



One *Mitzvah* at a Time

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Parashat Naso 5782

Parashat Naso includes the ritual of *sotah*. A husband brings his wife whom he suspects of adultery to the *mikdash* (sanctuary) where a *kohen* gives her a potion of “cursed waters” that either acquit her or punish her. From our earliest sages to the present moment, many nuanced interpretations of this anomalous and troubling ritual have emerged.¹ We will focus on one Rabbinic principle that applies to the procedure of *sotah*, but has much wider implications for other rituals, and paves the way towards a theology of *mitzvot* embedded in honoring the dignity of each individual.

The Talmud asks whether one *sotah* ritual could be used for two suspected adulteresses at the same time). Why not save water and the Divine Name and have them both drink from one

¹ *Sotah* poses challenges to an halakhic approach that values fair legal procedure and evidence-based rulings. Much of the Mishnah’s interpretation of the biblical passage makes the ritual adhere more to Rabbinic approaches to procedure and evidence. *Sotah* is doubly troubling from a feminist perspective. Ishay Rosen-Zvi (in his book *The Rite That Was Not: Temple, Midrash and Gender in Tractate Sotah*) has described how the Mishnah’s interpretation of *sotah* emphasizes an association between women and desire, guilt, and punishment, even though the Torah leaves room for an innocence. These tropes relate to negative attitudes towards the female body and sexuality that appear in other contemporaneous literature of late antiquity. A different approach to the ritual presumes that the purpose was to confront male jealousy and create a process to clear the wife’s name and enable the marriage to continue. There is much more to say about the arguments and implications of various readings. While these are not the focus of this essay, my discussion ultimately pushes back on a reading of *sotah* that would propagate shame and humiliation of innocent women, and instead reaffirms an approach to *mitzvot* that puts individual dignity front and center.



potion? In response, the Talmud raises a concern that we should not “bundle” *mitzvot* together:²

תלמוד בבלי סוטה ח.

אין משקין שתי סוטות כאחת, ואין מטהרין שני מצורעין כאחת, ואין רוצעין שני עבדים כאחת, ואין עורפין שתי עגלות כאחת, לפי שאין עושין מצות חבילות חבילות!

Talmud Bavli Sotah 8a

We do not make two suspected adulteresses drink at once; we do not purify two people with *tzara'at* (skin disease) at once; we do not pierce the ear of two slaves [who want to stay with their master] at once;³ we do not break the neck of two calves [in response to an unresolved murder] at once⁴—because we do not do *mitzvot* in bundles.

At face value, it looks like this principle of not bundling *mitzvot* already exists more generally. Yet, the origins and meaning of this principle, are complex. When we trace the development of this concept we find that there are actually a number of different reasons to be concerned about an approach to *mitzvot* based in “efficiency.”

In its earliest form, it seems that the main concern about efficiency wasn't really about bundling *mitzvot* but about bundling **people**. In an earlier version of the *baraita*, there is a list of rituals that can't be performed as “two in one” but *without the framing language* “we don't bundle *mitzvot*.”

² This is cited in the printed version of the Talmud with a formula that normally means it is a quotation from a *mishnah* (דתנן), but in this case it's actually a *baraita*, a text in a similar style to the Mishnah but not in the Mishnah itself.

³ See Exodus 21:6.

⁴ See Deuteronomy 21:1-9.



ספרי זוטא (הורוביץ) במדבר פרק ה פסוק יט

השביע אותה הכהן, אין משביעין שתי סוטות כאחת ולא שורפין שתי פרות כאחת ולא עורפין שתי עגלות כאחת ולא הורגין שני אנשים כאחת ולא מסגירין שנים כאחת ולא מחליטין שנים כאחת:

Sifrei Zuta (Horowitz), Numbers 5:19

“The *kohen* makes her swear...” We do not make two suspected adulteresses swear at once; we do not burn two [red] heifers at once; we do not break the neck of two calves at once; we do not execute two men at once; we do not quarantine two people with *tzara’at* at once; we do not diagnose two people with *tzara’at* at once.

The list suggests that there is a problem of combination with these specific cases, where ritual interfaces with an individual at a particularly charged moment in their lives. The ritual means to achieve some kind of coming to terms for the individual, a reckoning with the accusation of adultery, diagnosis or healing for a person with *tzara’at*, a test of resolve for the slave who wants to remain with his master, elders coming to terms with an unsolved murder in their precinct. The idea that one accomplishes “two at once” would entirely undermine how the ritual works. The *mitzvah* is designed to bring a person’s experience into full view, for the individual or community to sink into the complex feelings contained in this moment. To attempt “two in one” denies the intensity and subjectivity of this experience, and instead leads to a sense of being in a factory assembly line of formulaic motions.⁵

From these origins that are really about not bundling **people** while performing a ritual for an individual, we see a shift towards the principle of not bundling **mitzvot**. To the list we find in the earlier sources, the Talmud adds the frame that the concern is about “not bundling *mitzvot*.”

⁵ See Tosefta Sotah 1:6 for a more specific discussion of why it is problematic to do two sotah rituals at once.



Now the concept takes on a life of its own, and in other sources we see that it is applied to *mitzvot* more broadly. This includes to *mitzvot* that have nothing to do with individual people, such as mentioning two different concepts in one final phrase of a *berakhah*.⁶ How does this leap work? If there is no longer an issue of honoring individuals in intense life moments, what is the problem with an “efficient” approach to *mitzvot*?

Rashi explains that doing two *mitzvot* at once makes it look like you are trying to get the *mitzvah* over with, that each *mitzvah* is a “burden” one wants to shrug off.⁷ The idea of not bundling *mitzvot* reflects a theology of savoring—rather than “bearing”—*mitzvot*.

We can use Rashi’s framework to understand the end of the *parashah*, where the Torah separately lists the sacrifices brought by each head of the twelve tribes (besides the Levites) for the dedication of the altar. They all give the same gift. It would have been much more efficient to “bundle” this section rather than wasting words to list each gift separately. But listing them separately reflects how God savors each and every gift. When we imagine the head of each tribe bringing a gift in the newly constructed *mishkan* (tabernacle), it is a turning point after members of their tribe participated in the sin of the golden calf. There must be such a mix of guilt, relief, and homecoming in bringing these gifts forward. God meets each *korban* (sacrifice) with a unique intention and focus, just as each person who brings a *korban* has a unique life circumstances and feelings from which the offering emerges.

We can think of *mitzvot* as parallel to *korbanot*, not being bundled together but representing unique acts of devotion and attention. *Mitzvot* are about taking advantage of an opportunity

⁶ In Berakhot 49a, the principle is used to explain why you don’t conclude a *berakhah* with two different clauses/concepts: על הארץ ועל המזון! - ארץ דמפקא מזון. על הארץ ועל המזון! - ארץ דמפקא פירות; מקדש ישראל והזמנים! - ישראל דקדשינהו לזמנים; מקדש ישראל וראשי חדשים! - ישראל דקדשינהו לראשי - חדשים; מקדש השבת וישראל והזמנים! - חוץ מזו. ומאי שנא? - הכא - חדא היא, התם - תרתי, כל חדא וחדא באפי נפשה. וטעמא מאי אין חותמין בשתיים - לפי שאין עושין מצות חבילות חבילות.

⁷ On Sotah 8a: חבילות חבילות - שנראה כמו שהיו עליו למשאוי וממהר לפרק משאו.



to express how much we savor being in relationship with God, not checking things off a list as quickly as possible.

The Talmud applies this principle not only to *mitzvot* writ large but also to learning Torah, teaching that if one “bundles their Torah it will diminish.”⁸ Rashi explains that this is someone who takes in new material but doesn’t review it.⁹ One might think they have harvested “bundles and bundles” of Torah, but instead it disappears.

Beyond the quantitative perspective, not to learn too much too quickly, there is something deeper here in what it means to learn Torah. Torah can function like the rituals of the *mikdash* in the earlier sources. It can meet us in the intensity of our lives and hold the complexity of each moment’s experiences. Torah is to be savored as we encounter it in moments of joy, difficulty, and transition. If we bundle up too much learning all together, it might not actually intersect with our lives and experiences. Like the leper who feels reduced to an object on an assembly line, we might end up with a transactional practice of Torah and *mitzvot*.

We have traced the development of the concept of not “bundling” *mitzvot* and instead paying attention to each *mitzvah* individually. The origins of this principle stem from *mitzvot* as a means for paying close attention to people, as individuals go through moments in life that require specific rituals. When we become aware of these roots it can inform the way we practice *mitzvot*. Although the concept of “not bundling” people shifts into a concern about “not bundling” *mitzvot*, this does not mean that our attention to individual *mitzvot* should take over our attention to individual people. Rather, love and care for each *mitzvah* can—and

⁸ Eruvin 54b: “אמר רב שיזבי משום רבי אלעזר בן עזריה: מאי דכתיב לא יחרך רמיה צידו - לא יחיה ולא יאריך ימים צייד:” הרמאי. רב ששת אמר: צייד הרמאי יחרוך? כי אתא רב דימי אמר: משל לצייד שצד צפרים, אם ראשון ראשון משבר כנפיו - משתמר, ואם לאו - אין משתמר. אמר (רבה) [רבא] אמר רב סחורה אמר רב הונא: מאי דכתיב (משלי י"ג) הון מהבל ימעט וקבץ על יד ירבה. אם עושה אדם תורתו חבילות חבילות - מתמעט, ואם לאו - קובץ על יד ירבה. אמר (רבה) [רבא] ידעי רבנן “להא מילתא ועברי עליה. אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק: אנא עבדתה, ואיקיים בידאי.”

⁹ Rashi on Eruvin 54b: “צייד רמאי - שמרבה בגירסא ואינו מחזר עליה.”



must—be fully intertwined with bringing our attention more fully towards love and care of individual people and their stories.

