

## The Suspected Adulteress: A Metaphor for When We Mess Up in Life

### Numbers, Ch. 5

11. G-d spoke to Moses saying, 12. Speak to the Israelites and say to them: if a man's wife go astray and commit treachery against him. 13. And a man lie with her carnally, but it was hidden from her husband's eyes, but she was secluded [with the suspected adulterer] and there was no witness against her, and she was not seized. ...15. Then the man shall bring his wife to the kohen and bring her offering for her, one tenth of an ephah of barley flour. 17. The kohen shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and some earth from the Tabernacle floor... 19. The kohen shall then place her under oath, and say to the woman, "If no man has lain with you and you have not gone astray to become defiled [to another] in place of your husband, then [you will] be absolved through these bitter waters which cause the curse. 22. For these curse bearing waters shall enter your innards, causing the belly to swell and the thigh to rupture," and the woman shall say, "Amen, amen." 23. Then the kohen shall write these curses on a scroll and erase it in the bitter water... 27. He shall make her drink the water, and it shall be that, if she had been defiled and was unfaithful to her husband, the curse bearing waters shall enter her to become bitter; and her belly will swell, and her thigh will rupture. The woman will be a curse among her people. 28. But if the woman had not become defiled and she is clean, she shall be exempted and bear seed...



בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּרַק ה

א. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

יב. דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי תִשְׁטֵה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמַעַלָּה בּוֹ מַעַל: יג. וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַת זָרַע וְנִעְלַם... עֵינֵי אִישָׁה וְנִסְתָּרָה וְהִיא נֹטְמָאָה וְעַד אֵין בָּהּ וְהוּא לֹא נִתְפָּיֵשׁ: טו. וְהִבִּיא הָאִישׁ אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל הַכֹּהֵן וְהִבִּיא אֶת קֶרְבָּנָהּ עֲלֶיהָ עֲשִׂירֵת הָאִיפָה קֶמַח שְׁעָרִים... יז. וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִיָּם קְדוּשִׁים בְּכֶלִי חָרָשׁ וּמִן הָעֶפֶר אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בְּקִרְקַע הַמִּשְׁכָּן... יט. וְהִשְׁבִּיעַ אֶתֶּה הַכֹּהֵן וְאָמַר אֶל הָאִשָּׁה אִם לֹא שָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּךְ וְאִם לֹא שְׁטִית טְמָאָה תַּחַת אִישׁוֹ הֲנֹקִי מִמֵּי הַמָּרִים הַמְאָרְרִים הָאֵלֶּה: כב. וּבָאוּ הַמַּיִם הַמְאָרְרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּמַעְיָד לְצַבּוֹת בָּטָן וּלְנֹפֶל יָרֵךְ וְאָמַרְהָ הָאִשָּׁה אָמֵן אָמֵן: כג. וְכָתַב אֶת הָאֵלֶּת הָאֵלֶּה הַכֹּהֵן בְּסֹפֶר וּמְתָה אֶל מֵי הַמָּרִים: כז. וְהִשְׁקָה אֶת הַמַּיִם וְהִיתָה אִם נֹטְמָאָה וְתִמְעַל מַעַל בְּאִישָׁהּ וּבָאוּ בָּהּ הַמַּיִם הַמְאָרְרִים לְמָרִים וְצַבּוֹתָהּ בָּטָןָהּ וְנִפְלָה יָרֵכָהּ וְהִיתָה הָאִשָּׁה לְאֵלֶּה בְּקֶרֶב עַמָּה: כח. וְאִם לֹא נֹטְמָאָה הָאִשָּׁה וְיִטָּהַרְהָ הוּא וְנִקְתָּה וְנִזְרַעָה זָרַע:

*If a man's wife go astray (5:12)*

### Talmud, Sotah 3a

A person does not sin unless a spirit of folly enters into him. (The word the Torah uses for the sotah's "going astray," *shtut*, also means "folly" and "insanity.")

### Tanya

Every Jew, whether righteous or wicked, has two souls... One soul clothes itself in the person's blood to animate the body [and is the source of its egocentric drives and desires]... and the second soul of a Jew is literally a part of G-d above [and is the source of the person's striving to unite with G-d]...

The body is called a "small city": as two kings wage war over a city, each wishing to capture it and rule over it, that is to say, to govern its inhabitants according to his will so that they obey him in all that he decrees for them, so do the two souls (the G-dly [soul] and the vitalizing animal [soul] that derives from *kelipah*) wage war against each other over the body and all its organs and limbs.

The desire and will of the G-dly soul is that it alone should rule over the person and direct him, and that all his limbs should obey it and surrender themselves completely to it and become a vehicle for it, and serve as a vehicle for its ten faculties [of intellect and emotion] and three "garments" [thought, speech and action]... and the entire body should be permeated with them alone, to the exclusion of any alien influence, G-d forbid... While the animal soul desires the very opposite...

*She was secluded [with the suspected adulterer] (5:13)*

### The Lubavitcher Rebbe

The suspected adulteress is a metaphor for anyone who has strayed from G-d. When G-d said the words, "You shall not have any other deities" (Exodus 20:3), He warned us not to become unfaithful. But how can one become "secluded" from G-d whose glory fills the entire earth? By being arrogant. Arrogance conceals a person from G-d, "G-d says, He (the arrogant person) and I cannot dwell in the same place."

(Sotah 5a). The solution is to “bring an offering of barley flour” (v. 15) which is referred to as “animal fodder.” A person needs to humble himself. This is brought “to the priest”, or anyone whose life is devoted to G-d and can therefore help him to become more spiritually uplifted.

*Then the kohen shall write these curses on a scroll and erase it in the bitter water... (5:23)*

### **Talmud, Chulin 141a**

Great is peace! For to make peace between husband and wife, the Torah instructs that the name of G-d, written in holiness, should be blotted out in water. (The text of the oath administered to the sotah included the Divine name.)

*If the woman had been defiled... her belly will swell and her thigh will rupture (5:27)*

### **Talmud, Sotah 27b**

Just as the waters test her, they also test him (i.e., if she is guilty, the same happens to the adulterer).

*She is clean, she shall be exempted and bear seed. (5:28)*

### **Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 3:4**

G-d compensates her for her humiliation. If she was barren, she will now conceive; if she gave birth painfully, she will now give birth with ease; if she used to give birth to unattractive children, she will now give birth to beautiful children...

### **The Lubavitcher Rebbe**

She returns to her full marital status. Similarly, when we sin against G-d, we should not think that we are lost and cannot return. We should not say, as the Jewish people erroneously did after the destruction of the first Temple, “G-d has forsaken me, G-d has forgotten me.” (Isaiah 49:14) We must remember that even when we sin, the Divine soul within us has remained faithful to G-d. Our temporary indiscretion was only an act of our animal soul and through proper repentance, which restores the Divine soul’s control, our relationship with G-d can be reinstated. Furthermore, our relationship with G-d will even improve. We will now be able to “bear children”. If before the sin, our spiritual efforts did not seem to bear permanent fruit, i.e. we were unable to sustain our love and awe of G-d, our renewed and deepened commitment to G-d will enable us to sustain Divine consciousness and feel G-d’s presence with greater depth and permanence. Nonetheless the priest does not inform the woman of the potential benefit before she drinks. This mirrors the process of repentance. When a person repents he is not only spiritually cleansed from his prior sin, but reaches an even higher spiritual status than before his sinful act. However, a person cannot say, “I will sin and then I will repent, for then he will not be granted the opportunity to do teshuvah.” (Yoma 85b)

## SUMMARY

- The story of the suspected wife can be seen as a lesson in our sojourns in life. It is a cosmic metaphor of the “marriage” between G-d and the “wayward” Jewish people, who are tested and eventually exonerated through the “bitter waters” of exile.
- The isha sotah, like each of us struggling with the vicissitudes of in our lives or like the Jewish people struggling with the bitter exile, has never really entirely “strayed”. We are still “married” to our ideals and spiritual vision; we simply need to be reunited with our true, inner selves.
- The path of exoneration and return, takes effort and strength of character but leads to a more mature relationship with ourselves and with our world. We do not just return to what we were; we grow through the process. Only after straying and then rebounding, do we become a greater, more courageous and enriched human being, driven by a stronger yearning for a more meaningful bond with G-d.

