

The Mysterious Ritual of Sotah: Engaging with Ideas We Don't Understand

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Not to put anyone on the spot, but I'm curious ... what goes through your mind when you see I'm about to start a sermon? Is it some version of: *Oh my God. What is he going to say this time, and how long is he going to drag on?* Or is it something more charitable? *I've been sitting here for two hours, and now, finally, ten minutes of something I might understand?* Maybe it's a little of both.

But speaking of things we don't understand. ...

I have preached about Parashat Naso many times, but I have never spoken about Sotah. Sotah is the term for the woman suspected of being unfaithful to her husband. The Torah describes an ordeal by which such a person was made to drink a prescribed potion that was supposed to work a miracle. If she was innocent of her husband's charge, the potion would have no effect; but if she was guilty, the water would enter into her "so that her belly would distend and her thigh sag, and the woman would become a curse among her people."

They don't teach this one in Hebrew School. I remember studying it in my 9th-grade *Chumash* class, and ... it *probably* wasn't the reason I left the school. The Talmud says the ritual ended when people stopped believing in the powers of these mysterious waters. I confess that I never read Naomi Ragen's novel *Sotah*, but I am sure it didn't present this ritual in a particularly positive light.

I know that if I ignored this strange passage, nobody would care. So why am I mentioning it now? The answer is *the tangent*. I recently completed Tractate Sotah in the Talmud and it was way more engaging than I ever thought it could be ... because of the tangent.

Chapter 8 of Tractate Sotah opens with the requirement that the oath administered to the Sotah before she drinks the bitter waters can be administered in any language the woman understands; it need not be recited in Hebrew. The same is true for other prayers: *the Shema*, the *Amidah*, *Birkat Hamazon*/ Grace after Meals need not be recited in Hebrew.

But there are certain other prayers, says this Mishnah – among them, the priestly blessing, which is also in this portion – that must be recited in Hebrew. Even if you don't understand the words, even if the congregation doesn't understand the words, the priests are commanded to bless the congregation in Hebrew: *Yevarakhekha Adonai v'yishm'rekha. ...*"

The Gemara goes on to cite other opinions about the Shema and Amidah as well. Sure, the Rabbis say the Shema can be recited in any language, but Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, the author of the Mishnah, disagrees. He says the Shema must be recited in Hebrew, even if you don't understand the words.

Same with the Amidah. The Mishnah says that the Amidah can be recited in any language. But the Gemara says "no; it must be recited in Hebrew." The reason is that God understands every language, but the angels who hear our prayers only understand Hebrew.

Now, says the Gemara, how can it be that in one place, the tradition says you can pray in any language, and in another place it says you have to pray in Hebrew? There is no conflict, the Gemara answers. *Communal* prayer can be recited in any language because that goes directly to God; but *individual* prayers, for which angels serve as intermediaries, must be recited in Hebrew.

Take a second to digest that because it is counter-intuitive. Individual prayer, recited by a person who may-or-may-not understand what she is saying, must be recited in Hebrew, while *communal* prayer, led for us by an able *hazzan*, can be recited in any language. There are mountains of commentary trying to sort it out. (Maybe communal prayer really *should* only be recited in Hebrew; maybe individual prayer *can be* recited in English.) But that's not the point. The point is that *on some level* our tradition is comfortable with the notion that I might pray in a language I don't understand.

Some of us might relate. Sometimes Jewish prayer feels more authentic when it is recited in Hebrew, even if I don't understand it. But others surely disagree. *What do you mean prayer is more authentic in a language I don't understand?!?* I suggest it is worth considering *how* prayer means. It is worth expanding our understanding of "meaning" beyond the translation of the words. We might deepen our prayer experience by finding meaning in the *obligation* of prayer; or in the *music* of prayer. (It is amazing how easy it can be to sing along even when you don't understand the words.) We might better appreciate the power of the community experience, just being together with others who are praying. We tell ourselves the challenge of prayer is the Hebrew, but I submit it isn't the Hebrew language that is the problem; it's the *prayer language*. And much of that is non-verbal.

Ignore what I said about the angels and what they may or may not understand, and just appreciate what the Talmud is telling us about *meaning*. Even when we don't understand, our prayers can have meaning.

We live in a society where understanding is everything. We are well-educated, and our mindset is that if we don't understand something, it must not be so important. We demand that everything we do make sense. *You tell me the reason why such-and-such practice exists, and I will tell you if I want to participate.* But that's not the traditional Jewish mindset.

The ancient rabbis rejected what they called *ta'amei hamitzvot*, the reasons for the commandments. They were wary of giving reasons for certain practices because if you don't like the reason, you may reject the practice. They want us to think differently: if you don't like the reason, change the reason. If you don't understand a particular observance – think *tefillin!* – you should try it a few times and see if you can find a way to let it make sense. When our ancestors stood at Mount Sinai, they proclaimed: "*na-aseh v'nishma*, we will do and we will hear." *We will observe and then we will seek to understand.* We will take a leap of faith, or what Heschel called a *leap of action* to engage in traditions we don't fully understand. Faith means believing understanding might come. Spirituality is a *practice*; it takes time. You can't figure it out and then begin; we figure things out along the way.

When it comes to Jewish learning. ... How many subjects, how many passages are ignored because we decide they aren't relevant? Certainly Sotah is one. But that's an extreme example. Jewish learning *should* be relevant. Some topics will excite us more than others. But we must take risks. How can I decide something is not relevant if I am unwilling to open the book? If every topic already made sense, why would I need to learn anything?!? We might benefit from pushing ourselves to explore ideas

we don't understand. Some of these things don't matter much to me, but they mattered to my ancestors; they matter to people I respect. I owe it to them to try to understand why.

It's the same with people. June is Pride Month; next week is Pride Shabbat. How much intolerance towards queer people is rooted in deficiency of understanding? *I don't understand you or your lifestyle, so I am going to keep my distance; and I am going to push legislation to keep you away from others.*

There are so many ways our society has become *more* tolerant in the last hundred years – certainly when it comes to interfaith or interracial relationships. But when it comes to *interpolitical* relationships, trends are moving in the opposite direction. When Gallup asked in 1958: “If you had a daughter of marriageable age, would you prefer she marry a Democrat or Republican...?” 18% of Americans said they would prefer a Democrat, 10% preferred a Republican, and the majority didn't care. In 2016, however, when asked the same question, 28% said they preferred their child marry a Democrat and 27% a Republican, and the share who didn't care shrunk significantly. It is so easy to reject those whose perspectives we don't understand.

But we have to try harder. People are complicated; texts are complicated; rituals are complicated; prayers are complicated. *Understanding* doesn't always mean agreeing on every point. Meaning is not the same as translation. If something is important enough, we have to make an effort. We have to take risks. If *tzelem Elohim*, the idea that we are all created in the image of God, means anything, it means we must train ourselves to endure – and even appreciate – the discomfort. And if that doesn't work, we can at least engage on a tangent. Shabbat shalom.