



BAMIDBAR

Naso

Moment of Insanity: How to Find the Right Mentor

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MOMENT OF INSANITY: HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT MENTOR

ABSTRACT

With so many charlatans, exploiters and just plain people without common sense, how can one find the right mentor?

In what is surely one of its strangest passages, the Torah in this week's reading dedicates an entire section to what are known as the laws of *sotah* – an extensive process used to ascertain and hopefully dispel any suspicions of marital infidelity. And this issue is considered so important that an entire Talmudic tractate is dedicated to the subject!

But why? These laws were already considered inapplicable in the time of the Second Temple two thousand years ago. Which only begs the question: What meaning and relevance could they have for us today?

On the other hand, we know that every word of the Torah is carrying a personal directive. So what can we possibly learn from the laws of *sotah*?

Well ... quite a lot.

For one, the laws of *sotah* capture the real reason behind all human sins and iniquities – temporary insanity, which allows us to stray and wander away from our true calling.

For another, long before our modern therapists, the Torah has provided us with a proven method and criteria for finding a “soul doctor,” who can help us navigate our lives and find balance in an incongruous world.

PART I: THE RELEVANCE OF SOTAH TODAY

1. Moments of Insanity

We all have our moments of insanity. Those times when we do something utterly irrational, and then can hopefully laugh at ourselves.

A drunk walks into a bar, sits down and demands a drink.

“Get out” says the bartender. “I don't serve drunks here.”

The drunk staggers out the front door, only to come back in through the side door. He sits at the bar, bangs his fist and demands a drink.

“I just told you to get out, didn't I? Now LEAVE!”

The drunk gets off his stool, stumbles out the side door and, comes back inside through the back door. Once again, he sits at the bar and loudly asks for a drink.

The bartender, now glowing mad, looks at the drunk and yells “I TOLD YOU, NO DRUNKS ALLOWED, NOW GET OUT!!!”

The drunk looks up at the bartender and slurs “How many bars do you work at, anyway?”

2. Strange Passage

In what is surely one of its strangest passages, the Torah in this week’s reading dedicates an entire section to what are known as the laws of *sotah* – an extensive process used to ascertain and hopefully dispel any suspicions of marital infidelity. And this issue is considered so important that an entire Talmudic tractate is dedicated to the subject!

But why? These laws were already considered inapplicable in the time of the Second Temple two thousand years ago¹. Which only begs the question: What meaning and relevance could they have for us today?

On the other hand, we know that every word of the Torah is carrying a personal directive. So what can we possibly learn from the laws of *sotah*?

Well ... quite a lot.

Indeed, long before our modern therapists, the Torah has provided us with a proven method and criteria for finding a “soul doctor,” who can help us navigate our lives and find balance in an incongruous world.

3. The Torah’s Message

Let us begin to unravel the Torah’s message by reading carefully what it has to tell us here:

If any man’s wife has gone astray ... the man shall bring her to the *kohen*/priest [for a special test] ...

The *kohen* shall take holy water in an earthen vessel, and some earth from the Sanctuary floor, which the kohen shall take and put into the water.

The *kohen* shall station the woman before G-d ... while holding in his hand the bitter lethal waters.²

¹ Mishne, Sotah 47a. Rambam Laws of Sotah 3:19.

² Numbers 5:12, 15-18.

What is going on here?

Well, the first clue is the Hebrew word *sisteb* meaning “gone astray.” This word shares its root with both the word *sotah* (“straying wife”) and *shetus* (“folly” or “insanity”).

Indeed, the Talmud, citing this very verse, explains the relationship between *sisteb* and *shetus*, as follows: “A person does not commit a sin unless a spirit of folly has entered into him.”³

What does this mean?

4. Spirit of Folly

Don't people sin due to temptation or personal gain or due to inability to rein in their desires? Why does the Talmud attribute the transgression to a “spirit of folly” or – in other words – to temporary insanity?

The reasoning behind this is quite compelling:

Normal, healthy people would not sin if they recognized the destructive consequences of their act – just like sane people would never place their hand in fire. By using this word *sisteb*, the Torah is teaching us the core-root of all sin.

The mere fact that we sinned means that for that moment we were blinded by a “spirit of folly” that did not allow us to see that we are “walking into fire.” Interestingly, the word for sin used by the Talmud is *aveirah*, which literally means “misalignment/displacement” (as in *ba'avorah m'reshus l'reshus*, move/displace an object from one property to another). In other words, when we sin, we are momentarily misaligned from our healthy selves, and blinded from seeing the true impact of our behavior.

Thus an *aveirah* (“misalignment/displacement”) is the antithesis of a mitzvah, which comes from the root meaning “connection/bond,” suggesting that every good deed commanded by G-d aligns our behavior with our soul and our essence, while every transgression does the opposite.

5. Understanding Sotah

The laws of *sotah*, then, capture the real reason behind all our human sins and iniquities – temporary insanity which allows us to stray and wander away from our true calling.

This understanding of the *sotah*, answers the question we asked earlier: What is the relevance of this Torah

³ Talmud, Sotah 3a.

reading to our lives today?

All the laws and details in this passage are actually methods, techniques and guidelines for realigning an unfocused life. And could there be anything more relevant to us?

Imagine having before you a time-tested blueprint that guides you how to repair any of your past mistakes ... how to heal from emotional wounds ... how to remedy any form of dissonance you may be experiencing.

Of course, you would want to know it!

That is exactly what the Torah is telling us here, says the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chasidic Movement. *Sotah*, “wife gone astray” on the psycho/spiritual level is not referring to a *literal* husband and wife, but to the soul and body in each one of us. “Going astray” refers to the material body which has the capacity to wander away from its calling and destiny.

6. Dissonance

This “straying” can manifest in many different ways in our lives:

- It can be the dissonance between our own morals and the compromises we feel we need to make at work.
- It can be the struggles between tradition and modernity, faith and reason.
- It can be the overall disparity between spirit and matter – our spiritual and our material lives.

Every one of us strays as a result of our own “spirit of folly,” which causes us stumble and fall.

7. Complicated Challenge

Our challenges can get even more complicated.

G-d placed our souls inside physical bodies that must live and survive in a material universe. In order to survive in this world we need to eat, sleep and engage in other practical activities, including joyous and entertaining ones.

At the same time, we are also expected to dedicate ourselves to more sublime pursuits, which often require some measure of abstinence and discipline (and even fasting, remorse and other forms of penitence).

At times, when we are too indulgent we need to balance that by going into a more restrained and remorseful mode. At other times, we may get demoralized and depressed due to an overabundance of self-denial.

As a result of these two poles tugging at us – immersion in material life on one end of the spectrum, and abstinence on the other – we can end up in a quandary:

Which is the correct path to take in any given situation?⁴ Should I follow the voice of my bodily needs or the voice of my soul?

8. Soul Doctor

What is the solution to all these challenges and quandaries (in whatever form they may take)?

The Torah tells us to approach a *kohen*/priest – or soul doctor, as the great Maimonides calls him.⁵ In other words, when in doubt, the Torah is proscribing finding a trusted mentor (or a rabbi, teacher, or therapist) to help us objectively dissect and determine the correct path to take.

And what does a soul doctor do to resolve the situation?

The Torah passage that we read at the outset said that he “shall take holy water in an earthen vessel.”

As we know, “water” refers to Torah.⁶ And “holy water” refers to the inner dimension of Torah.

Placing the “holy water” of Torah in the “earthen vessel” of our world is the process of explaining the Torah through parables and metaphors – that is, teaching and explaining the Torah’s wise and balanced methods in a manner that is accessible and relevant, and that speaks to the heart of every person.

⁴ The Baal Shem Tov explains that this is also the meaning of the strange uncertainty stated in the Midrash (Bereishis Rabba 2:5): “It was evening – these are the actions of the wicked, it was morning – these are the actions of the righteous. And I don’t know which one I prefer...” Asks the Baal Shem Tov: How could there be a doubt; is there any way that He would prefer the actions of the wicked?! And he explains, that the doubt is not between wicked actions and righteous ones, but rather between the path of the body and the path of the soul, material immersion or asceticism.

⁵ Rambam Hilchos Dayois 2:1. See Bava Basra 116a.

⁶ Bava Kama 17a.

Weighing any problem with the scales of holy wisdom will in turn help heal the person and help him or her determine what path to take and how to achieve balance.

9. The Arrogant Healer

However, there is a trap that must be avoided:

If the soul doctor should become arrogant in the process then his words will not be heeded and his advice will not be effective.

The solution for this is the following phrase in the Torah. In addition to placing the “holy water” in an “earthen vessel,” the soul doctor must also take “some earth from the Sanctuary floor.”

The earth is the symbol of humility, and the soul doctor must be humble like the earth and must blend this humility into the water – into the Torah he is teaching and any advice he is offering. Only then his words will resonate and achieve their intended effect.

PART II: HOW TO FIND A SOUL DOCTOR

10. The Right Mentor

Now at this point a lot of you might be saying: How do I find such a soul doctor? Last time I looked under “soul doctor” in the yellow pages, there was no such category. Where do I go to search?

It is true that it is not so easy to find a wise mentor, or rabbi, teacher or therapist with whom you feel a soul connection. How can we know if he is the real deal?

By no means is this a minor question. If we don’t know whether our soul doctors are authentic, how can we ever know whether the advice they impart is true?

In other words, all our knowledge seems to be dependent on others who, with all their flaws and subjectivity, may be feeding us distortions and personal opinions, rather than objective truth. Indeed, they themselves may be victims of those who taught them before!

11. Absolute Truth (Humor)

No wonder so many people are suspicious of religious authorities who claim to have a monopoly on absolute truth.

This reminds me of the new constituent who approached his rabbi.

“Rabbi, I hear that the Torah contains the absolute truth, will you teach it to me?”

“Of course,” the rabbi answers.

“How much will these lessons cost me?” asks the constituent.

“Nothing,” the rabbi exclaims. “How can I charge you for the Torah which G-d gave us for free?!”

The man is impressed.

So they get together to begin the first class. They open up a Torah, which is all in Hebrew, and the man cries out: “I don’t read Hebrew. I can’t understand one word in this book!”

To which the Rabbi replies: “Hebrew lessons will be \$2,000...”

12. G-d’s Plan

But could G-d really have left us to flounder like this?

Surely, G-d must have had a plan when He gave us the Torah, a blueprint for life. For what value would this blueprint have, if we could not understand it?

And indeed He did.

First, the Torah itself tells us the nature of truth, and the criteria for a rabbi, teacher, soul doctor and indeed any moral authority. And it does so, because the Torah is etched inside each of us.

Each of us comes to earth with the Torah knowledge inside of us. Indeed, the Talmud says that the Torah is

taught to us “in our mothers’ womb.”⁷ Just like our bodies grow through pregnancy and go through their developmental stages, so too our minds and souls develop during these nine months. Upon birth we are made to consciously forget, but the truth remains imprinted on our unconscious psyches. When we discover a truth in our lives – when we are educated and taught wisdom – the truth resonates, because we already have it inside ourselves; it was just concealed beneath the conscious layers of existence.

Truth, in other words, is not owned by anyone. Not by teachers, not by rabbis, not by scientists. No one has a monopoly on truth. G-d’s truth is planted into all of existence and ingrained in our psyches. We have both the truth within us as well as the tools to discover it. A good teacher or mentor – the right soul doctor – is one who helps us cut away the weeds and uncover the flowers within.

Education, in other words, is not so much about imparting information than it is about discovering our inner wisdom. Not so much about educating, as it is about un-educating us from ignorance and bad habits that impede the way to recognize the inner truths within ourselves and others, within life and existence.

13. Finding the Right Mentor

Following this line of thought let us now go back to the search for the right mentor, a true soul doctor.

The basic criteria for such a person includes mastery of Torah knowledge, ordination (*semicha*) and apprenticeship (*shimush*). But there is one more critical ingredient necessary to be a true Rabbi, a real “soul doctor:” fear of heaven and absolute humility in the face of G-d.

Such a person is not merely a wise man with charisma, he is much more than that. He is a G-dly man, a true soul doctor, interested only in bringing G-d’s will and wisdom to others.

A new Rabbi was hired by the local Synagogue. Everyone in town was talking about the new Rabbi, especially impressed with his credentials. His title wasn’t just plain “Rabbi” but “Rabbi Doctor Weinberg.”

One day the Rabbi gets a call from a child in the community. “Rabbi, I have a headache. What shall I do?” Rabbi Weinberg replies: “Why are you calling me; why don’t you call a doctor?” Says the child, “because everyone is saying that you are a ‘Rabbi Doctor,’ not just a Rabbi but also a doctor.” Rabbi Weinberg begins to chuckle. “Little boy. I am not a doctor in medicine; I am a doctor in philosophy.”

Without missing a beat, the child asks the Rabbi: “Philosophy?! What type of illness is that?!”

⁷ Talmud, Niddah 30b.

The most vital trait of such a true teacher is humility – the humble recognition that these truths are not his own ... that they are G-d's. He cannot allow one iota of ego to get in the way of his teachings.

14. Foolproof Test

Now, that we know what criteria to look for, the question is: How do we know that a given person possesses them?

Let me suggest a simple foolproof test, which has been proven to work time and again.

If you hear a rabbi – or some other religious authority – say something that doesn't sound right to you, ask him respectfully the following question, preferably in private: What is the source for the statement you made?

You are likely to get one of three answers:

Some will say or imply with their body language: “What right do you have to ask me that question? Who do you think you are? I – I am the authority; you are just a simple ignoramus!” Others will be less insulting outright, but patronizing and condescending nevertheless, for they do not want to be challenged.

A second answer you are likely to get will be: “I don't really have a source. It's my own idea and innovation.” (Some might even proudly add in one form or another: “Don't you find my thoughts brilliant?”)

The third and only answer you should accept is a polite and humble one: “Here are my sources. Chapter and verse. This is how I interpreted a particular source based on the following commentaries. Here is where I added a certain point, based on the following logic.”

Only the teacher that demonstrates humility – who subjugates his person to the teachings (not vice versa) – is the one that earns the right to be your true teacher and authority, one that can motivate you and make demands of you. All others may impart information, even of vital importance, but you can never trust whether you are getting *their* truth or the *truth's* truth.

Needless to say, a true soul doctor will exude only love. He will educate with an attitude that is warm and non-judgmental. His words will resonate with his listeners and students, who will feel G-d's presence in his words. And the words from his heart will enter their hearts.

After all, even a soul doctor – and perhaps especially a soul doctor – is commanded “*V’obavto l’rayeobo komocho*” – to love your fellow as yourself.”

15. Conclusion (for Part I and II)

These are just a few of the many profound lessons that we can derive from the Torah teaching about the *sotab*. So many psychological, spiritual, emotional and practical applications are hidden here. It would take hours, if not days, to unearth them all.

So let’s begin learning together – from this day forward – unfurling before us the wisdom of the Torah which is our guide to life, our banner, and our shield.

Amen.

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