

Naso 5778

'And if you wrong us, shall we not avenge?'

Naso is the longest parashah in the Torah, with much material to select from. But this year we read, and I find myself drawn once again to - the mysterious and - to me - maddening rite of *Sotah*.

Here, briefly, is the scenario. A husband suspects his wife of infidelity (whether she has in fact been unfaithful or not). He is required to bring his wife to the priest, along with a 'jealousy offering', and she is forced to undergo a trial by ordeal. The priest mixes holy water and dust, and uncovers the woman's hair. She is required to hold the jealousy offering on her hands and say 'amen' to a challenge put to her by the priest; that if she is innocent, the waters will not harm her and will indeed render her more fertile; but if she has been unfaithful, the waters will cause her body to decompose and erupt simultaneously. Then the priest mixes the ink from the oath into the water and the dust and gives it to the woman to drink, and whatever consequences there are then ensue.

The Rabbis' main development of this ritual was to ensure that it took place in public; though on the other hand, they tightened up the rules of evidence around it to make it harder to bring the woman to the priest in the first place, which probably saved more women in the long run.

My question for today: how are we to make of this little passage, which might well strike us as grotesque or even farcical? But I think it is neither; I think it speaks to something important and contemporary, and particularly significant given the events of the past week.

I believe the ritual of the *Sotah* speaks directly to the human desire for vengeance.

Merriam-Webster: *punishment inflicted in retaliation for an injury or offense*. Important to note: prompted by a feeling of injury, perceived as justified because in retaliation for that injury. we have probably all felt vengeful at some point in our lives - understandable human response to feeling slighted and wanting to get those feelings out.

The question, though, is how we deal with the wish to avenge, and it falls to the legal and moral systems we build to address it. I want to talk briefly about the four ways our tradition addresses the problem, of which the Sotah ritual is only one.

The first is to leave the issue of vengeance to God. Psalm 94, which we read at the end of the morning service every Wednesday opens with the impassioned plea, *El nekomot Adonai/el nekomot hofia/hinasei shofet ha-aretz/hashev g'mul al ge-im* God, God of vengeance, appear/arise, Judge of the earth, to give the arrogant what they deserve. In other words, the acting out of vengeance is God's business, and God's business alone (hence, perhaps, the repetition of God's name). As for us - later in the psalm we find the compelling line, *berov sarapai bekirbi tanhumekha tesh'a'ashu nafshi* - when the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. Or, as I like to think of it, 'when I'm lying awake at three in the morning You have the power to change my inner monologue - please do that.'

So on the spiritual level, at least, vengeance is not supposed to be our business, but that of a higher authority - one with a different system of evaluating when, where and how it should be dealt out, if our theology permits that kind of interpretation.

A second way of regulating vengeance is to work on the communal level. In the Torah we find the commandment to build cities of refuge to which a person who has killed unintentionally may flee the person called *go'el hadam* - the redeemer of blood, or, as commonly translated, the Avenger. The Torah law provides that the Avenger, a family member of the deceased, will be free from punishment if they kill the deceased's killer. It looks like a recipe for vigilante justice, but the system has checks and balances. Once in the city of refuge, the killer is untouchable. The Levites who are in charge of the city are to look after him or her until the High Priest dies - at which point, all killers go free and cannot be executed without the usual consequences. The system is built out by the rabbis so that only one person in the family may act as the Avenger; and the area around the cities is to be kept populous so that it is more difficult for the *goel hadam* to get access. (And, by the way, it is forbidden, under other regulations, to sell weapons to someone who is likely to commit murder.)

But the main rule that regulates vengeance is staggeringly simple. We find it at the center of the Torah, in the Holiness Code:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people.

Vengeance is off the menu, pure and simple.

Rashi, the medieval commentator, unpacks it for us a bit:

One person says to another, 'Lend me your sickle,' and the other person says 'no!' The next day, the person who refused asks, 'Lend me your hatchet,' and the first person says, 'no!' - that is avenging.

Observe the beauty and the wisdom of this explanation. It reduces vengeance to a mundane occurrence - in an agricultural society, these interactions would take place on a daily basis. And yet the demand it makes of our human nature is a significant one - that we should not take the obvious path of reaction. And if we can train ourselves not to react vengefully, then there are benefits - here's the whole verse:

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people.
but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. [Vayikra 19:18]*

Let me summarize, so that we can bring ourselves back once again to the Torah portion. So far we have seen three ways that the Jewish tradition regulates the wish for vengeance - and they aren't mutually exclusive.

We can try to detach ourselves from the wish to avenge. We can leave vengeance up to a higher authority. But also, we need to train ourselves, day by day, into a mindset of empathy that makes vengeance impossible - because how can you be vengeful if you are truly working to love the other as you love yourself?

And in the rare situation where we may legally have an entitlement to exact vengeance, society provides sanctuary for the object of our rage, and an expiry date, and places a number of obstacles in our way.

And that brings me back to the situation with which I began - the Sotah. This one deals with the wish for vengeance in our intimate relationships, symbolized here by a man and wife. The Sotah ritual is full of rich and arcane symbolism; it's public; it's humiliating for the woman. But unless we believe in that kind of magic, it seems very unlikely that the drinking of the bitter waters would produce any kind of result. Except - and this is critical - to purge the husband's feelings of vengeance towards his wife once she passes the ordeal. It's a pretty piece of drama with a real-life result.

As I read about the Sotah this year, I think of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* - another situation full of apparent (and actual) violence which serves as a blind for the fact that the two most intelligent characters in the drama have found each other and are busy playacting so they can make their fortune and get away from the fools and social strictures that have been limiting them. And while the same might not be exactly true of the Sotah, I would hope that it would satisfy the husband - who is the fool in this scenario. And I would hope the priest would recommend to the husband that next time this happens, he should divorce his wife and pay her *ketubah*.

So it's clear that the Judaism recognizes the destructive potential of vengeance and takes steps to moderate it, manage it, contain it and, where necessary, it provides a safe piece of drama for those who can't deal with their own feelings of vengeance. Here's what it *doesn't* do:

It doesn't foment it, by playing to our worst tendencies;
It doesn't justify it by suggesting that the victim might have invited it;
It doesn't enable it by making it easy to act out;
It doesn't idolize it or portray it as noble;
And it doesn't make it the basis of public policy.

Our tradition demands of us that day upon day, we address our own inner wish for vengeance. Because we all have it. Inside all of us live the blood-avenger, the jealous husband, the three o'clock in the morning demon with the monologue. And it is not only our challenge, it is our sacred duty to acknowledge them; and do battle with them; and win.

Shabbat shalom.