



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Naso 5772

The Law and Lore of the Wayward Woman

By Adina Roth

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Torah—with its rich narratives and poetry, glimpses of the Divine and profound wisdom—is a text we turn to for inspiration, intellectual stimulation and meaning. Yet there are moments in the Bible when culturally located prejudices come to the fore and the reader is left struggling with the tension between timeless writing and context-bound oppression. One such moment is the law of the *sotah*—or wayward woman—found in *Parashat Naso*.

The law reads as follows: If a man has suspicions (also translated as “jealousy” or “zealous indignation”¹) that his wife has had an affair, he brings her before the *kohen* (priest), who makes her drink a mixture of holy waters and earth. He removes her head covering (which implies shaming²) and warns her that if she has indeed been with a man other than her husband, the ingested waters will cause her thigh to collapse and her stomach to distend. The sages are divided on whether this refers to miscarriage or the explosion of her uterus and genitals.³ Either way, the gruesome punishment seems to be a direct response to the alleged crime: sexual ‘waywardness’ is followed by sexual shaming and maiming. Alternatively, if the woman is revealed to have not been with another man, she returns home with her husband to bear a child—an uncomfortable consolation prize for one who has just been publicly defamed.

Having heard the *kohen’s* warning and just before drinking the water, the woman must answer “Amen, Amen.”⁴ In this context, we realize that ‘Amen,’ despite its benign, comforting associations today, actually means to submit to God’s will. ‘Amen’ is sinister here, as the woman is forced to surrender her fate to forces beyond her control.

It’s ironic that in this rare instance when a woman is given the opportunity to speak in a biblical ritual, she is simultaneously restricted in what she can say; these robotic and depersonalized words silence any defense she might have offered of her guilt or innocence. The subservient quality of ‘Amen’ also contrasts with her alleged waywardness. If she has been wayward, ‘Amen’ signifies the beginning of her return to compliance. If not, it is her forced acceptance that this shaming ordeal is God’s will despite her innocence.

In contrast to the passivity of the woman’s ‘Amen,’ the text places all of the agency and power among men. Her husband brings her to the male *kohen*, who administers the ritual. And the rite itself carries out the will of a Deity who is characterized as masculine in a biblical context. In this web of husband, priest and God controlling her fate, the woman’s story is absent.

In fact, it could be argued that the patriarchal nature of the ritual *depends* on the absence of her authentic voice and story. Her story—with all of its intricate details of how she got married, the nuanced unfolding of her relationship with her husband and her private desires and hopes—would identify the woman as an individual. In expressing her

¹ Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 680.

Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004) 705.

² Alter 707.

³ Ibid. 708.

⁴ Numbers 5:22.

individual, lived experience, the woman's complex story could pose a challenge to the unequal power dynamics and absolutes that the law attempts to enforce.

If the suppression of the woman's story enables the oppression of women in the *sotah* ritual, it makes me think that the *telling* of women's stories in their own voices can be a powerful antidote to oppression. Women's stories are, in their own way, forms of "waywardness"—positive, powerful rejections of the status quo. By telling stories, we can challenge sexual norms, question the entire patriarchal system and develop women's agency over their lives. Stories can serve as activist tools to help women in all cultures move beyond 'Amen Amen'—and into empowerment.

Women across all cultures are working to author their own stories. Whether it is the sharing among Jewish women in a Rosh Chodesh circle or the oral narratives of women travelers in sub-Saharan Africa, stories are being used to make room for today's wayward women's voices to be heard.

Consider the story of Mukhtaran Bibi, a courageous warrior woman in Pakistan. After a tribal council determined that she should be gang raped to redress a family honor crime, Mukhtaran did not shrivel up in despair or commit suicide. Instead, she chose to step forward and, at great risk to herself and her family, she told her story. It created ripples, which turned into waves, and generated such interest that she became an activist, building schools and establishing networks to empower women further. She prosecuted her rapists and her courage gave strength to other women in similar situations to speak out and tell their stories.⁵ Individual stories are so powerful that they can inform and inspire activism and even bring about policy change.

It is worth contemplating how women's waywardness is still punished in overt and subtle ways in the 21st century. The law of *sotah* in *Parashat Naso* invites us to consider how women's stories have been suppressed and controlled by patriarchal conventions—and how unlocking them can lead to change in our own time. Storytelling, with its complex portrayals of humanity, helps shift women from the subservience of 'Amen' to the power of having a voice. Only then do they have the freedom to author their own lives.



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⁵ "It's not just a woman who has been raped, but a nation," *The Guardian*, 14 March 2005. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2005/mar/14/gender.pakistan>. See also Nicholas D. Kristof, "Mother of a Nation," *The New York Times*, 2 April 2006. Available at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=F30A1FF639540C718CDDAD0894DE404482>.

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