

Tasting Life's Bitter Waters¹

You are married, or intensely committed to a vision, a goal, a dream. You are devoted to this goal because you know it will make the world a better place. You believe that regardless of the effort, this vision will ultimately make your life more fulfilling, more altruistic, loftier.

Then along comes life, and with it, the ups and downs, the challenges and the obstacles.

At some point you find that you have swerved from your path, strayed from your values. It might have been restlessness or boredom with the monotony of the day-to-day minutiae. Or perhaps it was a spirit of impulsiveness, a rebellion against the curves that life has thrown you.

Maybe you can be blamed for losing your vision and forgoing your ideals. Or maybe you couldn't ever have been expected to rise higher.

Whatever the case, you wake up one morning to the realization that you have changed. You are no longer leading the life that you had always believed you would. You have strayed from your moral vision. You have betrayed your dream.

You may ask yourself: Is there a path of return? Do I want to take it? Are the costs too high? Is it worth the effort? If I do change paths now, what will be the end result? Will I ever fully succeed?

Common wisdom, laced with its jaded cynicism, says there's no turning back the clock. Move on with life, leave your childish idealism behind, and face the reality of adulthood. Life is not a bed of roses. The path of sacrifice is not where you will find fulfillment. And anyway, once you have already veered off the path, it can never be the same. It's simply too late.

Torah wisdom, of course, asserts the opposite.

The *ishah sotah* is the "wayward wife" who is suspected of adultery.

Moralists see the story of the *ishah sotah* as expressing the sanctity and holiness of marriage in Judaism.

Others see G-d's willingness to erase His holy name for the sake of marital harmony as an indication of the importance of peace between man and wife and among mankind in general.

Kabbalists see the story as a cosmic metaphor of the "marriage" between G-d and the "wayward" Jewish people, who are tested and eventually exonerated through the "bitter waters" of exile.

But perhaps we can also see, in the story of the *sotah*, **a promising lesson for each of us in the personal sojourns of our lives.**

Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: Should any man's wife go astray and deal treacherously with him, and a man lie with her carnally, but it was hidden from her husband's eyes, but she was secluded [with the suspected adulterer] and **there was no witness against her** ...—NUMBERS 5:12-13

The *ishah sotah* is labeled a wayward wife because she has "strayed," deviated from the prescribed moral road, even if she has not been implicated in actual adultery. Her husband has warned her in the presence of witnesses not to seclude herself with her suspected lover. She has disregarded this warning.

At this point, the husband or the wife can decide to terminate the marriage, without any admittance of guilt. Neither the husband nor the wife can be forced to have the test of the bitter waters. (Sotah 6a) **Furthermore, the "bitter waters" test will not work if the husband has been unfaithful or had sinned in the laws of sexual purity at any point in time.** (Sotah 47b, Yevamot 58a)

But should they wish to resume their marriage, the suspecting husband brings his wife to the Holy Temple, where the kohen enacts the ceremony of the bitter waters. **The husband then brings an offering for his wife, making it clear that he wishes to continue the marriage should his wife be vindicated.**

The offering consists of unsifted, coarse barley flour, the commonest grain, without the oil or incense that accompanies other grain offerings. It is a question here of simple existence, whether the marriage will or will not continue. An animal food-barley is brought to signify the wife's questionable moral standing: even if her guilt has not reached the point of actual adultery, she has veered from the path and followed her animalistic instincts.

The kohen shall take holy water in an earthen vessel and some earth from the floor of the Mishkan, the kohen shall take and put into the water. Then the kohen shall stand the woman up before the L-RD, and uncover the [hair on the] head of the woman ...—NUMBERS 5:17-18

This uncovering of her hair is against the propriety of the married Jewish woman, just as the *ishah sotah* has gone against the moral standards of modesty. From this verse is derived (Ketubot 72a) that **it is improper for a married woman to be seen publicly with her hair uncovered.**

¹ Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights, Vayikra/Bamidbar/Devraim*, (Chabad.org), pp. 97-102.

He shall then give the bitter, curse-bearing waters to the woman to drink, and the curse-bearing waters shall enter her to become bitter.—

NUMBERS 5:24

Relevant passages from the Torah were written on a scroll and dissolved in the "curse-bearing waters." The name of G-d appeared in these passages, and in the process it would be erased. If the woman was guilty of actual adultery, the waters would cause her an accursed death. The man with whom the *ishah sotah* committed adultery would have the same consequences of an accursed death at the time when she drank these waters. (Sotah 28a)

If she was not found guilty, she would be blessed with offspring, and her marriage would enjoy a newfound commitment and happiness. If she had been childless until now, she became fruitful; if her pregnancies were difficult, they now became easy; and so on. (Sotah 26a)

Since the *ishah sotah* had strayed from the proper path—even if she had not actually committed adultery—I have always wondered, why was she blessed so abundantly?

But **perhaps this is the crux of the lesson for each of us.**

Because in truth, the *ishah sotah*, like each of us struggling with the vicissitudes of our lives, **has never really entirely strayed.** We are still "married" to our ideals and vision, since they are so much a part of our soul. We simply need to be reunited with our true, inner self.

Like the *ishah sotah* on her path of exoneration and return, this takes effort. It takes strength of character. It might involve humiliation or sacrifice. But if our resolve is firm, if we persevere in what we know is true and right, ultimately we will succeed.

G-d stands at our side. Once we have demonstrated our commitment, He will defend us, even allowing His own name and honor to be "erased" while assisting us in our endeavor.

Moreover, not only will we succeed at realigning our life to what it was originally, but our commitment and the fruits of our commitment will be more productive and more blessed, leading to greater yields and to a more mature relationship with ourselves and with our world.

Because we haven't just returned to what we were. We have grown through the process.

True growth is not about only persevering on one straight path. Only after tasting of the bitter waters of life, only after struggling and stumbling and standing up against the darker forces, do we become a greater, more courageous, and enriched human being.

Only after straying and then rebounding are we driven with a stronger yearning for inner unity and divine life. Only after experiencing the darkness of life's night and the desolation of its winters do we attain an even more intense and meaningful bond with G-d.

The lesson of the *ishah sotah* to each of us, man or woman, is that though our path may be a difficult and twisted one, when we victoriously face down the wearying struggles and tempting choices, we emerge as greater individuals, and as a redeemed people, in a redeemed world.

1. *Common wisdom, laced with its jaded cynicism, says there's no turning back the clock. Move on with life, leave your childish idealism behind, and face the reality of adulthood. Life is not a bed of roses. The path of sacrifice is not where you will find fulfillment. And anyway, once you have already veered off the path, it can never be the same. It's simply too late—Torah wisdom, of course, asserts the opposite.*

a. Isaiah 44:21-22

²¹"Remember these things, Jacob, for you, Israel, are my servant. I have made you, you are my servant; Israel, **I will not forget you.** ²²I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. **Return to me,** for I have redeemed you."

b. Luke 15:11-24

¹¹Yeshua continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. ¹³"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. ¹⁷"**When he came to his senses,** he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰So he got up and went to his father. "But **while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.** ²¹"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²²"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a

ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.

c. Matthew 21:28-32

²⁸"What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' ²⁹"**I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.**

³⁰"Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. ³¹"Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Yeshua said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. ³²For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

d. Song of Songs Rabbah 5:2

According to R. Yose, the Holy One said to Israel: **My children, open to Me in penitence an opening as small as the eye of a needle, and I shall make an opening in Me for you so wide that through it wagons and coaches could enter.**

2. Numbers 5:12-13

¹²*Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: Should any man's wife go astray and deal treacherously with him, ¹³and a man lie with her carnally, but it was hidden from her husband's eyes, but she was secluded [with the suspected adulterer] and **there was no witness against her ...***

a. Deuteronomy 17:2-7 (cf. Deu 19:15)

²If a man or woman living among you in one of the towns the LORD gives you is found doing evil in the eyes of the LORD your God in violation of his covenant, ³and contrary to my command has worshiped other gods, bowing down to them or to the sun or the moon or the stars in the sky, ⁴and this has been brought to your attention, then you must investigate it thoroughly. If it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done in Israel, ⁵take the man or woman who has done this evil deed to your city gate and stone that person to death. ⁶**On the testimony of two or three witnesses a person is to be put to death, but no one is to be put to death on the testimony of only one witness.** ⁷The hands of the witnesses must be the first in putting that person to death, and then the hands of all the people. You must purge the evil from among you.

b. Matthew 18:15-17

¹⁵"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. ¹⁶But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that **'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses'** (Deu 19:15). ¹⁷If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the *k'hilah*; and if they refuse to listen even to the *k'hilah*, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector ...

1) A "sin" here is not something that offends one's sensibilities, or "flies in the face" of one's doctrinal views—it is a violation of a Torah instruction, i.e., something that violates what the Torah either requires or prohibits. Obviously, it requires a thorough knowledge of Torah instructions.

c. 2Corinthians 13:1-3

¹This will be my third visit to you. **"Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses"** (Deu 19:15). ²I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, ³since you are demanding proof that Messiah is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.

d. 1Timothy 5:19

¹⁹Do not entertain an accusation against an elder **unless it is brought by two or three witnesses** (Deu 19:15).

e. John 8:2-11

²At dawn Yeshua appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman **caught in adultery**. They made her stand before the group ⁴and said to Yeshua, "Teacher, **this woman was caught in the act of adultery**." ⁵In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" ⁶**They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.** But Yeshua bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ⁸Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Yeshua was left, with the woman still standing there. ¹⁰Yeshua straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" ¹¹"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Yeshua declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

1) Leviticus 20:10

¹⁰"If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—**both the adulterer and the adulteress are to be put to death.**

3. *This uncovering of her hair is against the propriety of the married Jewish woman, just as the ishah sotah has gone against the moral standards of modesty. From this verse is derived (Ketubot 72a) that **it is improper for a married woman to be seen publicly with her hair uncovered.***

a. 1Corinthians 11:5-6 (CJB)

... ⁵but **every woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled brings shame to her head**—there is no difference between her and a woman who has had her head shaved. ⁶For if a woman is not veiled, let her also have her hair cut short; but if it is shameful for a woman to wear her hair cut short or to have her head shaved, then let her be veiled.

4. *... when we victoriously face down the wearying struggles and tempting choices, we emerge as greater individuals, and as a redeemed people, in a redeemed world.*

a. Mark 13:26-37

²⁶At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.

²⁸Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near.

²⁹Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³²But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. ³⁴**It's like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch.** ³⁵**Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn.** ³⁶**If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping.** ³⁷What I say to you, I say to everyone: 'Watch!'

b. Acts 22:6-11 - Paul's "testimony at the Temple Mount

⁶About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' ⁸"Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "'I am Yeshua of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. ¹⁰**What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. "'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.'** ¹¹My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

1) Acts 9:10-18

¹⁰In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord," he answered.

¹¹The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight." ¹³"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! **This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.** ¹⁶**I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.**" ¹⁷Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "**Brother Saul, the Lord—Yeshua, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.**" ¹⁸Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was immersed, ¹⁹and after taking some food, he regained his strength. Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus.

²⁰**At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Yeshua is the Son of God.** ²¹All those who heard him were astonished and asked, "Isn't he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn't he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?" ²²Yet **Saul grew more and more powerful** and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Yeshua is the Messiah.

a) **Why didn't the Lord just heal Saul and "pour-out" His Spirit upon him Himself—because it was Ananias' "assigned" task.**

b) And Paul was a "chosen instrument" (v. 15) too!

c. 1Corinthians 3:5-9

⁵What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as **the Lord has assigned to each his task**. ⁶I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸**The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose**, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹**For we are co-workers in God's service**; you are God's field, God's building.

d. 1Corinthians 7:17-24

¹⁷Nevertheless, **each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them**, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the *k'hilot*. ¹⁸Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. **Keeping God's commands is what counts**. ²⁰Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. ²¹Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—**although if you can gain your freedom, do so**. ²²For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Messiah's slave. ²³You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

e. Acts 14:21-23

²¹(Paul and Barnabas) preached the gospel in (Derbe) and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²²strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. ²³**Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each *k'hilah* and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust**.

f. 1Timothy 4:6-16

⁷Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. ⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come ... ¹⁰That is why **we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God**, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

¹¹**Command and teach these things**. ¹²Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the be-

lievers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. ¹³Until I come, **devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching**. ¹⁴**Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you**. ¹⁵Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. ¹⁶Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.