

# Echoes of Eden

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## Parashat Naso 5774

### Avoiding Embezzlement

The major thrust of Parashat Naso is the initialization of the Temple, particularly the consecration offerings brought by the leaders of each tribe. After an opening section that deals with the stewards of the Temple service, but just before getting into the main topic of discussion, a few seemingly “random” laws are transmitted. The first is a cluster of laws regarding misappropriation of Temple property. The relevance to the main topic of discussion is relatively straightforward: The sparkling new Temple poses new ethical challenges and concerns. Therefore, this is a fitting opportunity for the Torah to teach us that misuse of Temple property, me’illa (literally, embezzlement), is a punishable offence.

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However, before returning to the main issue at hand – the consecration of the Temple - the Torah transmits three additional laws whose connection to the parashah’s main theme seems far more tenuous: the instance of the wife suspected of infidelity (sotah), the nazir, and the priestly blessings.

The logical flow to the case of sotah appears, at first glance, to be based on a linguistic connection: The word me’illa, used to describe embezzlement of Temple resources, is also used to describe the wife’s suspected infidelity. In today’s world, where the “sanctity” of marriage is often ignored, the Torah’s choice of words gives us pause. By creating this linguistic connection, the Torah creates a parallel between these cases, pointing out with a single word that both embezzlement from the Temple and marital infidelity involve the misuse of something holy. In both cases, a type of sanctity is violated. Infidelity is thus seen not merely as a transgression against a particular spouse; it tramples upon something sacred. This attitude is reflected in the Hebrew word for marriage, kiddushin: Marriage is a holy institution. It creates a state of holiness. In such a

worldview, an “open marriage” is not an option. The state of holiness, the sanctity of each marriage, is unique and exclusive.

The case of the sotah is quite specific in its circumstances: A husband suspects that his wife has an inappropriate relationship with a particular man, and asks her not to put herself into a compromising situation with that particular man. Ignoring his request, the wife secludes herself with the person in question. Clearly, this marriage is dysfunctional. At the very least, the husband is suspicious and jealous, and the wife is insensitive to his concerns and makes poor choices that fuel those suspicions. This deteriorating situation is taken to the Temple, and not to the courts; this is, after all, a question of possible me'illa. Something sacred may well have been violated. Therefore, in a ceremony fraught with symbolism, this very Torah passage – including the Name of God - is destroyed, dissolved in liquid, and ingested by the suspect woman. Apparently, the antidote to the violation of holiness is, literally, a dose of additional holiness. The case is considered so extreme that it calls for destroying the words of the Torah, and the Name of God. This is no trifling matter. The destruction of the sacred text reflects the diminution of holiness that it addresses, for if the sanctity of marriage is brought into question, the sanctity of God's Name suffers as well. An affront to one type of holiness is an affront to both types of holiness.

If, in fact, the woman was unfaithful, if through her infidelity she shattered something holy, her body will not be capable of ingesting the holy words. If, however, she is innocent, the dose of additional holiness will prove her innocence and carry her to new heights.

In this light, the other seemingly-disjointed commandments seem far more germane to the discussion. The nazir is a “regular” person who takes upon himself more holiness, voluntarily taking on a quasi-kohen status. In allowing this self-deprivation and self-definition, the Torah recognizes that even in the world of the mundane, individuals may occasionally feel the need to elevate their own personal level of holiness. The passage that immediately follows that of the nazir is the text of the priestly blessing, birkat kohanim, the conduit through which holiness is transmitted to the masses.

The Temple is the epicenter of holiness in the world. However, Judaism is designed to bring holiness into our everyday lives. Holiness is not the exclusive property of the Temple or of the kohanim who serve in the Temple. The challenge is to bring holiness into our marriages, our homes, our lives. We are

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required to conduct ourselves, and our business and personal relationships, with a constant eye toward holiness. When holiness is ignored or, even worse, banished from our personal lives, the individual must undergo a spiritual adjustment, represented by the nazir state. On the national level, the kohanim play a dual role: They serve as representatives of the people in the Temple service, but at the same time they transmit the holiness of the Temple and spread it throughout the land, by

teaching Torah and also by allowing the holy blessings to flow through their fingers to touch the lives of each and every member of society.

For a more in depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/05/audio-and-essays-parashat-naso.html>