



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת תזריע-מצורע תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Tazria-Metzora

JUST DESSERTS

There exists a detailed procedure for determining the guilt or innocence of a married woman whose indiscretions have aroused suspicion. The Torah mandates that the suspect (known as a *sotah*) must drink a certain concoction referred to as “bitter waters.” If innocent, she is showered with blessing, but if guilty, a horrible and degrading death is visited upon her (*Bamidbar 5:11-31*).

Following the principle of *middah k'neged middah*, the Mishnah in Sotah (*1:7*) demonstrates how each stage of the procedure and punishment is precisely calculated to repay her, “measure for measure”:

היא קשטה את עצמה לעברה, המקום נגלה. היא גלתה את עצמה לעברה, המקום גלה עליה...

“She adorned herself for sinful purposes, therefore Hashem caused her to become repulsive. She conducted herself in a publicly immodest fashion, so Hashem brought calamity upon her in full view of the populace (she must undergo her ordeal in the Temple arena [*Bartenura*]...)”

The *haftarah* to this week’s *parshah* (from *Melachim II, ch. 6*) contains a dramatic narrative, relating the events surrounding the siege by the Aramean nation. We shall see how the above idea unfolds in this story in a most fascinating way:

QUICK NAVI SHIUR (LESSON IN THE PROPHETS)

A terrible famine had descended upon the besieged Israelites, punctuated by a tremendous spike in food prices for the most meager of provisions. So acute was their suffering that King Yehoram swore that Elisha the prophet would be put to death. The

king held him responsible for the situation, believing that Elisha could have prevented the calamitous situation by intervening through prayer.

When the entourage arrived at Elisha’s house to carry out the sentence, it seems that the king had a change of heart. At that point, Elisha prophetically declared that the famine would end, and the price of even fine flour would fall considerably. One of the king’s officers expressed his skepticism of the fulfillment of this prophecy, questioning how such a thing could possibly occur. Elisha immediately replied with a stunning rebuke: “Behold, you will witness it with your eyes but will be unable to partake,” (*ibid*, v. 2).

Shortly thereafter, a group of lepers decided to “try their luck” by visiting the Aramean camp. Reasoning that they themselves were doomed anyway, they figured they had nothing to lose.

Upon arriving at the camp, they were shocked at their find: the camp had been completely abandoned! The Arameans had apparently fled for some unknown reason, and they had left behind a camp fully stocked with provisions and spoils!

The lepers related the news to the king of Yisrael, who dispatched an investigation. The lepers’ story was verified: Hashem had wrought a miracle, causing the Arameans to hear the sound of a huge, approaching army (when, in fact, there was none). Scared out of their wits, the Arameans hightailed it out of there, and the siege was lifted.

When the news of this windfall reached the starving people of Yisrael, they stormed the camp and helped themselves to the bounty. As Elisha had prophesied, the price of food dropped dramatically.

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The second part of Elisha's prediction was fulfilled, as well. The skeptical officer had been stationed by the gate when the people began their stampede. He witnessed the incredible turnaround and the end of the famine – but was trampled to death in the process.

MEASURE FOR MEASURE

The *middah k'neged middah* aspect of the officer's fate is apparent. He did not believe in Elisha's prophecy that food would once again become plentiful; hence, he did not partake.

R' Zalman Sorotzkin (*Oznaim LaTorah, haftarah to parshas Metzora*) wonders, however, why it was necessary for the doubting officer to be punished so harshly – with death. *Middah k'neged middah*, as we have seen, is measured out very precisely. He certainly deserved to be deprived of sharing in the plenty; couldn't this have been accomplished in some other way than actually having to lose his life?

It must be – concludes R' Zalman – that this official's crime went far beyond merely distrusting the *navi*. Rather, his initial response expressing skepticism was actually calculated and sinister. Recall that the king had originally planned to execute Elisha. Upon arriving at Elisha's house, he had a change of heart. The officer, however, was not keen on allowing Elisha to live. He therefore attempted to diffuse the king's new, contrite spirit by casting doubt on Elisha's prophecy.

And so we see the punishment fitting the crimes with an amazing exactitude. For his lack of belief in the prophecy of plenty, the officer was indeed denied the opportunity to share in the blessing. And for his malicious and murderous design, he himself was killed.

Perhaps we can complete this *middah k'neged middah* picture based on the comments of the Ralbag. It seems that the king was not taken by

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surprise when his chief officer met his fate. On the contrary; he helped orchestrate it. The Ralbag contends that this servant of King Yehoram actually lost favor in the king's eyes when he made his disparaging comments to Elisha. As a result, King Yehoram purposely assisted in ensuring that the retribution promised by Elisha would materialize. He specifically placed his subordinate in a situation where he would most likely come to harm. The king reckoned that by stationing his officer by the "floodgates," the crowds would overwhelm him.

And so, like the *sotah*, every aspect of the offender's retribution was meted out with precision. As R' Zalman explained, the officer attempted to enjoin the king to kill Elisha. In the end, the king "conspired" with Elisha to be rid of the officer.

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