

LIMITING THE WINE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

After the Torah detailed the procedure for determining the guilt or innocence of the accused adulteress, the Sotah, the Torah presented the laws of Nazir - Nazirite. The Talmud in Sotah (2a) asks, "Why, in the order of this week's Parsha, do the laws of the Nazir follow the laws of the Sotah?" The Talmud answers, "To teach us that who ever witnesses the embarrassment of the Sotah should limit himself from drinking wine."

Our present society is on a downward slippery slope and gaining speed. The media has admitted that their self-governing TV rating system has failed in its objectives. Rather than limiting the amount of inappropriate programming the opposite has happened. Depending on the inappropriateness, there has been a 30% to 40% rise in such scenes.

A competing broadcasting company advertises itself as the "family channel, free of foul language, violence, and."

The mayor of a local beachside township has moved to change certain "archaic" modesty laws that are on the books. These laws are intended to contain the dress code (or lack thereof) on that township's beaches. Listening to local radio talk shows discussing this "worthy news item" presented a revealing and frightening trend away from acceptable and traditional values. The majority of the callers were supportive of the mayor! "Americans are so repressed." "We should learn from the Europeans." "Why should we be embarrassed? Are animals embarrassed to walk around naked? Isn't it the most pure and natural way to be?"

How do we feel about this trend? What are we doing to protect our children and ourselves? To what degree have we become inured to this attack on the sanctity of the human and our ability to be "like G-d, knowing right from wrong?"

A little more than two years ago the nation was shocked by the murder of 13 teenagers. On the one-month anniversary of that event six other students were injured in another school shooting. Do you remember the difference in the coverage of the first incident with the second incident. Understandably, the Columbine incident was profoundly disturbing and frightening. Live coverage, interviews, town meetings, soul searching and congressional debate followed the first. However, the second shooting was yesterday's news before it was even yesterday! We have become a society of observers constantly searching the information highways for the more shocking and titillating. The media are the purveyors for this prurient, ignoble, and seemingly insatiable hunger.

Billboards scream their larger than life messages of need. Radios assault the airwaves with their incessant chatter of pretentious morality, or blatant disregard for all that is moral. Music, the most insidious of them all, sneaks its way into our souls disguised as poetry and song. Much of art is exhibitionistic clothed like an Emperor, and TV has come out of the closet to molest the minds of the innocent. What should we do?

The Rambam in the Laws of Teshuva 6:1 writes the following. "If society is so evil that they do not leave you in peace unless you assimilate and act like them, then you must flee to the caves and the deserts rather than learn from their sinful ways." Has society degenerated to the level where we must "flee to the caves and the deserts?" Must we isolate ourselves from societies affront to what should be our Torah honed moral and ethical sensibilities? Must we divorce ourselves from the acceptable norms of contemporary society? Should self-preservation become the singular focus of our identity and efforts?

This week's Parsha juxtaposes the laws of the Sotah with the laws of the Nazir. The Sotah was an accused adulteress who had behaved in a manner that caused her husband to become suspicious and jealous. The procedure presumed a number of criteria. First of all, was the husband innocent of similar behavior? If he was, had he communicated his suspicions to her in the presence of two witnesses? If yes, had she ignored his concerns and closeted herself alone in a room with the suspected adulterer, while in the presence of two witnesses. (They were outside the locked room, similar to Yichud after the Chupah.) If she had, the wife had the option of refusing the Sotah procedure and accepting a divorce. However, if she maintained her innocence, despite the proven disrespect she had shown her husband by having ignored his suspicions and jealousies, then she was subject to the publicly embarrassing procedure, regardless of her innocence or guilt.

The Nazir, on the other hand, was an individual who wanted a spiritual tune-up. The individual committing to a month of Torah study, sanctity, and physical purity could accomplish this. Part of the program involved his escape into asceticism. Through denying himself wine and grape by-products, forgoing haircuts, and avoiding any contact with the dead, he shielded himself with symbolic sanctity. The goal was to recalibrate his perspectives and values through study and prayer.

The Torah let us know that this was a noble but not necessarily preferred method for spiritual development. The preferred method involved living life to its fullest within the framework and limitations of Torah and Mitzvos. Therefore, the Nazir had to bring a "sin-offering" upon the completion of his month long immersion into sanctity.

Rabbi Dovid Landesman Shlit'a, shared the following insight into the Talmud's explanation for the juxtaposition of Sotah to Nazir. The Talmud states, "To teach us that whoever witnesses the embarrassment of the Sotah should limit himself from drinking wine." The Talmud was addressing today's trend toward acceptance and desensitization of Torah defined morals and values.

Imagine the scene. The setting is the Bais Hamikdash. The Temple is crowded with Jews from all

over Eretz Yisroel and beyond. Foreign visitors and dignitaries mix with the masses of pilgrims and petitioners. Kohanim and Leviyim purposefully move about directing the people and facilitating their devotional needs. All of a sudden a murmur runs through the crowd. "A Sotah, a Sotah! Conflicting emotions are apparent on most faces. Here in the Bais Hamikdash, in G-d's own house a woman accused of adultery!

Embarrassment and fascination vie for dominance. Quickly the crowd gathers in front of the players. The angry husband, the defiant wife and the stern looking senior Kohain attempt to ignore the straining public. Turning to the couple the Kohain asks if they wish to proceed. It is clear that the Kohain wants the man to either withdraw his petition or for the woman to admit her guilt, rather than cause the name of G-d to be erased. The man stoically refuses to relent and the wife angrily shakes her refusal to confess.

The Kohain turns to the wife and removes her hair covering. All can see her embarrassment. Some in the crowd, sensitive to her pain, turn away rather than witness her shame. However, most of the people look on in fascination. The Kohain then administers the oath of fidelity to the wife. "If you have not been unfaithful this cursed water will not harm you. However, if you have been unfaithful G-d will make you into a curse" "With defiance and fear the wife answers, "Amen, Amen."

With parchment, ink and quill the Kohain transcribes the verses (in this week's Parsha) containing the oath of fidelity, including the name of G-d. Quickly the parchment is dipped into a cup of water that had been mixed with dirt from the floor of the Temple allowing the name of G-d to dissolve. Bringing the earthen cup to her lips the Kohain tells the woman to drink the cursed and bitter water. When finished, the woman quickly covers her hair and leaves the Temple.

What lesson should the assembled masses have learned from witnessing the Sotah process? For some it would have a profound affect. They would return to the norms of their lives committed to never allowing themselves or their children to be so humiliated. The experience would be repeated, reviewed, and revisited. The lesson would be shared and reinforced. The intent of G-d in allowing such a humiliation would be realized.

On the other hand, others would witness the spectacle of a family's shame, shudder, and say, "B"H it's not me." Then, they would go off to lunch at Ben Yehudah for KFC and a falafel. Unaffected by the shame, desensitized to the embarrassment, indifferent to the tragedy and pathos, life would go on as before.

Regarding the later the Talmud in Sotah states, "If you witness the Sotah's shame and that is all that it is, a fascination, a curiosity, a spectacle. If witnessing the pain and embarrassment of a family leaves you unaffected, go home and immerse yourself in sanctity. Go home and swear off wine. Go home and become a Nazir. You are the one who needs to be recalibrated and rehabilitated. You are the one who has become a casualty of assimilation and society's attack on Torah morals and values. You are the one who needs to escape for a short time into the caves and the desert. The first group

does not have to become Nazirites. They learned G-d's intended lesson. It is the others who are more curious than shamed that must respond to their own indifference.

We live at a time when the Nazir sounds like a pretty good idea. How far have we fallen? How indifferent have we become? To what extent have we become accepting of immorality and perversion? How honest are we willing to be, and what are we prepared to do to correct the situation? It is time to recalibrate. It is time to introduce greater intensity in devotion and commitment to learning Torah and doing Mitzvos. It is time to "limit the wine."

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
