



The Sota Ritual Revisited

Rabbi Avi Strausberg — strausberg@hadar.org

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1. “The Sota Ritual Revisited” (excerpts), Avi Strausberg

Scene Three

All of the key players are already in place, including The Husband, the two writers, and the crowd of men. A second woman enters the stage and stands far downstage left.

Woman 2:

This book is indeed about words. Speaking the unspoken. Speaking the spoken in a new and viable way, speaking the pain, speaking the hunger. Speaking.¹

Writer 1:

If jealousy over comes him

The Husband takes two steps toward the Sota.

Writer 2:

They threaten her. They say things to her that are not fit for her to hear.

The men point their fingers at the Sota in accusation.

Woman 2:

Speaking about violence against women not because it is the only issue, but because it is an issue that lives smack in the middle of the world and is still not spoken, not seen, not given weight or significance. So that words crack open

Writer 1:

The priest makes her stand before the Lord.

The priest places both hands on the Sota's hips and lifts her on to the milk crate.

¹ From here on, the voice of Woman 2 will contains the words from the introduction of Eve Ensler's *A Memory, A Monologue, A Rant, and A Prayer*.



Woman 2:

So that the words crack open numbness and denial and disassociation and distance and deception. Speaking so that we are in community, in conscience,

Writer 2:

He tears her garments... He uncovers her breasts.

He rips off her dress and uncovers her hair.

Woman 2:

in concern.

Writer 2:

They watch.

Woman 2:

Speaking about violence against women because in 2006, young Amish girls are gunned down in their school just because they are girls; women are trafficked like meat sold from poor neighborhoods to men in rich neighborhoods; women are raped in Darfur on their way to get wood for the fire or grass for their donkeys.

Writer 1:

May the Lord make you a curse.

The priest lowers his hands on the Sota's body, placing one hand behind the small of her back, and one hand over her stomach.

Writer 1:

May you miscarry.

Woman 2:

In 2006, women are burned and mutilated and stoned and dismissed and undone and refused and silenced.

Writer 1:

She says, "Amen, amen"

Woman 2:

Speaking about violence because in early November 2006 the president of Israel stepped down after being accused of rape and harassment, and a cleric in Australia blamed uncovered women for getting raped.

The Sota lifts her eyes to the audience and looks at The Husband. She nods almost imperceptibly. She casts her eyes down to the ground.



Writer 1:

He makes her drink.

The priest bends down and lifts the glass of water from the table. He stirs the water with a spoon. He tips the Sota's head back and forces her to drink.

Woman 2:

Speaking about violence against women because of your mother, your sister, your aunt, your daughter, your girlfriend, your best friend, your wife. Speaking about violence against women because the story of women is the story of life itself. In speaking about it, you cannot avoid speaking about racism and domination, poverty and patriarchy, empire building, war sexuality, desire, imagination. The mechanism of violence is what destroys women, controls women, diminishes women, and keeps them in their so-called place.

Writers 1 and 2:

They watch.

The crowd takes a step back and watches with interest, waiting to see the results of the trial. Nothing happens.

Woman 2:

Speaking about violence, telling the stories, because in the telling, we legitimize women's experience. We reveal what is happening in the dark, in the basement, out of sight. In the telling, women take their power back. Their voice. Their remembering. Their future.

The crowd continues to watch. Woman 2 turns her eyes to the Sota. The Husband stands in silence.

Lights out.

Scene Four

Female voiceover, "it begins again".

Lights up.

All of the key players are already in place, including The Husband, the two writers, the crowd of men, and Woman 2. A third woman enters the stage and walks towards the Sota. She stands on the edge of the crowd.

Woman 2:

This book is indeed about words.

Writer 1:

Jealousy overcomes him.

The Husband takes two steps toward the Sota.



Woman 2:
Speaking the unspoken. Speaking the pain.

Woman 3 (*speaking directly to the Sota who doesn't seem to hear*):
Who are you and whom do you love?²

Writer 2:
They threaten her.

The men point their fingers at the Sota in accusation.

Woman 3:
How will you begin? How will you live now?

Writer 1:
The priest makes her stand before the Lord.

The priest places both hands on the Sota's hips and lifts her onto the milk crate.

Woman 3:
What is the shape of your body?

Writer 2:
He tears her garments... He uncovers her breasts.

He rips off her dress and uncovers her hair.

Woman 3:
Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?

Writer 2:
They watch.

Writer 1:
May the Lord make you a curse. May you miscarry.

The priest lowers his hands on the woman's body, placing one hand behind the small of her back, and one hand over her stomach.

Woman 3:
Who are you and whom do you love?

² From here on, the voice of Woman 3 will contain the words of Bhanu Kapil Ride's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*.



Writer 1:
She says, “Amen, amen”.

Woman 3:
What are the consequences of your silence?

The Sota lifts her eyes to the audience and looks at The Husband. She nods almost imperceptibly. She casts her eyes down to the ground.

Writer 1:
Drink.

The priest bends down and lifts the glass of water from the table. He stirs the water with a spoon. He tips the woman's head back and forces her to drink. A fourth woman enters the stage and stands a distance away.

Writers 1 and 2:
They watch.

Woman 3:
Tell me what you know about dismemberment?

The crowd takes a step back and watches with interest, waiting to see the results of the trial. Nothing happens.

Woman 3:
Who are you and whom do you love?

The crowd waits eagerly in silence.

Woman 4 (*speaking to the Sota*):

There was a woman here who was loved. She was good to look at because she was a quick and imaginative thinker. She liked the view of the peach orchard from the southern window, and loved the turquoise earrings that her mother had given her at her marriage. Her life mattered, utterly, to herself, to her children, to those she loved, to the birds she scattered crumbs to after the family had eaten. This was her house, and years later the house still remembered her, though it was almost gone and the woman's spirit had flown to the other side.³

Woman 4 continues to look at the Sota.
Lights out.

³ From here on, the voice of Woman 4 comes from the words of Joy Harjo's poem “There is no such thing as a one-way land bridge” from her book *A Map to the Next World*.



2. Midrash Tanhuma, Naso 6

A story is told of two sisters who resembled one another. One sister was married and lived in one city. And the other sister was married and lived in another city. The husband of one of them grew jealous of his wife and wanted to bring her to Jerusalem to drink the bitter waters. That sister went to the city where her sister lived with her husband. Her sister said to her: Why did you see fit to come here? She said to her: My husband wants me to drink the bitter waters. Her sister said: I will go in your stead and drink. She said to her: Go. She dressed herself in her sister's clothes and went in her stead. She drank the bitter water, and was found to be innocent. She returned to the home of her sister, who came out happily to greet her. She embraced her sister and kissed her on the lips. When they kissed one another, her sister breathed in the smell of the bitter waters, and immediately she died to fulfill what is stated (in Eccl. 8:8), "No human has control over the wind to contain the wind, nor is there control on the day of death [...]."	מַעֲשֵׂה בִשְׁתֵּי אֲחִיּוֹת שֶׁהָיוּ דּוּמּוֹת זוֹ לְזוֹ. וְהָיְתָה אַחַת נְשׂוּאָה בְּעִיר אַחַת, וְאַחַת נְשׂוּאָה בְּעִיר אַחֶרֶת. בִּקֵּשׁ בַּעֲלָהּ שֶׁל אַחַת מֵהֶן לִקְנָאוֹת לָהּ וּלְהַשְׁקוֹתָהּ מֵיִם הַמְרִים בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם. הִלְכָה לְאוֹתָהּ הָעִיר שֶׁהָיְתָה אַחֲתָהּ נְשׂוּאָה שָׁם. אָמְרָה לָהּ אַחֲתָהּ, מָה רָאִית לְבֹא לְכָאן. אָמְרָה לָהּ, בְּעָלִי מִבְקֵשׁ לְהַשְׁקוֹת אוֹתִי מֵיִם הַמְרִים. אָמְרָה לָהּ אַחֲתָהּ, אֲנִי הוֹלֶכֶת תַּחְתִּיךָ וְשׁוֹתָהּ. אָמְרָה לָהּ לְכִי. לְבָשָׁה בְּגָדֵי אַחֲתָהּ וְהִלְכָה תַּחְתִּיהָ וְשָׁתָתָה מֵי הַמְרִים וְנִמְצְאָתָה טְהוֹרָה, וְחִזְרָה לְבֵית אַחֲתָהּ. יָצְאת שְׂמִיחָה לְקִרְאָתָהּ, חִבְּקָהּ אוֹתָהּ וְנִשְׁקָהּ לָהּ בְּפִיהָ. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁנִּשְׁקוּ זוֹ לְזוֹ, הִרְיָחָה בְּמִיִּם הַמְרִים, וּמִיד מֵתָה, לִקְיָם מֶה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: אֵין אָדָם שְׁלִיט בְּרוּחַ לְכַלֵּא אֶת הָרוּחַ, וְאֵין שְׁלִטוֹן בְּיוֹם הַמָּוֶת, וְאֵין מִשְׁלַחַת בְּמִלְחָמָה, וְלֹא יִמְלֹט רָשָׁע אֶת בַּעֲלָיו (קֹהֶלֶת ח, ח).
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3. [“Sisters,” A Bride for One Night, Ruth Calderon, p. 7-11 \(see pdf\)](#)

4. Excerpted Reflections on “Sisters,” A Bride for One Night, Ruth Calderon, p. 11-14

This is a story about sisterhood. Although it was written when the Sota ceremony was no longer performed (if indeed it ever was), it served as a warning to women who might be tempted to collude against male power. The narrator of the story warns that anyone who tries to circumvent the law will pay with her life and that the final kill will be a kiss of death. Feminine loyalty will not triumph over masculine rule of law. Actions must be met with consequences, and ultimately justice conquers all.



But I am not willing to read the story this way. I took the liberty of freezing the end of the story one moment prior to the sister's arrival, just before the sisterly kiss turns into a kiss of death. I searched within the Talmud's paean to quiet obedience for the subversive story that lies hidden between the lines, between the letters. I sought out the story that was told in the scullery and the kitchens, that is awash with the scent of clean babies, fresh laundry, and fragrant spices. This story features sisters in solidarity and a God who is accepting, assisting, winking at the woman from behind the back of her jealous husband, like a mother who smiles at her eldest son from behind the back of his grumbling younger brother. Like an accomplice.

Sisterly solidarity in this story, as in the discourse of feminism, is a force that is stronger than just blood ties, a force that cannot be overcome: the force of women who would not hesitate to violate the law for the sake of one another. The solidarity of the downtrodden...

The ritual of the bitter waters is a ceremony that developed in response to men's primal fear of women. The womb of a woman is the most secret of interior chambers, the great enigma that can never be fully known. When a woman becomes pregnant, only she and God can know whose seed is inside her. Her child could be from her husband's sperm, but it could also be from the sperm of another man. After all, monogamous social norms are not a guarantee of monogamous behavior...

It was possible for a woman to survive the ceremony. After all, the bitter waters were not necessarily fatal. But even if she were to survive, the biblical ritual serves its desired function: A man is able to overcome his lack of control and the doubts that haunt him by turning his wife over to the priest. Moreover, by means of the Sota ritual, the priest subverts the act of seclusion that the woman engaged in -- if it ever actually happened. Measure for measure, each aspect of the suspected act is reversed. Instead of taking place privately, the ritual is performed publicly. Instead of the woman beautifying herself, the priest dishevels her hair and tears her clothes. The potential act of seclusion, whose power lies in its secrecy, is dragged into the public eyes...

"She shall be absolved and shall retain seed": I picture the woman who dared to plead innocent, who came to Jerusalem and stood before God, facing the holy sanctum with her secret hidden from the entire world, drinking the bitter water mixed with dust and with letters erased from the scroll. Such a woman converts the Sotah ritual into a religious act. She who is not scared off by her husband or by the priests and their warnings will attain a position of power superior to theirs. She has undertaken a sort of feminine hajj. When she arrives home, who would dare to defy her?

