

The Kohen shall take sacred water in an earthenware vessel, and the Kohen shall take from the earth that is on the floor of the Mishkan and put it in the water. (5:17)

The “bitter waters,” which the *sotah*, wayward wife, must drink, are the instrument of an ordeal which can have either negative or positive results. On the negative side, if the woman has, as accused, been involved in an extra-marital relationship, she will die a bitter death. On the positive side, if she has been wrongly accused, she stands to benefit considerably. She will be blessed with healthy children. The process begins with the *Kohen* reading the curses contained in *Parashas Sotah* on a piece of parchment. The verses of the Torah in which these curses are written are then erased with the dried ink which forms the words including Hashem’s Name, erased and mixed with water from the holy *Kiyor*, Laver. These bitter waters are given to the *Sotah* to drink. The waters then determine whether she has sinned or not.

In the *Talmud Sotah* 17A, *Chazal* teach that the *Sotah* waters and the accompanying dust/earth to which the guilty *sotah* succumbs, were actually a reward given to Avraham *Avinu* (to be used by his descendants), as a result of his exceptional humility. Avraham declared, *V’ani afar va’eifar*, “I am but dust and ashes” (*Bereishis* 18:29), symbolizing his utter nothingness. *Rashi* explains that our Patriarch was acutely aware that his very existence was a gift from G-d. When he fought in the War of the Four Kings, his life miraculously was spared. Likewise, when Nimrod threw him into a fiery furnace, he emerged whole and unscathed, once again, as a result of Hashem’s kindness. For acknowledging Hashem’s benevolence to him during these two instances, he merited two special *mitzvos*, which are vehicles for glorifying Hashem’s Name. How is the dust of the *sotah* related to Avraham’s declaration comparing himself to dust?

Horav Avraham Pam, zl, quoted by Rabbi Sholom Smith in his collection of the *Rosh Yeshivah’s* Torah thoughts, says that the dust of the *sotah*, mixed with the water which comes from the floor of the *Bais Hamikdash*, is a vehicle for promoting peace and harmony between husband and wife, in a home plagued by discord, resulting from suspicion and bitterness. Marriages do not just “break up.” There are underlying reasons, most often connected with damaged egos and egos, which need to be stroked. Little people require greater assuaging, more attention; bigger people, secure in their skin, require less. The Torah teaches us that, in order to promote and preserve harmony in a home, it is permissible to erase Hashem’s Name, because, in a home disrupted by contention, broken by controversy, destroyed by constant dispute, Hashem’s Name no longer reigns. True humility of both husband and wife will circumvent the issues, which tear apart a relationship.

The relationship between husband and wife – if it is to remain harmonious – must be a giving relationship, whereby each spouse thinks of the other one, rather than of himself or herself. *Shalom bayis* is most often disturbed when a husband or wife must get his or her way without regard for the other. Then there are the complaints in which the most minor infraction or shortcomings are blown out of proportion. It is all about the ego of the individual; a small rift; a tiny tear in the relationship,

becomes a large rip when his ego comes into play.

Avraham *Avinu* realized that, if not for the grace of G-d, he would be dust or ashes. Life is so fragile. Ask anyone who has been sick or who has had a spouse who has been ill. Is it worth getting upset over minor issues, which are, for the most part, foolish? When one takes a moment to reflect upon the “dust and ashes” of the *sotah*, a person will develop a sense of humility that will enhance his *shalom bayis*.