



[torahsparks@uscj.org](mailto:torahsparks@uscj.org)

The weekly Haftarah Commentary  
By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Senior CY Faculty in Talmud and Midrash,  
may be found at: <http://www.uscj.org.il/learn/commentaries/>

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**The Shirley & Jacob Fuchsberg Center For Conservative Judaism**

8 Agron Street, P.O. Box 7456, Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 Fax: 972-2-623-4127

[Israel@uscj.org](mailto:Israel@uscj.org) • [www.uscj.org/Israel/](http://www.uscj.org/Israel/)



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## TORAH SPARKS

### Parashat Naso

May 28 - June 3, 2017 • 9 Sivan 5777

Annual (Numbers 4:21-7:89): Etz Hayim p. 791-811; Hertz p. 586-601

Triennial (Numbers 4:21-5:10): Etz Hayim p. 791-795; Hertz p. 586-589

Haftarah (Judges 13:2-25): Etz Hayim p. 812-815; Hertz p. 602-604

## Sotah - Oppression or Empowerment?

**Rabbi Shoshana Cohen**, Faculty, Conservative Yeshiva (Talmud and Midrash)

Parshat Naso contains the famous law of the Sotah (Num. 5:11-31), the woman who is suspected by her husband of having committed adultery. In such a case her husband can bring her to the priest (*kohen*) and she will be forced to drink a strange concoction of water, dirt from the Tabernacle floor and curses containing God's name ground into little pieces, known as the "bitter waters" (*mei ha-marim*).

Once the woman drinks this potion there are two options: If she is guilty "the water that causes the curse will enter into her and become bitter, and her belly will swell, and her thigh will fall away; and the woman shall be a curse among her people." If she is innocent "then she shall be cleared, and will conceive seed" (vs. 27-28).

Throughout the passage about the Sotah it is the man, or rather the men, who are in control. The husband may be overwhelmed by an unfounded *ruach kina*, "spirit of jealousy," yet he may still force his innocent wife to go through the ordeal. At this point her body essentially comes under the jurisdiction of another man, the priest. The fact that an innocent woman

could be forced to go through such a trying and humiliating ritual just because her husband is suspicious is problematic, to say the least. This may be one of the reasons why, according to many scholars, the ritual was likely never actually performed. In any event, part of what stands out to us as modern readers of the text is the utter powerlessness of the woman here.

Fascinatingly the rabbis in the Talmud tell how an important Biblical figure used this ritual as a mode of empowerment and strength. In Brachot 31 Hannah is presented as a model of prayer, from whom many important laws are learned, yet their close reading of I Samuel 1:17 portrays her as challenging God for the lot He has dealt her, particularly her being barren. R. Eleazar interpreted the words *im ra'oh tireh* (v. 11) – “if You will surely look” (lit, “look, look!!”):

“Hannah said before the Holy One, blessed be He: *If You will look*, it is well; and *if You will not look*, I will go and shut myself up with someone else in the knowledge of my husband Elkanah, and as I shall have been alone they will make me drink the water of the suspected wife, and You cannot falsify Your law, which says, ‘She shall be cleared and shall conceive seed.’”

In this Talmudic passage Hannah uses this apparently oppressive law to her advantage, as a tool of her own liberation (or at least to help her get what she so wants, a child). In doing so Hannah is revealed to be a *talmidat hachamim*, a Torah scholar, not only because she knows the law but also because she knows how to manipulate it to her advantage. Hannah’s technique is one often used by less powerful people in attempt to get control of their own situation, using the tools of oppression to attempt to secure liberation.

What we do with difficult texts in our tradition is matter of choice. We can choose to use them to further oppression or we can use them to overcome oppression and facilitate empowerment. Perhaps it would be better if we used Hannah as our guide.

## A Vort for Parashat Naso

**Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty**

Chapter 7, the longest in the Torah (89 verses) tells of the gifts of the tribal chieftains to the Tabernacle – identical gifts, one leader each day, for twelve days. The Midrash says that none of the chiefs tried to “outdo” those who came before and that their communal spirit earned Divine pleasure. The *RaLBaG*, R’ Levi ben Gershon (1288–1344, Provence, a philosopher, Talmudist, mathematician, physician and astronomer) explained that the extensive repetition comes to applaud the chieftains’ behavior. In following the agreed practice and not trying to stand out or promote himself, each was worthy of having his gift described in detail.

## Table Talk

**Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty**

*We are approaching the end of the material regarding the Tabernacle, holiness and purity (the “Holiness Code”) concluding with the inauguration of the Tabernacle, Chanukat Hamizbe’ach as the Torah calls it.*

- 1) Several groups of people may not stay within the camp (5:1-4). What do they have in common? Why may they not stay? Are these permanent issues?
- 2) A person who takes a nazirite oath has to allow his or her hair to grow wild (6:5, 13-20). What happens to the hair at the end of the nazirite period? Why do you think that the Torah focuses on a person's hair?
- 3) In the first days of the Tabernacle the leaders bring sacrifices and gifts. Among the gifts are wagons and oxen (7:1-9). What will they be used for? Who is not allowed to use them (4:16 may help)? Why? Why do you think that these things may not be carried by wagons?
- 4) How long did all the gift-bringing take (chapter 7, especially v.78)? Why do you think that each leader brought on a separate day rather than have everyone come together?
- 5) Why is a list of all the gifts given at the end (7:84-88)? Do you remember another place in which Moshe gave an accounting of materials (check Ex. 38:24-31)? Do you think that the reasons similar or different?