

## **But if the woman had not become defiled and she is pure, then she shall be proven innocent and she shall bear seed. (5:28)**

Unquestionably, the suspected *sotah* had gone through a harrowing ordeal. At the end, her claims of innocence were miraculously proven correct. She had not committed adultery. As a result, she will be blessed. *Chazal* (*Sotah* 26a) teach that she will bear children more easily. If she had heretofore suffered difficult labor, she will now experience an easy birth. If her babies had been dark-skinned, they will now be fair. If she had previously been barren, Hashem will give her a child to compensate for her ordeal. A wonderful reward for what? This woman had acted in a manner that provoked her husband to warn her to distance herself from a certain man. She ignored her husband and continued her relationship. She went so far as to meet with him in a secluded place. Certainly, they were not together to discuss Torah and *mitzvos*. Why should such a loose woman be rewarded? At the end of the day, she had acted inappropriately for a Jewish woman.

*Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl*, quotes *Chazal* (*Makkos* 23b), "One who sits and refrains from doing an *aveirah*, sin, is given a reward like one who performs a *mitzvah*." The *Talmud* (*Kiddushin* 39b) states that this rule applies only when the opportunity for sinning presents itself, yet the person resists the temptation to sin. *Rashi* explains that controlling one's *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, is in and of itself one of the greatest *mitzvos*. Bearing this in mind, we must take into consideration that this woman had the opportunity to sin. Indeed, she was there, and she could have transgressed; yet, she restrained herself and did not. Hashem rewards everyone for the good that he does – regardless of the circumstances. Indeed, this woman had been acting licentiously by meeting with her paramour, but, in the end, she did not act it out. For this, she deserves reward.

The *Chasam Sofer* explains that she went through a humiliating ordeal. She was suspected of the worst behavior and publicly excoriated. The shame was great, but also expiating; shame atones. *Horav Chaim Vital, zl*, cites (*Shaar HaGilgulim*, preface 36) the *Zohar Hakadosh* that states that Rabbi Yirmiyah earned a higher position of repose in *Gan Eden*. (He presents the questions in the Heavenly *Yeshivah*.) *Rav Chaim* writes that he heard from his *Rebbe*, the *Arizal*, that when he was in *yeshivah*, he would pepper the speaker with a multitude of questions. He never let the lesson conclude until he was completely satisfied and all his questions resolved. It reached a point that he was removed from the *bais hamedrash*. As a result of his humiliation before all the sages, he was rewarded to be the only who can raise his voice in question during the *shiur* in the *Mesivta d'Rakia*, Heavenly *Yeshivah*. This is the reward one receives for accepting shame and not responding (by flying off the handle).

The *Chafetz Chaim* once walked down the steps of his house not taking notice of a fruit peel that was in his path. He slipped and fell down all the stairs. A group of cynical students, who were clueless as to the identity of the elderly Jew who had fallen down the stairs, made jest of him tumbling down the stairs. The sage was overjoyed.

Indeed, he entered the *bais hamedrash* atypically in an extremely jovial mood. When queried concerning his unusual mood, he replied, “Everyone pays honor to me. I am never humiliated. What will I do about my ‘many’ sins? What will expiate them? *Bushah*, embarrassment, is one of the greatest and most effective atonements. Now, I have been cleansed. Should I not be happy?”

Humiliation has an extraordinary power behind it, allowing for one who has been humiliated to confer his/her blessing on someone in need – and achieve singular efficacy. The following story underscores this idea. It was an evening dedicated to *chizuk*, strengthening, for women, covering the gamut of areas from emotional stress to spiritual ascendancy, with presentations rendered by well-known gifted speakers. The lead speaker was an accomplished *mechaneches*, educator, who was both a knowledgeable and captivating speaker. She ascended to the lectern and patiently waited for the women to get settled, so that she could begin her talk.

Suddenly, a tall, thickset woman, whose wild eyes were filled with anger, came up to the lectern and began to berate the would-be speaker, “Years ago, you humiliated me in public. My life has been a miserable failure since that day. I will never get over the shame that you brought upon me. You are a murderer! You destroyed my life!” She yelled all this in the presence of hundreds of women.

The speaker calmly responded, “I am sorry that you feel this way, but I have no idea who you are. I do not remember ever meeting you and certainly not putting you to shame.”

The attacker refused to be placated, “I remember vividly the day that you ruined my life. You will not get away with it. I want everyone to know what kind of evil person you are.” With these words, she grabbed the microphone from the speaker and screamed, “It is forbidden to listen to this woman. She murdered me by ruining my life. Her public humiliation of me destroyed whatever self-esteem I had. Look at me! She is responsible for the way I look!”

By this time, one of the hostesses who had arranged the evening approached the angry woman and attempted to calm her down – to no avail. This woman was in serious pain, and she was not leaving. She pushed the woman away and continued with her harangue. The assemblage was torn. On the one hand, the speaker was a distinguished, accomplished woman, who had reached out and helped many. On the other hand, the woman who was hurt came across as very angry, but otherwise sincere.

The speaker appeared devastated. She had just been publicly excoriated, humiliated, raked across the coals. She broke down in tears. Suddenly, she looked up and asked, “Please get Rachel.” The organizers called for Rachel, who, after a few minutes, walked up to the podium, “Rachel, you do not know me, but I am a good friend of your mother. Actually, we grew up together. I would like you to know that, during this moment of my travail, when I have sustained a terrible humiliation and did not respond, I am granted the power of efficacious blessing. I know that you have yet to be blessed with a child. In the merit of the travail that I have just experienced and my lack of response to the

baseless degradation that was hurled at me, may Hashem bless you with a child. *Ana Hashem*, please Hashem, may my shame be a *zechus*, merit, for Rachel *bas...*”

The woman's actions stunned all those within hearing distance. Whoever was privy to what had just taken place was flabbergasted. They had never seen such magnanimity.

During these few moments, the accuser stood quietly. One of the woman organizers asked her, “Do you know the name of the speaker?” (She felt that the speaker might be the victim of mistaken identity.) “I do not know what her married name is today, but when I knew her, her last name was Cohen,” she replied. When the organizer heard this, she took the microphone and declared for all to hear, “Our speaker's maiden name was Chain – not Cohen. She must have a strong likeness to the woman who humiliated this woman years ago.” When she heard this, the accuser thought for a moment and said, “I guess I made a mistake.” She neither apologized nor sought to make amends. She just walked off the stage and ignored everyone staring at her. Clearly, she has been the victim of serious emotional trauma which had left her slightly unhinged.

The entire room broke into an uproar over the extraordinary act of *chesed* which the speaker evinced. She maintained her cool; not only did she not lose it, but she had the presence of mind to realize that, at this moment, her humiliation could be used to help a woman in need. One year later, Rachel *bas...* gave birth to a healthy child.