

The Sota Ritual Revisited:

The Rabbis Respond

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Summer Learning Retreat 2021

1. Numbers 5:11-31

(11) The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: (12) Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: If any man's wife has gone astray and broken faith with him (13) in that a man has had carnal relations with her unbeknown to her husband, and she keeps secret the fact that she has defiled herself without being forced, and there is no witness against her— (14) but a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over one and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself— (15) the man shall bring his wife to the priest. And he shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley flour. No oil shall be poured upon it and no frankincense shall be laid on it, for it is a meal offering of jealousy, a meal offering of remembrance which recalls wrongdoing.

(16) The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the LORD. (17) The priest shall take sacral water in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water. (18) After he has made the woman stand before the LORD, the priest shall bare the woman's head and place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell.

(יא) וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (יב) דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ כִּי־תִשָּׁטֶה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמַעַלָּהּ בּוֹ מְעַל: (יג) וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה שִׁכְבַּת־זָרַע וְנִעְלַם מֵעֵינֵי אִישׁוֹ וְנִסְתָּרָה וְהִיא נֹטְמָאָה וְעַד אֵין בָּהּ וְהוּא לֹא נִתְפָּשָׁה: (יד) וְעָבַר עָלָיו רוּחַ־קִנְיָאָה וְקָנָא אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהוּא נֹטְמָאָה אוֹ־עָבַר עָלָיו רוּחַ־קִנְיָאָה וְקָנָא אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהִיא לֹא נֹטְמָאָה: (טו) וְהִבִּיא הָאִישׁ אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן וְהִבִּיא אֶת־קִרְבָּנָהּ עָלֶיהָ עֲשִׂירֵת הָאִיפָה קֶמַח שְׁעָרִים לֹא־יִצָּק עָלָיו שֶׁמֶן וְלֹא־יִתֵּן עָלָיו לֶבֶנָה כִּי־מִנְחַת קִנְיָאָה הוּא מִנְחַת זָכָרוֹן מִזְכֶּרֶת עוֹן:

(טז) וְהִקְרִיב אֹתָהּ הַכֹּהֵן וְהִעֲמָדָה לִפְנֵי ה': (יז) וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִיָּם קִדְשִׁים בְּכִל־חֶרֶשׁ וּמִן־הָעֶפֶר אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בַּקֶּרֶקֶע הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקַּח הַכֹּהֵן וְנָתַן אֶל־הַמִּיָּם: (יח) וְהִעֲמִיד הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה לִפְנֵי ה' וּפָרַע אֶת־רֹאשׁ הָאִשָּׁה וְנָתַן עַל־כַּפֶּיהָ אֶת מִנְחַת הַזָּכָרוֹן מִנְחַת קִנְיָאָה הוּא וּבִיד הַכֹּהֵן יִהְיוּ מִי הַמָּרִים הַמֵּאָרָרִים:



(19) The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, “If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water of bitterness that induces the spell. (20) But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself, if a man other than your husband has had carnal relations with you” — (21) here the priest shall administer the curse of adjuration to the woman, as the priest goes on to say to the woman—“may the LORD make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the LORD causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; (22) may this water that induces the spell enter your body, causing the belly to distend and the thigh to sag.” And the woman shall say, “Amen, amen!”

(23) The priest shall put these curses down in writing and rub it off into the water of bitterness. (24) He is to make the woman drink the water of bitterness that induces the spell, so that the spell-inducing water may enter into her to bring on bitterness. (25) Then the priest shall take from the woman’s hand the meal offering of jealousy, elevate the meal offering before the LORD, and present it on the altar. (26) The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Last, he shall make the woman drink the water. (27) Once he has made her drink the water—if she has defiled herself by breaking faith with her husband, the spell-inducing water shall enter into her to bring on bitterness, so that her belly shall distend and her thigh shall sag; and the woman shall become a curse among her people. (28) But if the woman has not defiled herself and is pure, she shall be unharmed and able to retain seed.

(29) This is the ritual in cases of jealousy, when a woman goes astray while married to her husband and defiles herself, (30) or when a fit of jealousy comes over a man and he is wrought up over his wife: the woman shall be made to stand before the LORD and the priest shall carry out all this ritual with her. (31) The man shall be clear of guilt; but that woman shall suffer for her guilt.

(יט) והשביע אותה הכהן ואמר אל-האשה אם-לא שכב איש אתך ואם-לא שטית טמאה תחת אישך הנלי ממי המרים המארים האלה: (כ) ואת כי שטית תחת אישך וכי נטמאת ויתן איש בך את-שכבתו מבלעד אישך: (כא) והשביע הכהן את-האשה בשבעת האלה ואמר הכהן לאשה יתן ה' אותך לאלה ולשבעה בתוך עמך בתת ה' את-ירכך נפלת ואת-בטנך צבה: (כב) ובאו המים המארים האלה במעיך לצבות בטן ולנפל ירך ואמרה האשה אמן | אמן:

(כג) וכתב את-האלת האלה הכהן בספר ומחה אל-מי המרים: (כד) והשקה את-האשה את-מי המרים המארים ובאו בה המים המארים למרים: (כה) ולקח הכהן מיד האשה את מנחת הקנאת והניף את-המנחה לפני ה' והקריב אתה אל-המזבח: (כו) וקמץ הכהן מן-המנחה את-אזכרתה והקטיר המזבחה ואחר ישקה את-האשה את-המים: (כז) והשקה את-המים והיתה אם-נטמאה ותמעל מעל באישה ובאו בה המים המארים למרים וצבתה בטנה ונפלה ירכה והיתה האשה לאלה בקרב עמה: (כח) ואם-לא נטמאה האשה וטהרה הוא ונקתה ונזרעה זרע:

(כט) זאת תורת הקנאת אשר תשטה אשה תחת אישה ונטמאה: (ל) או איש אשר תעבר עליו רוח קנאה וקנא את-אשתו והעמיד את-האשה לפני ה' ועשה לה הכהן את כל-התורה הזאת: (לא) ונקה האיש מעון והאשה ההוא תשא את-עונה: (פ)



2. Mishnah Sotah 1:1, 3-7

With regard to one who issues a warning to his wife, Rabbi Eliezer says: He issues a warning to her based on, i.e., in the presence of, two. And the husband gives the bitter water to her to drink based on the testimony of one witness who saw the seclusion, or even based on his own testimony. Rabbi Yehoshua says: He both issues a warning to her based on two witnesses and gives the bitter water to her to drink based on the testimony of two witnesses.

What does her husband do with her? He brings her to the court that is found in that location, and the court provides him with two Torah scholars to accompany him, lest he engage in sexual intercourse with her on the way. Rabbi Yehuda says: Her husband is trusted with regard to her.

They would bring her up to the Sanhedrin that was in Jerusalem, and the judges would threaten her. And this was done in the manner that they would threaten witnesses testifying in cases of capital law. And additionally, the judge would say to her: My daughter, wine causes a great deal of immoral behavior, levity causes a great deal of immoral behavior, immaturity causes a great deal of immoral behavior, and bad neighbors cause a great deal of immoral behavior. The judge then continues: Act for the sake of God's great name, so that God's name, which is written in sanctity, shall not be erased on the water. And additionally, the judge says in her presence matters that are not worthy of being heard by her and all her father's family.

If after the judge's warning she says: I am defiled, she writes a receipt for her marriage contract. And she is then divorced from her husband. But if after the warning she maintains her innocence and says: I am pure, they bring her up to the Eastern Gate, which is at the opening of the Gate of Nicanor, because three rites were performed there: They give the *sota* women the bitter water to drink, and they purify women who have given birth (see Leviticus 12:6-8), and they purify the lepers (see Leviticus 14:10-20). And the priest grabs hold of her clothing. If the clothes are torn, so they are torn; if the stitches come apart, so they come apart. And he pulls her clothing until he reveals her heart, i.e., her chest. And then he unbraids her hair. Rabbi

המקנא לאשתו רבי אליעזר אומר מקנא לה על פי שנים ומשקה על פי עד אחד או ע"פ עצמו רבי יהושע אומר מקנא לה על פי שנים ומשקה ע"פ שנים

כיצד עושה לה, מוליכה לבית דין שבאותו מקום, ומוסרין לו שני תלמידי חכמים, שמא יבא עליה בדרך. רבי יהודה אומר, בעלה נאמן עליה.

היו מעלין אותה לבית דין הגדול שבירושלים, ומאימין עליה כדרך שמאימין על עדי נפשות. ואומרים לה, בתי, הרבה יין עושה, הרבה שחוק עושה, הרבה ילדות עושה, הרבה שכנים הרעים עושים. עשי לשמו הגדול שנכתב בקדשה, שלא ימחה על המים. ואומרים לפניה דברים שאינה כדאי לשומען, היא וכל משפחת בית אביה.

אם אמרה טמאה אני, שוברת כתבתה ויוצאת. ואם אמרה טהורה אני, מעלין אותה לשער המזרח שעל פתח שער נקנור, ששם משקין את הסוטות, ומטהרין את היולדות, ומטהרין את המצרעים. וכהן אוהז בבגדיה, אם נקרעו נקרעו, אם נפרמו נפרמו, עד שהוא מגלה את לבה, וסותר את שערה. רבי יהודה אומר, אם היה לבה נאה, לא היה מגלה. ואם היה שער נאה,



Yehuda says: If her heart was attractive he would not reveal it, and if her hair was attractive he would not unbraid it. If she was dressed in white garments, he would now cover her with black garments. If she was wearing gold adornments, or chokers [<i>katliyyot</i>], or nose rings, or finger rings, they removed them from her in order to render her unattractive. And afterward the priest would bring an Egyptian rope, and he would tie it above her breasts. And anyone who desires to watch her may come to watch, except for her slaves and maidservants, because her heart is emboldened by them. And all of the women are permitted to watch her, as it is stated: “Thus will I cause lewdness to cease out of the land, that all women may be taught not to do after your lewdness” (Ezekiel 23:48). With the measure that a person measures, he is measured with it. She, adorned herself to violate a transgression, the Omnipresent therefore decreed that she be rendered unattractive; she exposed herself for the purpose of violating a transgression, so the Omnipresent therefore decreed that her body be exposed publicly; she began her transgression with her thigh and afterward with her stomach, therefore the thigh is smitten first and then the stomach, and the rest of all her body does not escape punishment.	לא הִיָּה סוֹתֶרוֹ: הִיָּתָה מִתְכַּסֶּה בְּלִבָּנִים, מְכַסֶּה בְּשָׁחוֹרִים. הָיוּ עָלֶיהָ כָּלִי זָהָב וְקַטְלִיאוֹת, כְּזָמִים וְטַבָּעוֹת, מַעֲבִירִים מִמֶּנָּה כְּדִי לְנִלְוָהּ. וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ מְבִיא חֶבֶל מִצְרִי וְקוֹשֶׁרוֹ לְמַעַלְהָ מִדִּדְיָהּ. וְכָל הָרוֹצֶה לְרְאוֹתָהּ בָּא לְרְאוֹתָהּ, חוּץ מֵעַבְדֶּיהָ וְשִׁפְחוֹתֶיהָ, מִפְּנֵי שְׁלֵבָהּ גֹּס כֶּהֱן. וְכָל הַנָּשִׁים מִתְּרוֹת לְרְאוֹתָהּ, שְׁנֵאָמַר (יִחְזַקְאֵל כג) וְנוֹסְרוּ כָּל הַנָּשִׁים וְלֹא תַעֲשִׂינָה כְּזִמְתְּכָנָה בַּמֶּדָּה שֶׁאָדָם מוֹדֵד, בָּהּ מוֹדֵדִין לוֹ. הִיא קִשְׁטָה אֶת עַצְמָהּ לַעֲבֹרָה, הַמָּקוֹם נִלְוָה. הִיא גִּלְתָהּ אֶת עַצְמָהּ לַעֲבֹרָה, הַמָּקוֹם גִּלָּהּ עָלֶיהָ. בִּירֶךָ הִתְחִילָה בְּעֵבְרָה תַּחֲלָה וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ הִבְטֵן, לְפִיכָךָ תִּלְקָה הִירֶךָ תַּחֲלָה וְאַחֵר כֶּךָ הִבְטֵן. וְשָׂאָר כָּל הַגּוּף לֹא פָּלֹט:
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3. Bavli Sotah 2a-3a

The mishna states: One who issues a warning to his wife. One issues a warning, the <i>tanna</i> indicates that after the fact, yes, but ideally, no, one should not issue a warning to his wife at all ab initio. Apparently, the tanna of our mishna holds that it is prohibited to issue a warning. Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhak says: When Reish Lakish would introduce his discussion of the Torah passage of <i>sota</i> he would say this: Heaven matches a woman to a man only according to his actions, as it is stated: “For the rod of wickedness shall not rest upon the lot of the righteous.” (Psalms 125:3) ... Reish Lakish says: What is the meaning of the term: Warning	הַמִּקְנָא דִּיעֵבַד אִין לַכְתִּחִילָה לֹא קִסְבֵּר תַּנָּא דִּידֵן אִסּוּר לְקִנְאוֹת א"ר שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר רַב יִצְחָק כִּי הוּא פֶּתַח רִישׁ לְקִישׁ בִּסּוּטָה אָמַר הִכִּי אִין מִזְוֹגִין לוֹ לְאָדָם אִשָּׁה אֲלֵא לְפִי מַעֲשִׂיו שְׁנֵא' (תְּהִלִּים קכ"ה, ג) כִּי לֹא יִנּוּחַ שִׁבְטֵי הָרָשָׁע עַל גּוֹרֵל הַצְּדִיקִים אָמַר רִישׁ לְקִישׁ מֵה לְשׁוֹן
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[kinnui]? It means a matter that causes anger [kina] between her and others. Apparently, he holds that a warning is effective based on the husband's own testimony, and therefore everyone else will not know that her husband issued a warning to her, and they will say: What is this matter happening before us that she separates herself from us, and they will come to act in anger with her.

And Rav Yeimar bar Rabbi Shelemya says in the name of Abaye: The term *kinnui* means **a matter that causes anger between him and her. Apparently, he holds that a warning is effective based on the testimony of two witnesses.** And since there are two witnesses, **everyone knows that he issued a warning to her. And the husband is he who will come to act in anger with her.**

Apparently, both Reish Lakish and Rav Yeimar bar Rabbi Shelemya **hold that it is prohibited to issue a warning.** Both are of the opinion that the word *kinnui* is a term for anger. Since causing anger is a negative trait, it follows that it is prohibited to issue a warning.

It is taught in a *baraita* that **Rabbi Meir would say: A person commits a transgression in private and the Holy One, proclaims about him openly, i.e., in public, that he transgressed, as it is stated concerning a *sota*, who transgressed in private: “The spirit of jealousy came [avar] upon him” (Numbers 5:14); and the term *avira* means nothing other than a term of proclamation, as it is stated: “And Moses gave the commandment, and they caused it to be proclaimed [vaya’aviru] throughout the camp” (Exodus 36:6)**

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The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: A man issues a warning to his wife only if a spirit entered him, as it is stated: “And the spirit of jealousy came upon him, and he warned his wife” (Numbers 5:14). The Gemara asks: Of **what spirit** does Rabbi Yishmael speak?

The Rabbis say: A spirit of impurity, as one should not issue a warning to one's wife. **Rav Ashi says: A spirit of purity,** as issuing a warning indicates that he will not tolerate promiscuous behavior.

The Gemara comments: **And it stands to reason like the one who says that Rabbi Yishmael was speaking of a spirit of purity, as it is**

קיני דבר המטיל קנאה
בינה לבין אחרים אלמא
קסבר קיני על פי עצמו
וכולי עלמא לא ידעי דקני
לה ואמרי מאי דקמא
דקא בדלה ואתו למיעבד
קנאה בהדה

ורב יימר בר ר' שלמיא
משמיה דאביי אמר דבר
המטיל קנאה בינו לבינה
אלמא קסבר קיני על פי
שנים עדים כולי עלמא
ידעי דקני לה ואיהו הוא
דאתי למיעבד קנאה
בהדה

אלמא קסברי דאסור
לקנאות

תניא היה רבי מאיר
אומר אדם עובר עבירה
בסתר והקב"ה מכריז
עליו בגלוי שנאמר
(במדבר ה, יד) ועבר
עליו רוח קנאה ואין
עבירה אלא לשון הכרזה
שנאמר (שמות לו, ו) ויצו
משה ויעבירו קול
במחנה

תנא דבי רבי ישמעאל
אין אדם מקנא לאשתו
א"כ נכנסה בו רוח
שנאמר ועבר עליו רוח
קנאה וקנא את אשתו
מאי רוח

רבנן אמרי רוח טומאה
רב אשי אמר רוח טהרה

מסתברא כמאן דאמר
רוח טהרה דתניא וקנא



taught in a <i>baraita</i>: “And he warned his wife,” i.e., the issuing of the warning, is optional; this is the statement of Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Akiva says: It is mandatory. The Gemara explains: Granted, if you say that Rabbi Yishmael was speaking of a spirit of purity, then it is well, as it may be optional, or even mandatory, to issue a warning. But if you say that he was speaking of a spirit of impurity, can it be optional or mandatory for a person to introduce a spirit of impurity into himself? ... “And he warned his wife,” the warning is optional; this is the statement of Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Akiva says: It is mandatory. What is the reason of Rabbi Yishmael? He holds in accordance with the statement of this tanna, as it is taught in a <i>baraita</i>: Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya’akov says: With regard to that which the Torah said: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart” (Leviticus 19:17), one might have thought that this prohibition applies in a case such as this one. Therefore, the verse states: “And the spirit of jealousy came upon him, and he warned his wife” (Numbers 5:14). And how does Rabbi Akiva derive that it is mandatory? The Gemara answers: There is another warning written in the same verse, as the entire verse reads: “And the spirit of jealousy came upon him, and he warned his wife, and she be defiled; or if the spirit of jealousy came upon him, and he warned his wife, and she be not defiled.” Therefore, the first half of the verse teaches that it is permitted to issue a warning, and the second half teaches that it is in fact mandatory.	את אשתו רשות דברי ר' ישמעאל ר"ע אומר חובה אי אמרת בשלמא רוח טהרה שפיר אלא אי אמרת רוח טומאה רשות וחובה לעיולי לאיניש רוח טומאה בנפשיה וקנא את אשתו רשות דברי רבי ישמעאל ר"ע עקיבא אומר חובה מ"ט דר' ישמעאל סבר לה כי האי תנא דתניא רבי אליעזר בן יעקב אומר כלפי שאמרה תורה (ויקרא יט, יז) לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך יכול כגון זו ת"ל ועבר עליו רוח קנאה וקנא את אשתו ור"ע קיניו אחרינא כתיב
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4. Mishnah Sotah 9:9

From the time when adulterers proliferated, the performance of the ritual of the bitter waters was nullified; they would not administer the bitter waters to the <i>sota</i>. And it was Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai who nullified it, as it is stated: “I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your daughters-in-law when they commit adultery; for they consort with lewd women” (Hosea 4:14), meaning that when the husbands are adulterers, the wives are not punished for their own adultery.	משברו המנאפים, פסקו המים המרים, ורבן יוחנן בן זכאי הפסיקו, שנאמר (הושע ד) לא אפקוד על בנותיכם כי תזנינה ועל כלותיכם כי תנאפנה כי הם וגו'. משמת יוסי בן יועזר איש צדדה יוסי בן יוחנן איש ירושלים, בטלו האשכולות, שנאמר (מיכה ז) אין אשכול לאכל בכורה אותה נפשי
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