February 3, 2019 - Num 5:11-31 - Jealousy Ordeal for Suspected Adultery
Torah Reading: Numbers 5:11-31 - Jealousy Ordeal for Suspected Adultery
Psalm 94:1-11

The ‘Sotah’ - Trial of Jealousy

**Numbers 5:11-15** - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, If any man's wife go aside, and commit a trespass against him, And a man lie with her carnally, and it be hid from the eyes of her husband, and be kept close, and she be defiled, and there be no witness against her, neither she be taken with the manner; And the spirit of jealousy come upon him, and he be jealous of his wife, and she be defiled: or if the spirit of jealousy come upon him, and he be jealous of his wife, and she be not defiled: Then shall the man bring his wife unto the priest ..."

The words "if any man's" is "ish ish" in Hebrew - the word for man or husband is written twice. The rabbis interpreted this to mean the wife's alleged adultery would be a sin against both the husband and against God, who was Israel's husband. (God is called the Man [ish] of War on high in *Exodus 15:3*).

"...for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (*Exodus 34:14*) - vigilantly guarding what is His.

- **Proverbs 6:34** - "For jealousy is a husband’s fury; therefore he will not spare in the day of vengeance."

"Thy camp shall be holy" (*Deuteronomy 23:14*). This is Moses' warning against adultery when going to war, as God would remove his presence from their midst if there were adulterers in their camp. (according to the Bamidbar Rabba, 9)

In fact, in every agreement or covenant or contract, the "third party" is God, who is present. A betrayal of the agreement also betrays God. Especially true of the marriage agreement.

This passage holds a spiritual message for us as the Bride of Christ, and the sin of spiritual adultery, or turning away from God to trust in idols for our “grain, new wine and oil” (*Hosea 2:8*)

"go aside" or "go astray" is the word "satah" or “sotah” which is the Hebrew word describing the woman suspected of adultery here. It then became the name for the whole ritual.

"trespass = ma`al - a word usually reserved for offenses against God.

Adultery was forbidden by God in the Ten Commandments:
Exodus 20:14 - "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Leviticus 20:10 - "If a man commits adultery with a married woman--if he commits adultery with his neighbor's wife--both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death."

That punishment would only follow a conviction based on evidence, witnesses, testimony and legal due process. The Trail of Jealousy on the other hand was a test of last resort, depending on a miracle, not a majority opinion or a ruling by the priests. "They never gave the waters drink but in a doubtful case," according to Bamidbar Rabba, sect. 9. fol. 195. 2.

The husband's trust in his wife must have been seriously compromised to get to this point.

The husband must have first given his wife "an admonition before two witnesses, saying, 'have no talk with such a man,' and yet she talks with him" (Sotah, c. 1. sect. 1, 2.) or "'be not secretly or in private with such a one,' and she yet goes into a private place with him, and stays so long with him that she may be defiled." (Maimon. & Bartenora in Misn. Bava Kama, c. 9. sect. 11.)

The husband could simply end the marriage with a bill of divorcement, thus avoiding this test. (Rabbinical sources say either party could get a bill of divorcement). The jealousy and suspicion would have had to be at a level that no trust was left, despite their desire to maintain the marriage.

The trial of bitter waters was to resolve a situation of unbearable ambiguity and uncertainty.

Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan called them "the waters of investigation."

Initially, this all seems misogynistic and unfair

But the unfaithfulness of the wife was a greater threat to the order of the family than that of the husband, as it threw the legitimacy of the children into question (a woman always knows whether a child is hers, which is one reason why the stakes are often so much higher for female unfaithfulness).

The ritual of jealousy served to arrest the cycle of jealousy before it could be expressed in a husband’s abuse (or the violence of the lynch mob). The jealous party had to surrender judgment into God’s hands.

The jealousy rite really served both parties. The falsely suspected party could call the jealous party to 'put up or shut up,' receiving divine vindication through the rite and being delivered from any stain on their character.
Uncovering her head takes her out from under his authority and places her before God for immediate and personal judgment apart from the husband's representation.

God will also punish unfaithful husbands in his own time, but the openness of his judgment on adulteresses frees faithful wives from unjust suspicion or accusation.

**Ordeals**

In ancient times and in some societies today similar ordeals are performed to get at guilt or innocence. Most are cruel and involve plunging your hands into scalding water or carrying red-hot iron rods. The healing afterward indicated to a priest or shaman one's guilt or innocence. The difference is that here injury is not inherent to the ordeal. There is nothing naturally harmful in the "bitter water." It only turns deadly after the wife drinks it - and only if she is guilty. It's a miracle, and the outcome doesn't need to be interpreted.

This ritual - though strange to us - was considered by the rabbis as a "sign of honor" for Israel, because it reflected the high moral stature of the people, and their commitment to the "holiness of the camp" - that God would undertake a miracle to try to save a marriage.

Significantly, if the husband was also guilty of adulterous relationships, the ritual would not work. And when adultery became widespread in Israel, it was said, the Sotah ritual was abandoned altogether. This happened by the Second Temple period, the rabbis agreed.

Jesus called the people in his day “An evil and adulterous generation” (Matthew 12:39).

He also expanded the interpretation of adultery (and therefore of idolatry, too) to include one's hidden thoughts as well as actions:

- **Matthew 5:27-28** - “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

- **Hosea 4:14** - “I will not punish your daughters when they play the harlot Or your brides when they commit adultery, For the men themselves go apart with harlots And offer sacrifices with temple prostitutes; So the people without understanding are ruined.”

**Adultery**

The rabbis noted that the word for "going astray" - *sotah* - was here spelled with a Shin rather than Samech (corresponding to our letter sounds "sh" and "s").

Spelled with the "sh" the word is "*shotah*" and means madness or folly.
Rashi - Adulterers do not commit adultery unless a spirit of folly (שׁתְּתִיתוּת) enters them, as it is written [here], “should go astray” (תָּשׁוֹחַ, can also mean to become a foolish, i.e., to become “foolish”), and it is written, “One who commits adultery with a woman is devoid of sense” (Proverbs 6:32) (Tanchuma Naso 5). The simple meaning of the verse is: “Should [any man’s wife] goes astray.” She deviates from modest ways, thus arousing his suspicion.

The rabbis held two explanations for adultery - one appealing to reason, noting that "going stray" or leaving the path of modest and right conduct was a decision. The other was a "spirit of madness," recognizing the overpowering, mysterious power of sexual desire.

A "spirit of jealousy" had already entered the suspicious husband. It is also irrational, and cannot be placated by reasoned explanations. That's why the Sotah ritual is needed.

Self-Deceit

The rabbis saw in the adulterer and adulteress a mental process - what we today would call "compartmentalization" - isolating one part of their lives from the rest.

Proverbs 30:18-20 considers things that move in erratic and unpredictable ways: - "There be three things which are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid. Such is the way of an adulterous woman; she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith, 'I have done no wickedness.'"

Ibn Ezra interprets it: "She wipes away the traces so that she will not know that she has eaten." The main effect is not to deceive others, but to deceive herself, obliterating the memory of such an unthinkable act.

[A fascinating discussion of all this is found in "Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers" by Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg]

God Sees

The rabbis spent a lot of ink emphasizing that God sees and knows everything, even those hidden in the dark. "The eye of the adulterer waits for the twilight, saying 'No eye shall see me.'" (Job 24:15)

Jeremiah 23:24 - "Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the LORD."

Then comes a startling insight:

The adulterer says, 'Remove Yourself and give me space for a moment! This thing is extremely hard, as it were.' But He is longsuffering, and He gives them space for a
moment..." (Tanchuma, Nasso 4-5)

In this same midrash, God explains that "I created you, and I made you full of secret cavities, as it is said, "You forgot the God who brought you forth." (Deuteronomy 32:18) What is the "God who brought you forth - ma-cholelecha"? It is the God who made you mechilim mechilim - full of cavities. ... I God search the heart, and I probe the kidneys, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:10)

God created us with the capacity for secrecy, and He also knows where those secret places are. But God does not remain where He is not wanted. He removes Himself, with devastating results.

To maintain this kind of secrecy, the adulterers must fragment their reality, keep the secret hidden even from their own consciousness, in order to function in the normal humdrum daylight existence.

The Dissolving of God's Name

In the Sotah ritual, first the curse itself is written on parchment, then God's name is written in ink and all dissolved into the water, according to Josephus and others. This reflects what happens inwardly to the adulterers - God dissolves away from their consciousness. He no longer has any meaning for them.

To dissolve God's name into the water, the priest must violate a previous command of God to not deface His name (Deuteronomy 12:2-4).

The mishna uses the same word God uses when He commands Israel to "dissolve Amalek's name from under heaven." (Exodus 17:14 and Deuteronomy 29:19)

Israel Forced to Drink Powder from Golden Calf

The trial of bitter waters is directly related to the incident of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. Moses responded by breaking the tablets of stone, burning and grinding the calf to powder, scattering it on water and forcing the Israelites to drink it. The Levites were then instructed to kill 3,000 of their Israelite brethren, after which Moses interceded for the nation and the people were plagued.

The Numbers 5 rite of jealousy can be seen to be closely related to the rite of jealousy that God performed on his adulterous bride, Israel, by the hand of Moses.

The holy water of the tabernacle Laver corresponds to the brook that descended from God’s presence on Mount Sinai – Deuteronomy 9:21. The remains of the broken tablets were "dissolved" into that water, as were the ground up "dust" of what was left of the golden calf. This was scattered on the waters and the Israelites were forced to drink
Dissolved and blotted out

In Deuteronomy 29:14-29, the person who secretly rejects God to commit spiritual adultery with foreign gods will find that 'every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the Lord would blot out his name from under heaven' (v.20). Later, Moses asks that he be ‘blotted out’ of God’s book for the sake of adulterous Israel.

The reference in Deuteronomy 29:18 to "a root bearing bitterness or wormwood" is also significant, and is reflected in the "bitterness" of the waters of jealousy:

- Deuteronomy 29:18 - "Lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the Lord our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood"

- Hebrews 12:15 - "Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright."

Idolatry = spiritual adultery = sexual immorality = bitter waters

Zechariah's Flying Scroll

Zechariah’s flying scroll (Zechariah 5) is written with curses. It flies over the face of the land, enters the houses of thieves and those who swear falsely. It will expose their unfaithfulness, cause a swelling of the belly and a withering of the thing, and will bring curses to the house. A "woman" called "wickedness," exposed by the jealousy test, is sent away.

Confession

Aaron is instructed to confess Israel's sin over the scapegoat on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:21) The first real instruction for personal confession of sin is in Numbers 5:7 - "Then they shall confess their sin which they have done..."

In the Sotah ritual, the priests were said to encourage the suspected wife to confess. [See https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/960640/jewish/Sotah-Chapter-Three.htm]

They tell her: "My daughter, [we know] that wine has a powerful influence, frivolity has a powerful influence, immaturity has a powerful influence, bad neighbors have a powerful influence. Do not cause [God's] great name, which is written in holiness, to be blotted out in the water."
And they tell her: "There are many who preceded you and were swept away [from the world] (i.e. by drinking the waters. Why follow in the same pattern? Admit your guilt). Men of greater and more honorable stature have been overcome by their natural inclination and have faltered." [To emphasize this,] they tell her the story of Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law (Genesis 38), the simple meaning of the episode concerning Reuben and [Bilhah], his father's concubine (Genesis 35:22), and the story of Amnon and his sister (2 Samuel 13), to make it easier for her to admit [her guilt].

"They confessed without shame - and they inherited the life of the world to come."

If she says: "I committed adultery," or "I will not drink [the water]," she is to be divorced without receiving [the money due her by virtue of] her ketubah, and the matter is dismissed.

Sin Engraved on the Bones

The sins of a human being are written on his bones, according to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav.

Ezekiel 32:27 - "...their iniquities shall be upon their bones." Through confession the letters written on one's bones leave the bones and compose the words of the confession. For language issues from the bones, as it is written, "All my bones shall say, LORD, who is like unto thee" (Psalm 35:10).

Tradition says when the Israelites were traveling in the wilderness, Judah's bones were rolling around in his coffin, due to his impulsive words to his father: "I will be a sinner before you to all eternity" (Genesis 43:9). But then Moses reminds God of Judah's earlier confession in the affair of Tamar: "She is more righteous than I!" (Genesis 38:26) and his bones came back together and were able to rest.

Without confession, the sin is still written on the bones, and when these combine with the dissolved name of God, which goes into the body of the Sotah with the bitter waters, the result is her death.

Confession miraculously reintegrates us back into the realm of holiness.

Even in the case of Achan (Joshua 7:20) - in which there was no doubt of his guilt - his confession made atonement for him, although he and his family were stoned. How do we know this?

"And Joshua said unto him, Why hast thou troubled us, the Lord shall trouble thee this day: [implying] this day art thou troubled, but thou shalt not be troubled in the next world." (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 44b)

Barley Offering

Barley - as the grain used by animals and the poor - is the meal offering to reflect the animal-like actions that adultery debases us to. Perhaps it also displays an extreme
humility (like the barley grain First Fruit Offering) that is required before calling on Christ's resurrection, which the "barley cake" of Gideon's dream reflects, and which should be the attitude of the innocent wife undergoing the ritual.

It's not clear from the text exactly when the offering is made in the process.

**Drinking the Waters**

The holy water used in the ritual was taken from the Laver where the priests washed. The Bamidbar Rabbah reminds us that the Laver was made from the mirrors of the women who served by the Tabernacle door.

"And the priest took the holy water" (**Numbers 5:17**). There is no holy water except what is made holy by being put in a vessel, and that is the water of the laver. And why is that the water from the laver? Because the laver was made from the mirrors of the women, as it is written, "And he made the laver from copper [and its stand from copper, from the mirrors of the women who served (tzavu) at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting]" (**Exodus 38:8**). The same women who said, "God bears witness for us that we left pure from Egypt." When Moses came to make the laver God said to him, "From those [their] mirrors make it, for they did not act for the sake of unchastity, and from it [the laver] their daughters will be tested for whether they are as pure as their foremothers."

The daughters who grew up surrounded by impurity yet became impure are tested by the handiwork of their foremothers, who grew up surrounded by impurity in Egypt yet remained pure. The foremothers used their mirrors to enhance the sexual relationship with their husbands, thereby insuring the survival if Israel. The Sotah would have undermined her marriage and her community through sexual sin that will be revealed by these same mirrors through the waters from the Laver.

Before she drinks the waters, the priest rips her clothing, exposing her heart, unplaits her hair, and ties a rope around her just above her breasts, to keep her ripped clothes from falling off. (There are further more lurid details in the Talmud that seem to contradict what is in the scripture here)

God is described as plaiting Eve's hair before He brings her to Adam (Bereshit Rabbah 18:2) So this memory of Eve is purposely deconstructed in the suspected wife when the priests uncovers or “unplaits” her hair.

The dust from the Tabernacle floor is sprinkled onto the waters - this is dust from holy ground, a sacred precinct and therefore full of awe.

But also according to the Targum of Jonathan to remind her of her origin and her end - "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (**Genesis 3:19**) - and perhaps of the temptor, the serpent who beguiled Eve and whose food is now dust.

After drinking the waters, if she is guilty, then she will die.
Because the text says the curse “shall enter” twice (verses 24 and 27) the rabbis interpreted this to mean that the same effects would happen to her lover - wherever he was - at the same time.

**A Blessing**

But if she is proven innocent, there is a blessing - her "belly and thigh will be blessed" and she will be fruitful, and bring forth many beautiful and strong children.

**Numbers 5:28** - “...then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed.”

If she had any sicknesses she would be healed of them.

Targum of Jonathan: “Her splendor shall shine with the brightness and the beauty of her countenance.”

**Jesus Took the Curse on Himself for Us**

**Galatians 3:13** - "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree"

The curse of the Sotah is definitely a curse of the Law. As we are His Bride, and continually tempted to stray from Him, it's important to know:

1. He took the curse for us

2. We are told "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." (**James 5:16**)

The Sotah Trial of Bitter Waters, like all the other passages in the Bible, is there for our admonition and should serve as a warning against not only physical adultery, but the spiritual adultery of worshipping idols.

Through repentance and confession, we are returned to the "realm of Holiness"

**Jesus and the Woman at the Well - John 4**

The patriarchs ‘typically’ met their wives at wells (**Genesis 24; 29:1-14; Exodus 2:16-22**). The well or enclosed source of water symbolized the womb, fertility, and purity of the woman (**Song of Solomon 4:12-15**). Faithfulness to one's spouse was spoken of in terms of not spreading your own waters around and drawing and drinking solely from your own well (**Proverbs 5:15-20**). The prostitute is compared to a ditch collecting filthy water and the adulteress to a narrow well (**Proverbs 23:27**). God compares himself to a fountain of living waters for his people, whom they have adulterously rejected for broken
and dry cisterns (Jeremiah 2:13). Unfaithful Jerusalem itself is akin to a polluted well of wickedness (Jeremiah 6:7).

As a sort of antitype to the waters of jealousy, the "living water" that Jesus offers the woman also brings to light her adulteries. In place of the water bringing a curse, there is the offer of water bringing her eternal life.

In Colossians 2:14 we read that Christ has “blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us’and has removed it from out of the way, nailing it to his cross."

On the cross, Jesus is given vinegar – bitter wine – to drink right before he died. In Psalm 69, in which this is foretold (v.21), we also see a reference to the ‘blotting out’ of certain people, to be rendered barren and have their ‘loins shake continually’ (vv.22-28). In such details, it may be possible to hear echoes of Numbers 5.

In Revelation 8:10-11 the star ‘Wormwood’ falls from heaven and poisons the seas, rendering them bitter, causing many men to die as a result. The end of the adulterous woman is associated with bitterness and wormwood (Proverbs 5:4) and she suffers the testing of the bitter drink. The judgment of the third trumpet is a sort of jealousy rite (the third bowl also involves a poisoning of the drinking water – 16:4-7).

The adulterous Whore of Babylon is to be given the bitter wine of the cup of testing and fierce wrath of the jealous husband (Revelation 16:19).

Bridegroom has blotted out the handwriting of the curses against his formerly adulterous Bride into the cup of God’s jealousy and drained the entire cup himself.

One aspect of the Afikomen or the Lord's Supper is a version of a jealousy trial. In 1 Corinthians 11:27-34 those who take the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner eat and drink judgment to themselves.

See https://alastairadversaria.com/2013/02/09/the-cup-of-the-adulteress-understanding-the-jealousy-rite-of-numbers-5/