

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Hinda *bas* Hershel *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Under the Influence

NASSO – 5775

This week's *parshah* juxtaposes two divergent sections which seem, at first glance, to have little relation to each other: Sotah and Nazir. In the first (*Bamidbar* 5:11-31), the Torah discusses the procedure of the wayward wife, whose faithfulness is suspect. She goes through a lengthy ordeal that entails the husband bringing her to the Mikdash (Sanctuary) and culminates with her drinking the "bitter waters." If she is indeed guilty, the waters inflict upon her a horrible death. In the following section (*ibid.* 6:1-21), the Torah turns its attention towards delineating the laws of the Nazir, the individual who takes a vow of abstinence from such items as grape products and haircutting.

Chazal enlighten us that there is, in fact, a common thread. This is alluded to in the Mishnah (*Sotah* 1:4), which discusses the content of the opening remarks delivered by *beis din* (the judicial court) to the suspected adulteress:

היו מעלין אותה לבית דין הגדול שבירושלים, ומאמין עליה... ואומרים לה, בתי הרבה יין עושה...

"They would bring her up to the Great Beis Din, which was located in Yerushalayim, and would remonstrate her... saying to her: 'My daughter, wine can result in numerous improprieties...'"

This theme is picked up by the Gemara (*Sotah* 2a), which explicitly draws the connection between these two sections: "Why is the section of the Nazir adjacent to the section of the Sotah? To tell you that whoever witnesses the Sotah in her state of degradation should abstain from wine in the manner of the Nazir." With the effects of irresponsible imbibing on full display, it would be most prudent to derive the proper lessons and restrict one's access to this pernicious agent (*cf.* Rashi to Nazir 2a, s.v. "*Tanna*").

Many commentators, however, are somewhat baffled by this directive. The implication of the above teaching is that the spectacle of the Sotah's demise demands that the onlookers take precautionary measures; they must do something drastic to ensure that they don't follow her example and meet a similar fate (the paramour is also stricken through the guilty Sotah's drinking of the water [*Sotah* 27b]). But why, indeed, is this necessary? In fact, the whole notion seems somewhat counterintuitive. They have just witnessed the ordeal of the Sotah – which, put simply, was quite gruesome. She was humiliated and degraded; her ornaments were removed, and she was clothed in black; her face turned green, her eyes bulged, her veins protruded, her belly swelled and her thigh exploded (*cf.* *Bamidbar* 5:27; *Sotah* 7a, 20a). Who, pray tell, after seeing this, would be tempted to follow suit? "Whoever witnesses the Sotah in her state of degradation should abstain himself from wine in the manner of the Nazir"? Why bother? On the contrary, simply seeing the Sotah's demise should itself serve as the greatest deterrent for unseemly behavior. Why, then, do Chazal imply that those who observe the proceedings must take added measures (the Nazirite vow) to ensure that they don't mimic her ways?

The Connoisseur

To shed light on this issue, R' Yosef Leib Bloch cited the following well-known anecdote:

A certain individual, a notorious alcoholic, caused his family great concern. They tried and coaxed and urged and cajoled, but to no avail.

One day it happened that a crowd gathered around an unseemly spectacle. A different man was overcome with such severe drunkenness that he lost all sense of shame. Thus he collapsed on the ground in full view, wallowing in a puddle of his own drool and vomit. The onlookers were obviously appalled by the scene, but the family of the original alcoholic saw this as a potential windfall. They ran to summon their relative, bringing him to view the abhorrent sight. They hoped that he would be so put off by the public degradation of this reprobate that it would make a forceful impression. Perhaps this would be the event to finally awaken their relative to change his ways.

But any hopes that were aroused were soon put to rest. Upon encountering the scene, their relative indeed seemed to take notice. He approached the supine drunkard, leaned over and asked him a question.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I sure would like to know what did this to you. Can you tell me where I can get some?”

Cooling Off

Such is the potency of sin, explained R' Yosef Leib. Despite the horror of the consequences, the effects a transgression can have on a witness can be deceptively powerful. A person may be aware of the pitfalls of sin and may even appreciate its severity. And, of course, beholding the grisly consequences can give one pause. At the same time, however, there exists another danger, one that may exert a greater influence over the beholder than the fear of punishment: that is, the mere fact that a transgression was perpetrated. The commission of a sin – and its subsequent revelation to the public – asserts an immediate effect. A person sees that the deed can be done, and so its severity, in the public's eye, is somewhat diminished.

R' Eliyahu Meir Bloch (son of R' Yosef Leib) relates the example of Amalek to illustrate this point. Chazal (*Medrash Tanchuma* §9) compare Amalek's initial attack on Yisrael to a man who jumps into a bathtub filled with scalding water. He may burn himself; but through his action, the water attains a measure of coolness. Originally, the nations were too afraid to start up with the people on whose account the Egyptians were decimated. That is, until Amalek took the initiative and fought against B'nei Yisrael. Although Amalek lost the battle, the damage was done, and the fear of Yisrael was broken. In a similar sense, when a person commits an *aveirah* (sin), he has effectively reduced the “taboo” in the eyes of the onlookers (*Peninim Mishulchan Gavohah, Bamidbar 6:2*).

The truth is, however, that the matter goes even deeper. That is, committing a sin does not carry a mere *indirect* effect, causing those with knowledge of the act to be less inhibited by the prospect of transgression. Rather – as we shall see in the coming weeks, *b'ezras Hashem* – when an *aveirah* is perpetrated, the effects on the environs are swift, direct and more powerful than we may imagine.