

## “These waters that cause curse shall enter your innards to cause stomach to distend and thigh to collapse!”(5:22)

The *parsha* of *Sotah*, the wayward wife, is certainly tragic. Whenever a marriage is broken up due to moral turpitude, it is a stain on the very fiber of our nation's moral compass. We will not address the sin, but, rather, the punishment. Under normal circumstances, the testimony of a single witness has little to no efficacy. Yet, concerning the *sotah's* infidelity, one witness prohibits her from returning to her husband, since there are *raglayim l'davar*, credible reasons, to believe that the charge against her is true. If we were to put her through the process of the bitter waters, it would determine unequivocally the nature of her relationship with this man. We could, thus, allow her to remain at home until the bitter water test. Why should one witness prevent the test of the bitter waters from occurring?

Second, the punishment meted out to a woman who has committed adultery is *chenek*, choking. This punishment is considered to be one of the least painful methods of execution. Dead is dead, and execution is a tragedy, regardless of the circumstances, but our Torah demands that we seek out the most humane, least painful, method of punishment. Why does the *sotah* receive such an “outrageous,” excruciatingly painful death, which affects every part of her body? It is not only her belly which explodes; every part of her body expands and violently breaks apart.

Third, the Torah commands us to erase *parshas sotah* and mix the ink with the water. This means erasing Hashem's Holy Name a number of times. True, there is a powerful message conveyed by this erasure: Hashem's willingness to have His Name erased in order to engender marital harmony between husband and wife. Could this lesson not have been conveyed without erasing Hashem's Name? Parts of *parashas sotah* could have been erased; why specifically Hashem's Name?

Everything about the punishment which the *sotah* received is unusual. Why is this? **Horav Ben Tzion Firer, zl**, quotes the *Talmud Kiddushin* 31, “Someone who sins in secret, pushes, as it were, the ‘feet’ of the Divine Presence.” When one sins in a concealed place, apparently attempting to escape Hashem's attention, it is considered as if he is trying to make the Divine Presence “smaller” by “pushing” it out of place. In other words, one who commits a sin in secret is carrying out a transgression that borders on heresy.

Since the sin committed in secrecy is so egregious, its punishment must fit the crime, and likewise be of a powerful nature. Drinking the bitter waters in public reveals her shame as it declares to all that this woman committed an *aveirah b'seitar*, sin in secrecy. Thus, she receives the terrible punishment. If there is even one witness, however, who attests to her moral bankruptcy and deviation from her marriage commitment, then it is no longer a secret sin. Someone saw; someone told; the secret has been made public. She no longer receives the bitter punishment. This is why Hashem's Name is erased. We are thereby being told that one who commits a sin in secrecy is

erasing Hashem's Name.

Having said this, we wonder what is considered a sin in secrecy. Using the *sotah* as an example, I would think that, whenever one puts on a show of righteousness, while simultaneously acting evil, he is no different than the *sotah*. Any sin which places shame from people over shame from Hashem is such an example. Those who seek to maintain their "sterling" reputation, despite being involved in the most heinous crimes, commit a sin in secrecy. They are more concerned with what people will say than what G-d will say. That is the definition of *docheik raglei haShechinah*, "pushing" the "feet" of Hashem.