

## **The Scandal of the Sotah**

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I had not watched television or seen the news since Tuesday when I turned it on just this past Thursday evening to watch the late night news. Since Shavuot came in the middle of the week, and I do not watch television on yom tov, I wanted to catch up on what was happening in the world since I had tuned out a couple of days before. I turned on WJLA channel 7 just in time to hear Leon Harris and Allison Starling begin their report on the scandal that rocked Washington. I expected to hear about the IRS probe into politically right wing organizations or the Justice Department's records seizure of Associated Press reporters or the hearings on the handling of the attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi. But none of those scandals which are indeed rocking Washington, and making President Obama's already graying hair quite a bit grayer were what Harris and Starling were referring to. The scandal that they were talking about—at the head of the news cycle, by the way—was the television show *Scandal*. You see the season finale had just debuted, and it was somehow deemed newsworthy to report first on the fantasy scandal that on the all too real scandals in our town. Now I'm giving you a spoiler alert, so cover your ears or go use the bathroom now if you don't want to know what happens. Just to be clear, I do not watch the show, but I did see the news coverage of it. Among other bombshells, the beautiful Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington has been having a prolonged affair with President Fitzgerald Thomas Grant III, played by Tony Goldwyn, who is married to Mellie Grant, who is played by Bellamy Young. While the affair has been kept up until this point under wraps, the second season's finale ends with Olivia encountering a hoard of cameras and reporters to whom the story has been leaked, demanding details of her extramarital activities with the President of the United States. That's the news I waited two days to hear about!

Separating truth from fantasy, 79% of Americans, when polled, say that adultery is “always wrong.” However, 74% of men and 68% of women said they would have an affair if they could

be sure that no one would find out about it.<sup>1</sup> Nightline reported that up to one in three men and one in four women are believed to have extramarital affairs prompting University of Washington professor David Barash to quip: “Infants have their infancy, and adults their adultery.” With the not long ago disgraced Mark Sanford back in the news and the public’s willingness to forgive him and send him back to Congress, it’s hard to doubt that those statistics are true.

Now tucked neatly into this week’s parasha--which is the longest parasha of the Torah--just before the long list of chieftains and their gifts to the sanctuary that we read this morning--is the disturbing ritual of the Sotah. A sotah is a woman who was suspected of committing adultery, and the Torah describes an elaborate ritual including drinking a potion to ascertain whether or not she is guilty that sounds a lot like something out of Salem rather than *Jerusalem*. The Torah’s fixation on adultery suggests that it is anything but a modern problem. In the Torah’s first brush with adultery, Genesis 20, Avimelech King of Gerar nearly has an affair with Sarah, Abraham’s wife. Poor Avimelech thought Sarah was Abraham’s **sister**, not his wife. God intervenes in a dream, threatening the entire kingdom if Avimelech lays but a hand on Sarah, and in the morning he frantically confronts Abraham about the *hat’ah gedolah*, the *Great Sin*, he nearly committed. Jacob Milgrom, in his masterful commentary on the book of Numbers suggests that *hat’ah gedolah*, this great sin is a euphemism, not only in the Torah but also in Babylonian, Egyptian and other Near Eastern literatures...a euphemism for: adultery. And we find the theme recur over and over in the Torah; Pharaoh also tries to lay with Sarah; Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce Joseph; King Ahashuerus is all too ready to dump his argumentative wife Vashti and move on to a younger, more beautiful—and presumably more docile bride; King David of course has a disastrous affair with Batsheva that results in the death of the jilted husband as well as the first born progeny of the illicit relationship; and the haftarah today introduces us to an important biblical judge Samson, who is anything but monogamous or restrained in his sexual proclivities...indeed it is his ultimate downfall.

I think there is an interesting irony to the reading of parashat Naso and the sotah ritual as well as the Samson story at this particular time on the calendar. In a rabbi’s life, the weeks between Shavuot and early August mean one thing: Weddings! Since we refrain from weddings during the omer, and then again in late summer leading up to Tisha B’Av, this is a particularly high

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.infidelityfacts.com/infidelity-statistics.html>

season for weddings right now. How many future brides and grooms are ascending bimahs in synagogues all over the Jewish world this Shabbat only to hear a story about a deeply troubled marriage: an uncontrollably distrustful husband, and a wife who may or may not actually be guilty of the suspected infidelity. Rabbi Janet Marder writes: “Maybe it does make sense to read Naso in the midst of the wedding season. For it reminds us that what matters is not the poetic promises we utter under the chuppah, but the prosaic reality of living up to them in marriage. We get a devastating glimpse of how bitter it can be to lack faith in our partner, how hard it is to forgive and make peace.”

Even a seemingly anachronistic text has something to teach us in its very anachronism! Marriage, the Torah wants us to know, is complex...living a monogamous, lifelong commitment with one human being is a blessing, but it is also a series of profound tests to both partners. We need and expect a lot from a life partner, and because we are human and fallible, we are not always able to deliver. And when we encounter the broken faith, the secrets, the jealous, the bitterness of the sotah episode, you have to wonder how this archetypal couple reached such depths in their marriage—a couple that at one time stood under a huppah with family and friends, drank the cups of wine, heard the blessings, danced the horah...and now there is so much mistrust that the only recourse is this humiliating ritual?

Perhaps the Sotah ritual remains in our text as a warning not to let a marriage dissolve in these ways and to intervene before anyone would even consider such a ritual. Consider the case of the Rabbi Hiyya bar Ashi, recorded in the Talmud, tractate Kiddushin 81b. It is written that Rabbi Hiyya would pray regularly that God would save him from his *yetzer ha'ra*—another euphemism for his sexual urges. Only Rabbi Hiyya got himself in some trouble one day when he said this prayer within earshot of his wife! She wonders why he needs to say this prayer...is something wrong with their marriage? Should she be concerned? So she decided to disguise herself one day while Rabbi Hiyya was outside reading in the garden. She adorned herself with beautiful clothes, completely disguised herself, and paraded back and forth in front of him. Finally he asked who she was, and she responded, I am harutah--which means freedom (seductive, eh?!)! Before this playfulness turned into romance, she asked him to pick the pomegranate that was growing on top of the tree in the garden. Which he did right away! After this encounter, he returned home to find his wife, in her recognizable dress, lighting the oven in the kitchen. He

came in and sat on the oven—which some say is to punish himself for what had happened. She said to him, Why are you sitting on a hot oven? He confessed what had happened with the disguised temptress. *But it was I*, she said! He didn't believe her until she produced proof...the pomegranate she asked him to pluck from the tree. Still he wasn't entirely comforted because he believed his flirtatiousness was with another woman.

I think this is a particularly fascinating episode. The wife is savvy enough to detect that there are problems in the marriage. Her response is coordinated, playful, even risqué. Intimacy is what has been missing from the relationship, and she cleverly reintroduces it with creative role playing. She doesn't even mind that he thought he was being unfaithful, because after all, she was the one with whom he became intimate! Is the fire she was lighting in the oven symbolic of a fire being rekindled in their relationship...we can only hope! I am inspired by the attention this spouse pays to her own marriage, and her courage to take matters into her own hands to improve the rapport with her spouse.

Statistics tell us that romance and marital crises almost always happen after children are born. A young, low maintenance, carefree marriage suddenly becomes a miniature preschool with spouses transformed into wet nurses, diaper changers, carpool drivers, and soccer coaches. I remember a bombshell article that appeared in the Fashion & Style section of the New York Times, entitled "Truly, Madly, Guiltily," by Ayelet Waldman. She argued, raising the ire of countless readers: "I have four children. Four children with whom I spend a good part of every day: bathing them, combing their hair, sitting with them while they do their homework, holding them while they weep their tragic tears. But I'm not in love with any of them. I am in love with my husband. It is his face that inspires in me paroxysms of infatuated devotion. If a good mother is one who loves her child more than anyone else in the world, I am not a good mother. I am in fact a bad mother. I love my husband more than I love my children. And if my children resent having been moons rather than the sun? If they berate me for not having loved them enough? If they call me a bad mother? I will tell them that I wish for them a love like I have for their father. I will tell them that they are my children, and they deserve both to love and be loved like that. I will tell them to settle for nothing less than what they saw when they looked at me, looking at him." The firestorm of emails and letters that followed that March 27, 2005 article was legendary. Mommy and Me, Gymboree, and Soccer moms wrote in to declare the heresy of

Waldman's article. But I think it is brimming with Torah. For marriage to avoid descending into sotah-like misery, we would be better to follow Waldman's prioritizing, as well as the proactivity of Rabbi Hiyya's wife.

Men and women both need to feel valued and emotionally supported. And believe it or not, infidelity is not often the result of simple physical attraction. Much more often it is caused by a nagging sense within spouses that they are not valued or appreciated or emotionally supported by their partners. Making our spouses the most esteemed and beloved people in our lives is the beginning of rekindling the romance.

The sotah ritual culminates in a surprising, unexpected act. The name of holy name of God is scraped off of a parchment—the flecks of ink are poured into the bitter waters that are to be drunk by the woman. Whenever a marriage crumbles to the extent described in our parasha God's name is diminished. By continuing to affirm the blessings we recited under the huppah, by cultivating long, happy, healthy marriages we not only become a blessing to ourselves and our spouses, we also elevate and sanctify God's name. With all the challenges, the ups and downs that are life's inevitabilities, I pray that each of you be blessed with the strength to pursue lifelong happiness and companionship.