

TIMELESS TORAH

NASO: FROM CONFUSION TO CLARITY

Chain of Errors

When analysing how and why misconduct occurs, confusion about priorities and responsibilities is often a prominent factor. Parshat Naso, especially the passages of the *sotah* and the *nazir*, contains a number of lessons about how to manage such conflicts.

The verse immediately preceding the passage of the *sotah* (a woman suspected of committing adultery) discusses the obligation of giving tithes to the kohen (5:10). Rashi, commenting on the juxtaposition between this verse and the discussion of the *sotah*, writes that one who refrains from giving the tithes that are incumbent upon him is in danger of being forced to travel to the kohen for other reasons, namely, to carry out the procedure of the *sotah*, who is tried in the Beit HaMikdash by a kohen. Building on this, the Kli Yakar (d.1619) offers a fascinating insight. He cites two statements taught by the Sages: Firstly, that withholding tithes can bring a person, God forbid, to poverty. The consequence of failing to use one's money in the correct way might be to lose it in other ways. Secondly, he writes that the Sages taught (*Sotah* 4b) that a man who engages in illicit relationships is also liable to become impoverished. That being the case, the Kli Yakar concludes, we can suggest a possible chain of events that might lead to a case of a *sotah*. A person shirks his responsibility to give tithes to the kohen and as a result, he begins to lose his wealth. His wife notices this and, mindful of the above teaching that inappropriate moral behaviour can lead to poverty, suspects her husband of adulterous behaviour. With these thoughts in the back of her mind, she entertains the idea of behaving in a similar way, and eventually she is accused of being a *sotah*. The matter is then revealed, as the Sages

teach that the test of the *sotah*-waters work only if the husband himself is free of sin. In this scenario, he was the author of his own misfortune.

According to this way of understanding, the chain of events here are all due to confusion and misinterpretation. Yet the starting point was the individual's lack of clarity regarding his communal obligations, as expressed through giving the gifts to the kohen. This incorrect apportioning of his resources leads to misunderstanding within his own personal family unit, and eventually disastrous results. The greater the lack of clarity in life, the greater the potential for mistakes to happen.

This, explains the Kli Yakar, is the meaning behind the word '*sotah*', which is related to the word '*shoteh*', meaning 'fool'. The painful story of the *sotah* is caused by miscommunication between the spouses and reckless jumping to conclusions.

Climbing the Ladder of Spirituality

In remarkable contrast to the above, the next passage of the parshah, which deals with the *nazir* — one who takes a vow of abstinence from certain physical pleasures — begins with the following phrase: '*Ish ... ki yafli lindor neder nazir* — A [person] who accepts a vow of *nezirut*' (6:2). The word *yafli* here is unusual and highly significant. Rashi explains that it means to 'express clearly'. Indeed, the Gemara places a strong emphasis on the need for clarity when making a vow; a vow worded ambiguously might not have any effect. The Ibn Ezra, however, suggests a different translation of the word. According to him, *yafli* is connected to the word '*peleh*', meaning wondrous. Most people follow their desires in life; a person who is



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moved to take on extra restrictions is indeed a wonder. Whether we follow the interpretation of Rashi or the Ibn Ezra, however, the *nazir* is a person with clarity of direction and certainty of priorities. This is perhaps the depth of meaning behind a well-known teaching of the Sages: the passage of *nazir* follows that of *sotah* because one who witnesses the unfortunate situation of a *sotah* will be moved to abstain from wine and take on a vow of *nezirut*. In light of our analysis, this means that witnessing the demise of a *sotah* highlights the devastation of confused perspectives and encourages a person to take stock of their priorities.

Interestingly, however, in the Mishnah, the tractate of Nazir actually precedes Sotah. With a profound psychological insight into this discrepancy, the Imrei Emet (Rebbe of Gur, d.1948) explained that although ideally, spiritual growth should be preceded by turning away from negative behaviours, the Sages recognised that this order is exceedingly difficult in practice. Being overly anxious about fixing one's negative ways might encourage the person to become despondent and ultimately stay within those patterns. Sometimes, then, it is better to simply start with the good even if one still has negative things to put right.

Moving Forward

A unique requirement of the *sotah* ritual involves writing the passage of the *sotah* from the Torah on a piece of parchment and erasing it in a specially prepared basin of water. As the passage contains the Name of Hashem, this means that although normally strictly forbidden, the Name is here erased in the water together with the rest of the passage. It is worthwhile, the Sages famously teach, to allow the Name of Hashem to be erased in order to bring peace between a husband and wife.

In light of the above discussion, this teaching becomes even more important. The Maharal (Prague, d.1609) notes that the Sages also teach that when a married couple live together in harmony, the Divine Presence rests in their home. In the case of the *sotah*, as we have learned, there is friction between the spouses, caused by a poor perception of events affecting them. The erasure of the Name seems to reflect this; the couple's poor communication has removed Hashem from their marriage. But, equally, going through this process brings Hashem back into their marriage. By resolving the misunderstandings between them, they are allowing Hashem's Presence to rest between them once again.

The Priestly Blessing, *Birkat Kohanim*, which follows the parshah of *nazir*, echoes this message. As the Chizkuni notes, it is mentioned here rather than in Sefer Vayikra because it was only now, in the second year of the wandering in the Wilderness, that the Jewish people began to be assaulted by the Canaanites. This was a time, then, of darkness and lack of clarity. Additionally, with its introductory word, '*koh* (thus)', it is linked to the verse '*koh yihyeh zarecha* – so will be your descendants' (Bereshit 15:5), which was intended as a direction to Avraham Avinu at a time when his own future seemed uncertain. Thus, the Priestly Blessing, with its emphasis on *shalom*, peace and equilibrium, seems to be intended as a ray of light through the shadow of uncertainty. This is the ultimate lesson of the *sotah* and the *nazir*. From deep within our own confusion in life it is always possible to find the clarity to identify a way forward.

BEHA'ALOTECHA : The Light That Refuses to Go Out