NASO: Sotah and the Art of Marital Fidelity

The trust between husband and wife is one of the foundations on which a family stands—and infidelity is one of the few things powerful enough to bring it down.

One of the topics mentioned in this week's Parashah is Sotah, a case related to infidelity.

The Torah and the Sages discuss this topic in depth and describe not only the obvious consequences of adultery but also the factors that contribute to this deviation or to a suspicion of infidelity, and the behaviors that prevent it and strengthen fidelity.

In the following lines, I will briefly refer to a few topics directly or indirectly related to preserving sexual exclusivity in a Jewish marriage.

Sanctifying Sexual Intimacy

Unlike other religions, Judaism perceives sexuality as something positive and even sacred. Our Sages explained that our behavior should aspire to emulate God. He is compassionate, equitable, and magnanimous. Likewise, we must incorporate these characteristics into our own conduct. This "imitation of God" reaches its highest point when husband and wife become the "creators" of a new life. Procreation offers us an opportunity—unparalleled in any other act in life—to imitate the Almighty Creator of the world.

Sexuality also completes us: it leads us to physical and emotional plenitude as individuals. The first biblical reference to sexuality states: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). From this verse, the

Sages deduced that a man or a woman should consider themselves as half a person (pelag gufa), and that human fulfillment can only be achieved through marital intimacy.

Sexuality is certainly sacred, but it is also vulnerable to corruption. The Torah recounts the generation of the Flood, where sexual corruption and rape were the first symptoms of the moral decay of that corrupt generation. For those people, sex ceased to be an act that brought humans closer to the Divine. They treated sex as if it had no relation to love and holiness, considering it simply casual and unbound—a means to satisfy primal instincts.

Because of its importance and its creative (and destructive) power, sexuality needs to be "sanctified" (qiddushin). The sanctification of sexuality takes place when it is expressed exclusively within the context of marriage. This allows us to imitate the Creator and helps us intimately know the person we love the most, transforming us into something more significant than just the "I": a "WE" (husband, wife, children).

Sex outside of marriage is destructive. Infidelity often plays a decisive role in most divorce cases; adultery is usually the final red line that has been crossed. Infidelity distances a person from God and from those one loves the most: the wife or husband and the children.

Preserving Passion

But Judaism goes beyond limiting sexuality to the context of marriage. It is also crucial to preserve the sexual attraction between husband and wife and to avoid anything that can harm or destroy it. The Mitzvah of Niddah strengthens fidelity. A Jewish married couple abstains from sexual activity for approximately two weeks each month, corresponding to the woman's menstrual cycle plus seven more days. When the Sages of the Talmud, specifically Rabbi Meir, explained the reason behind this regulation, they said that thanks to this period

of physical separation, husband and wife are able to rekindle their desire for each other. In other words, far from negatively affecting sexual desire, this period of separation intensifies it, preventing one of the greatest challenges that marriages face: boredom and sexual monotony. This problem, well known and analyzed by psychologists and sexologists, arises from the theoretically unlimited opportunities for intimacy in a marital relationship, which can drive a person to look outside for sexual novelty, leading to infidelity.

Rabbi Meir explained that during the days of physical separation, a Jewish husband desires his wife, and his physical attraction to her intensifies as the night of the Mikveh (the ritual immersion that concludes the period of abstinence) approaches. And when the wife returns from the Mikveh—even in the case of a couple who have been married for many years—the desire between them is regenerated "with the passion they felt on their wedding night." It is as if the Niddah period creates a new honeymoon every month. (Someone said that if this extraordinary Mitzvah didn't exist, it would have to be invented!)

This period of separation also promotes a deeper level of interaction between husband and wife. The couple learns to communicate affectionately on the level of friendship. Every couple should aspire to achieve this level of non-physical relationship that will strengthen the marriage for the rest of their lives. Especially as the years go by and sexual desire naturally diminishes, the friendship between husband and wife will flourish, based on that "platonic relationship" built over the years during the Niddah periods.

Preserving Fidelity

In Jewish tradition, laws and codes of conduct are specifically designed to prevent infidelity, or anything that leads to it. One of these rules is known as "Yichud": when a man and a woman who are not married to each other isolate

themselves in a secluded place. The Sages mention it as one of the mistakes made by the Sotah, raising well-founded suspicions of adultery. The story of Amnon and Tamar in the book of Samuel illustrates the importance of Yichud. Amnon, one of King David's sons, had a sexual obsession with Tamar, his half-sister. In order to be alone with her, he pretended to be sick and asked for her help. He requested that everyone leave his room, and once alone with his half-sister, Amnon abused her. This devastating event deeply impacted King David, who felt guilty for not realizing what was happening in his own family. To prevent similar cases from recurring in the future, King David, together with his Court of Justice, instituted the law of Yichud, which prohibits a Jewish man from being alone in a locked room with a woman who is not his wife.

The prohibition of Yichud falls into the category of "gedarim" or "siyagim," which translates as "security measures" or halakhic fences intended to prevent people from succumbing to more significant transgressions. An equivalent of a "siyag" would be a ranger erecting a fence a few steps away from a cliff, to protect visitors from getting too close and accidentally falling into the void.

Similar preventive mechanisms exist, for example, in the field of addictions. A person struggling with alcohol addiction is advised to avoid bars and gatherings where alcohol is served, and to refrain from socializing with friends who drink. These "social fences" protect people from their own impulses and prevent the possibility of facing temptations they cannot control. It is easier to avoid entering a bar than to resist drinking once the drink is within reach.

Similarly, the rabbis recognized the power of the sexual instinct and emphasized that relying solely on common sense and personal morality is insufficient (□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□□□□□□). Additional rules and fences are required to prevent potentially catastrophic situations. By avoiding

Yichud—private seclusion between a man and a woman—the natural scenario in which infidelity or inappropriate sexual behavior develops is prevented.

The concept of Yichud is recognized and increasingly practiced in our day, even in non-Jewish society. It is very common for legal advisors to recommend that therapists, doctors, lawyers, and other professionals avoid staying alone in a closed room with a patient or client of the opposite sex, in order to prevent inappropriate situations or allegations of misconduct. This demonstrates the advanced wisdom of the Torah and our Sages, who established these laws thousands of years ago—laws that are now widely recognized, valued, and adopted throughout the civilized world.

Communication and Fidelity

In Judaism, sexuality is reserved exclusively for the intimate relationship between husband and wife. This simple but crucial idea also implies that certain types of interaction between married men and women should be avoided—beyond seclusion or Yichud—even in the field of communication.

Affectionate or sexual language and comments, or sensual behavior from a man toward a woman who is not his wife, are considered inappropriate. Similarly, a Jewish wife should reserve her physical charm for her husband, ensuring that her behavior and appearance in public are not provocative and that they reflect this exclusivity.

These principles of moral conduct are not very popular in contemporary society, where sexuality has been objectified through advertising, pornography, and the media. The widespread exploitation of sex—and modern permissive culture—has normalized inappropriate sexual behavior, and intimacy is no longer widely perceived as something exclusive between spouses and bound to marriage.

And this is precisely why preserving our Jewish codes of

conduct while living in a society that promotes contrary values represents one of the most formidable challenges that we Jews face today. But it is imperative to do so if we seek harmony in our marriage and the happiness of our family. And to do that, we must recognize the behaviors that enable infidelity, or that provoke justifiable jealousy from a spouse.

Let us consider one last example.

The Torah teaches us that infidelity can sometimes develop unintentionally, through the exchange of emotional communication between a married man and a woman. The first time the Torah describes sexual relations, it uses the verb "to know": "And Adam knew Eve, his wife." This "knowing" refers to the emotional connection that precedes—and leads to!—physical intimacy. When a couple goes on their first date, they treat each other respectfully and cordially. Then comes friendship, which slowly develops into an emotional relationship, recognized when communication between man and woman includes the subject of feelings. When this level is reached, the couple is ready for intimacy—that is, for marriage.

If we observe this progression from respect to intimacy, we can understand why the Sages warned that, beyond preventing physical contact or seclusion with someone of the opposite sex, a married person should avoid repeating a similar progression—which might develop unintentionally and unconsciously—with a person of the opposite sex in their professional or social life.

The Sages describe this emotional closeness as "qiruv da'at": when a woman and a man share and communicate to one another their private feelings and intimate information. Although initially the content of that information may not be related to the sexual sphere, this level of emotional communication enables feelings of closeness that might lead to intimacy.

A married man should avoid this type of communication, especially with a person of the opposite sex with whom he routinely interacts, such as an employee or a colleague in the workplace. Likewise, a married woman should avoid emotional dialogues with a coach, a therapist, or a teacher. These emotional interactions, qiruv da’at, do not turn into intimacy overnight, but they develop gradually.

Preserving fidelity is the cornerstone of the Jewish family and of the emotional well-being of our loved ones. This requires remaining vigilant and respecting the boundaries that prevent situations which can progressively become more difficult to control. The laws of Niddah, Yichud, and qiruv da’at—each from a different perspective—contribute to safeguarding fidelity, the most sacred and essential aspect of our family life.