

Parshat Naso
Erasure of God's Name as Rabbinic Invitation
Sofia Freudenstein - Class of 2025

Since I am someone who often thinks deeply about the role of women in the halakhic context, the Sotah process for investigating wayward wives is intriguing, both because of the biblical ritual in this week's parsha, and because of the audacious ways that the Rabbis interpret it.

On the shocking side, the Talmud actually eliminates the Sotah ritual altogether! The Mishna at the end of Masechet Sotah reads:

מְשַׁרְבוּ הַמְּנַאֲפִים, פְּסָקוּ הַמַּיִם הַמְּרִים, וְרַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי הִפְסִיקוּ

When adultery became rampant, the bitter waters [of the Sotah] ceased, and R. Yohanan ben Zakkai canceled [their use] (Mishna Sotah 9:9)

What is so interesting about this passage is R' Yohanan ben Zakkai's implicit understanding of the nature of the Sotah ritual. He believes the Torah limits the ritual's use to a time when it is effectively preventing adultery. And when society has shifted to a point at which it is not fulfilling its intended purpose, the rabbis of the Mishna are comfortable declaring it inapplicable. The Written Torah does not allude to any kind of limitation of this practice, yet R' Yochanan gets rid of the ritual entirely!

On the audacious side, another Mishna in Masechet Sotah says surprising things about the nature of the ritual itself. The rabbis acknowledge that although the Written Torah text says that the drinking of the Sotah waters leads to an almost magical body shift, in reality not all thighs will sag with the drinking of the water. They don't explain this by saying that the ritual lacks miraculous qualities, but instead they suggest that other good deeds done by the wayward woman may counterbalance the effectiveness of the ritual, since the good deeds delay the inevitable punishment of death for the woman. Rabbi Eliezer warns that it is dangerous to teach this method to potentially "outsmart" the Sotah system and says:

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, כָּל הַמְלַמֵּד אֶת בִּתּוֹ תוֹרָה, כְּאִלוּ מְלַמְדָה תִּפְלוּת.

Rabbi Eliezer says: Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is teaching her promiscuity [tiflut]. (Mishna Sotah 3:4)

This text may seem familiar to some, but maybe not in this Sotah context. The context of this text in the Mishnah is explicitly about the potential licentiousness (tiflut) that could arise from teaching women about the possible deferral of the deathly consequences of the Sotah ritual. However, this statement became the foundational text for centuries that barred women from studying Torah at all, as opposed to this specific lesson about Sotah, and is still used as an argument against women studying Talmud today. Only recently have we begun interpreting this text otherwise.

Both examples — the ancient rabbinic cancellation of the Sotah ritual and the transformation of the prohibition of teaching the Torah of the Sotah to include all Torah for all women — are examples to me of rabbinic creativity and ingenuity – for good and sometimes possibly for bad. These outcomes are both realities of the mechanism of halakhic development in a world in which Divine approval does not shoot down from the sky, telling us whether we are interpreting correctly.

In the Sotah ritual itself, God's name is erased into the elixir to be drunk by the wayward woman. God's name – which is holy and not allowed to be desecrated – is purposely destroyed for the sake of potentially preserving the bond of love between two people. Although there appears to be a minimizing of God's visibility in the ritual with the erasure of God's name, this could imply that God is taking a step back to allow for potential love and connection to flourish once again in the fraught marriage.

Perhaps we see this phenomenon — of God taking a step back — in our own lives as Jews. We live in a world where God is not in direct contact with us. This separation, while difficult, offers us agency. We are empowered to decide how halakhah is applied to today's world. But we pay the price by making these decisions without Divine guidance.

But the minimization of God in the halakhic process is not one of total lack of direction. The Gemara in Sukkah 53a-b shares a story about King David trying to build the Temple too early, and how, as a result of this, the waters of the Tehom threaten to flood the entire world. In a panic, David asks his wiseman Ahithophel for advice. Ahithophel answers:

נָשָׂא אֶחֱתִיתוּפֹל קָל וְחוּמָר בְּעֵצְמוֹ: וְזָמָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אִישׁ לְאִשְׁתּוֹ, אָמְרָה תּוֹרָה: שְׁמִי שֶׁנִּכְתַּב בְּקִדּוּשָׁה יִמָּחָה עַל הַמַּיִם, לַעֲשׂוֹת שְׁלוֹם לְכָל הָעוֹלָם כּוּלּוֹ — עַל אַחַת כְּמָה וְכְמָה.

Then Ahithophel raised an a kal va'chomer argument on his own and said: And just as in order to make peace between a man and his wife in the case of sota, when the husband suspects his wife of having committed adultery, the Torah said: My Name that was written in sanctity will be erased on the water to establish peace for the whole world in its entirety, all the more so it is permitted. (Sukkah 53b)

And the waters recede.

Ahithophel uses the imagery of the Sotah ritual to prove that another desecration of the Holy Name for the sake of peace, not only for one household but for the whole world, would surely be worthwhile. Ahithophel's reasoning comes through the application of the rabbinic exegetical method of kal vachomer, boldly using this method of logic for deciding a halakhic matter that has profound consequences.

Ahithophel – representing the rabbis as a whole – shows us that one can navigate a world where God retracts for the sake of greater values in a way that is not aimless and nihilistic. God's seeming absence requires rabbis to hone their hermeneutic tools to get closer to the Divine desire. The risk that comes with this practice is the foundation for the entire rabbinic project. We live in a world that is now Temple-less and prophet-less, but we still can be

thankful for the God-given ability to use our skills and wisdom in order to create halakhic reality that matches the Divine will.

We oscillate between feeling God's absence and yet also the Divine imperative to further the development of halakhah to manifest God's will. Chullin 88b notes that because Abraham described himself as "ashes and dust", he merited the reward of having the ashes of the Red Heifer and the dust of the Sotah waters for the Jewish people. The Red Heifer and the Sotah waters both embody a sense of mystery regarding the mitzvot themselves, yet also in that mystery there is an opportunity for rabbinic interpretation, creativity, and ingenuity. This ability to rejoice in that space while still trying to understand how best to make the world into one that reflects the Divine imperative, is what makes us the children of Abraham now.



Sofia Freudenstein graduated with an Honours Bachelor degree from the University of Toronto in May 2021, double-majoring in Jewish Studies and Philosophy. She worked on an undergraduate thesis assessing Revelation in Modern Jewish Thought, and has just completed her first basic unit of Clinical Pastoral Education at Baycrest Geriatric Hospital. Before university, Sofia competed in the International Chidon HaTanach, and participated in the Drisha High School Program, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, and the Tikvah High School Program. She spent a gap year at Midreshet Lindenbaum, interned for the organization Ayeka, has been a madricha for the Drisha High School Program and Co-Rosh Beit Midrash at Camp Stone. Sofia has been involved in her local Hillel as a Student Leader and Multifaith Chaplaincy Intern, and is currently a member of the Hillel International Student Cabinet. While in the Core Semikha program, Sofia will also pursue a masters degree in Jewish Philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. Sofia fondly remembers hearing Torah from scholar-in-residence Rabba Sara Hurwitz at her parents' minyan when she was 13, and has been looking forward to this opportunity for learning and growth in leadership ever since.