reestablish household peace. Once again, in many fundamentalist circles this unfortunately entails the wife submitting to the will of the husband. However, we are slowly making progress toward one of the prerequisites of peace: guaranteeing equality for all, regardless of gender, race, or any other distinguishing characteristic. And for true and lasting household peace to be established, it must be predicated on acknowledging the inevitable scars that strife leaves in its wake, never seeking to disparage them, and instead, massaging them with the soothing balm of mutual love and respect.

Shabbat shalom!