

## **The Origins of the Sotah<sup>1</sup>**

### *Self-Sacrifice in Jewish Leadership*

One of the most vital theological axioms which our Sages formulated was that the entire corpus of Jewish law, written and oral, was transmitted to Moshe at Sinai<sup>2</sup>. Thus, even though the section concerning the Sotah woman is recorded for the first time in this week's sedra, it too, amongst all of the other laws of the Torah, was transmitted during the Sinaitic revelation. Once we appreciate this chronology, we recognize that Moshe's response to the sin of the Golden Calf was modeled on what he had just learned from the Almighty on the mountain.

The Sotah protocols, detailed in this week's *sedra*<sup>3</sup>, are to be implemented when a marital bond is under mortal strain, under the suspicion for infidelity. Such was the unfortunate state of affairs concerning the fresh nuptials between God and His chosen people, as a portion of the Jewish people had engaged in theological adultery through their orgiastic worship of molten metal in bovine form. As a reflection of her lasciviousness, the hair of the Sotah woman is publicly released, *ופרע את ראשה*<sup>4</sup>. This is precisely the word which the Torah utilizes to describe Moshe's own perception of the Jewish people in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf, *וירא משה את העם כי פרע הוא*, 'Moshe saw the people, that they had become loosened'<sup>5</sup>.

Given that Moshe conceptualized the behavior of the Jewish people as analogous to the Sotah, it is perfectly understandable that Moshe proceeded to grind up the Calf and sprinkled its remains into a drink, which he administered to the people<sup>6</sup>. This administration of a ritual tonic, is of course, the apex of the Sotah protocol, and thus our Sages noted that Moshe was using this drink as a method of identifying those who were guilty of spiritual fornication (*Avodah Zarah* 44a).

It is in this context which Moshe's humility, self-sacrifice, and inexpressible greatness reveals itself. From a halakhic perspective, the most shocking aspect of the Sotah protocols is the deliberate erasure of the Divine name<sup>7</sup>, normally a grave offense<sup>8</sup>. Our Sages conceptualize this radical act as a singular testament to the exalted quality of peace<sup>9</sup>, and in particular, domestic harmony. In the wake of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to my revered teacher, Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky, from whom I was privileged to learn for four years in high school for first exposing me to the deep and profound connection between the Sotah protocols and the sin of the Golden Calf.

<sup>2</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi, *Pe'ah* 2:4, "even that which an experienced student rules in the presence of his teacher was in fact related [by the Almighty] to Moshe at Sinai.

<sup>3</sup> BeMidbar 5:11-31.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 5:18.

<sup>5</sup> Shemot 32:25.

<sup>6</sup> Shemot 32:20.

<sup>7</sup> BaMidbar 5:23.

<sup>8</sup> Devarim 12:4, Rambam *Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah* 6:1.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Talmud Bavli, *Makkot* 11a.

the Golden Calf, however, it is not the Almighty who submits His name for erasure. In fact, it is none other than his faithful servant, Moshe Rabbenu.

In theory, God might have fulfilled his promise to the Patriarchs to award the Land of Canaan to their descendents even if the entire Jewish people would be destroyed, as long as one descendent, Moshe, remains alive<sup>10</sup>. When the Almighty proposes precisely this plan, the destruction of the Jewish people as currently constituted, conjoined with rebuilding through Moshe alone, the great shepherd of Israel will have none of it. Instead, fresh with the model of Sotah on his mind, Moshe restores harmony between the spouses on the cusp of irreconcilable rupture by offering his own name for erasure,<sup>11</sup> מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת.

It was both an illustration of *imitatio dei* unparalleled in the annals of the Jewish people, and an act of remarkable self-sacrifice. Seeing how the Almighty offers his own name for the restoration of marital bliss, Moshe, in turn, offers his own.

In so doing, Moshe establishes an eternal precedent for self sacrifice as the sine qua non of all authentic Jewish leadership. As Rashi<sup>12</sup> notes in our sedra on the basis of Tanchuma, if Moshe is credited with the construction of the Mishkan, it is on account of his self-sacrifice in implementing the complex Divine will involved in its construction. Further, as Rashi notes on the very next verse<sup>13</sup>, the tribal princes who merited inaugurating the altar were indeed those *shotrim* who suffered horrific beatings in Egypt when it became impossible to meet the daily quota of bricks.

Moreover, by casting his lot with the Jewish people, instead of sauntering in right then to the Promised Land with a small tribe of his own progeny, Moshe exposes himself to the hazards of leading such a recalcitrant bunch<sup>14</sup>, and eventually loses his own right to enter the Promised Land<sup>15</sup>.

At that moment, however, in the wake of the Golden Calf, with the threat of total annihilation looming, the man whose spiritual calling card was his unparalleled humility<sup>16</sup> saves Israel by rejecting the Almighty's proposal to rebuild through him alone.

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<sup>10</sup> See Rashi to BaMidbar 14:12, just after the sin of the spies, where he explicitly makes this argument. Technically speaking, the oath with the Patriarchs may have been fulfilled through Moshe alone.

<sup>11</sup> Shemot 32:32

<sup>12</sup> See Rashi BaMidbar 7:1 s.v. *kalot Moshe*.

<sup>13</sup> See Rashi to BaMidbar 7:2 s.v. *hem nesi'ei ha'matot*.

<sup>14</sup> Devarim 1:37. Note that Moshe utilizes the term '*biglalchem*', indicating that the barring of his own entry to the Land of Israel was inextricably linked with his relationship with the Jewish people.

<sup>15</sup> BaMidbar 20:12

<sup>16</sup> BaMidbar 12:3

There will be no divorce between the Almighty and His people. God is left with no choice but to fulfill his promise to the Patriarchs by continuing his relationship with His eternal partner<sup>17</sup>, the entire people of Israel.

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<sup>17</sup> See Rashi to BaMidbar 7:1. It is striking that shortly after the Sotah narrative the Torah specifically alludes to the Jewish people as Hashem's "bride."