

Naso 1 - Numbers 4:21-5:31 - The Sotah

Source Sheet by Rabbi Marina Yergin

Texts from <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/opposite-faith> unless otherwise noted.

במדבר ה': י"א-ט"ו

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי־תִשְׁטָה אִשְׁתּוֹ וּמָעַלָה בּוֹ מִעַל: וְשָׁכַב אִישׁ אִתָּהּ שִׁכְבַּת־זָרָע וְנִעְלַם מֵעֵינַי אִשְׁתּוֹ וְנִסְתָּרָה וְהָיָא נְטֻמָּאָה וְעַד אֵין בָּהּ וְהוּא לֹא נִתְפָּשָׂה: וְעָבַר עָלָיו רֹוֹחַ־קִנְיָא וְקִנְיָא אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהוּא נְטֻמָּאָה אוֹ־עָבַר עָלָיו רֹוֹחַ־קִנְיָא וְקִנְיָא אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיָא לֹא נְטֻמָּאָה: וְהִבִּיא הָאִישׁ אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן וְהִבִּיא אֶת־קַרְבָּנָהּ עָלֶיהָ עֲשִׂירֵת הָאִיפָה קֶמַח שְׁעָרִים לֹא־יִצַק עָלָיו שָׁמֶן וְלֹא־יִתֵּן עָלָיו לְבִנָּה כִּי־מִנְחַת קִנְיָאֵת הוּא מִנְחַת זָכָרוֹן מִזִּבְחַת עֹון:

Numbers 5:11-15

יהוה *Adonai* spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: Any party whose wife has gone astray and broken faith with him, in that another 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, 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 him and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself—that party 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.

Citing Rabbi Rebecca Alpert, Rabbi Lisa Gruschow offers two choices: “We can ... try to wrest new meaning from them, or we can simply acknowledge the pain that they have caused—and continue to cause” (*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*).

Why do we still want to look at this today?

Rabbi Lisa Gruschow writes that “the sotah ritual is most powerful as a teacher of change. . . . Just as the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud used the best conceptual tools of their time to understand change, so must we—with the tools of our own time. Such an approach is not abandoning our tradition; it is being true to it” (*The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*).

What is the goal of the sotah ritual and how do we understand it today?

Dr. Aviva Zornberg writes that, while the ideal outcome of the sotah ritual is that “all ambiguity will be resolved,” the reality is quite different: “Total certainty can never be achieved in human affairs. . . . the sotah ordeal may seek to heal the world of its fractures, its lusts and jealousies. But it remains, nevertheless, an imperfect solution to the human need for certainty” (*Bewilderments*).

“Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns” (*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* by Anne Lamott).