

Grinding Up the Gemstone

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Parshat Naso

In this week's Torah portion, we read (Numbers 5:11-29) of one of the more disturbing rituals of Temple times, the ritual concerning the wife whose husband has accused her of unfaithfulness. The jealous husband is commanded to bring his wife before a priest, a cohen. He is also to bring a meal offering. (He is to bring it and not she, because it is his accusation and hence he must bear the financial cost of the sacrifice and trial.) After uncovering the wife's hair, the cohen administers an oath to her and writes certain curses on a paper, which he then immerses in a bowl of sanctified water to dissolve the writing, and the wife then drinks the water. The Torah tells us that, if the wife is innocent, nothing will happen. If she is guilty, however, severe physical manifestations will reveal it.

The *Sifri*, in commenting on this ritual, implies that the curses which the cohen wrote on the paper and dissolved in the water explicitly included G*d's Name. "G*d says, 'Let My Name be erased in the water, in order to bring peace between husband and wife.'" That is, the purpose of the ritual was not to shame the wife – although it is easy to read it so – but rather to reconcile the couple.

We are accustomed to the tradition that we not write out the Divine Name in full in order to honor Its sanctity and to assure that no harm come to the written Name. Yet the Name, it seems from the *Sifri*, was actually written on the paper for the very purpose of being dissolved in the water! And the *Sifri* reports G*d's comment, "Let My Name be erased in the water, in order to bring peace between husband and wife." How holy a duty it is to bring peace to a couple! Our focus this week, however, is not on the ritual itself, holy as it is, but on one particular aspect of it, the idea of erasing the Divine Name.

The idea of writing G*d's Name when knowing in advance that it is for the purpose of being dissolved is disturbing. Perhaps a tale from the Hassidic tradition may

ease our minds. Or, rather, a tale within a tale (speaking to a different subject, but shedding light on this matter as well), taken from a letter written by the “previous” Lubavitcher Rebbe, Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson, in 1935:

Rebbe Pinhas of Koretz was a direct disciple of the Baal Shem Tov and a close companion of his successor, Rebbe Dov Baer of Mezeritz. It was Rebbe Pinhas’ opinion that the teachings of Hassidism should not be generally publicized but should be shared only with those select few who would fully appreciate them. He was especially disturbed by those students who transcribed Dov Baer’s lessons and distributed copies to a wider audience.

Once, while Rebbe Pinhas was in Mezeritz, he found one such transcription languishing in a mound of garbage. The sight caused him great pain, and it seemed to justify his initial objections.

Rebbe Schneur Zalman of Lyadi, the “Alter Rebbe,” the founder of the Habad/Lubavitch tradition, was also visiting Mezeritz at the time, and he, of course, knew of Rebbe Pinhas’ intolerance of the indiscriminate publicizing of Hassidic teachings. Without directly addressing Rebbe Pinhas, he began to speak in metaphor.

“Once upon a time,” he began, “there was a mighty king who had an only son. Wishing his son to grow in wisdom, he sent him to explore faraway lands and distant islands. There the prince was to learn the history of these foreign lands and the nature of foreign plants and animals and to brave dangerous terrain to study exotic beasts and birds.

“One day, the news reached the king that his son, who was then on one of those faraway islands, had fallen gravely ill, and that the doctors were unable to find a cure for his illness. The king issued a call throughout the realm. Anyone who had knowledge of medicine or who could propose a cure for the prince’s illness was commanded to come to the royal palace.

“Well, all the great doctors and all the famed scholars of the kingdom were silenced; not one of them knew of any remedy for the prince’s illness. Then, one day, a man arrived at the palace. He told the king that he knew of a proven remedy for the prince’s illness. The remedy, however, was to be found only in an extremely rare and precious stone. Should they find this gem, grind it into the finest of powders, mix it with a superb wine, and give it to the prince to drink, he would be cured.

“The king commanded all the great savants of the land and all those who were expert in working with precious gems to assemble and make a thorough search of the royal treasure stores for the gem which the man had described. After inspecting all the king’s gems, the experts found that there was good news and bad news. The good news – they discovered one stone that matched the description. The bad news – the gem they found was the centerpiece of the king’s royal crown.

“The king was overjoyed. He ordered the gem to be extracted, ground to a fine powder, and made into the potion for his son. But then terrible news reached the palace. The prince’s condition had so deteriorated that his lips were sealed shut. So ill was the prince that he could take nothing, not even liquids, into his mouth. The experts and scholars assembled at the palace were certain that, under the circumstances, the king would surely direct that the stone not be removed and ground up, so that the splendor of the royal crown could be preserved. They were astounded when the king instructed them to speed up their work, to crush the gem and prepare the potion as swiftly as possible and pour it into the prince’s mouth. ‘Grind!’ said the king. ‘Pour! Squander the entire gemstone! Perhaps a single drop will enter the mouth of my son and he will be healed.’

“The king’s ministers were amazed at His Majesty’s decision and pleaded with him. ‘At first, Your Majesty, when the prince was able to take the cure, it was worthwhile to destroy the gem. Now, though, when his condition is so hopeless, when his ability to swallow even a single drop is in question, why ruin your glorious crown, the crown by which you assumed your throne?’

*“The king replied, ‘If, G*d forbid, my son should not live, who cares about the crown? Should he recover, the ruined crown will be my greatest glory, for it will attest to the loyalty of my only son, who risked his life to fulfill my will and to ascend in wisdom and bravery.’”*

The most valuable gem is worth far less than even the slimmest possibility of saving a human life. A transcription of the most valuable teachings is worth far less than even the least possibility of spreading the wisdom of those teachings. The Divine Name Itself is worth far less than the possibility of making peace between two individuals!

To this understanding, may we soon be led.

Shabbat Shalom.