Tractate Sotah – Destruction, Leadership and Messianism

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A. Introduction

Tractate Sotah poses a difficult problem for anyone wishing to read it as a single, coherent, cohesive unit concerned with one subject, or, alternatively, as expressing a dialectical conception of a single subject. Why? Three of its chapters do not deal with the laws of the sotah, a woman suspected of adultery, at all (!); rather, those laws have been incorporated into them, at least on the face of it, as an aside. I am referring, of course, to the tractate's final three chapters, which deal with rituals recited in the sacred tongue (chapters 7, 8, and 9). The tractate does connect the two parts, since the sotah rite is discussed at the beginning of chapter 7 as a text recited "in any language" (mishnah 1). Yet this does nothing to blunt the force of the simple fact that a tractate containing only nine chapters devotes three of them to matters entirely unrelated to its declared subject, the subject announced by its name: sotah. This is Albeck's somewhat apologetic comment on these chapters: "The laws of sotah were arranged only in the tractate's first six chapters. From chapter 7 onward, matters recited in any language were enumerated, including the passage concerning the sotah; opposite them, matters recited specifically in the sacred tongue were enumerated, including the passage concerning the priest anointed for war and the passage concerning the heifer whose neck is broken. The laws of these last two passages are numerous, so separate chapters were devoted to them (chapters 8 and 9)."[1]

Another editorial problem worth considering is the placement of the tractate's sixth chapter. Here is Albeck's comment: "The Tosafists [on the Babylonian Talmud, fol. 31a] have already observed that this chapter belongs in chapter 1, mishnah 3, before the procedure for administering the drink to the sotah, since it deals with the husband's warning. The law concerning a single witness to

[1] Another question of arrangement that has troubled scholars of the Mishnah concerns the order in which the Mishnah lists those matters recited in the sacred tongue, as against the order in which it subsequently details each one. In the case of the priest anointed for war and the heifer whose neck is broken, the order is reversed. At the beginning of chapter 7, the heifer rite is listed before the priest anointed for war, whereas in the sequence of chapters, chapter 8 is devoted to the priest anointed for war, and only afterward is the heifer rite discussed. Thus Albeck notes in his introduction to Tractate Sotah: "The Tosafists (42a; see also Tosafot Yom Tov) reconcile the change of order by explaining that, in chapter 7, the tanna teaches the passage concerning the heifer whose neck is broken after the king's passage, but when he comes to discuss the details, he gives priority to the chapter on the priest anointed for war, which contains only an interpretation of Scripture, over the chapter on the heifer whose neck is broken, which contains numerous laws. The Meiri explains (fol. 61c) that the subject of the priest anointed for war is stated in the Torah (Deuteronomy 20) before the heifer passage (chapter 21), and therefore the tanna presents its laws first. It may be added that the chapter on the heifer whose neck is broken is arranged last because it offers a fitting conclusion to the entire tractate: that conclusion includes those things that ceased over the course of time, first among them: 'When murderers multiplied, the heifer rite ceased'—that is, from the time of Rabbi Eleazar ben Dinai, who was the leader of the rebels—and likewise Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai abolished the bitter waters because adulterers had multiplied (9:9)."

defilement should also have been taught there, after ‘witnesses come forward to say that she has been defiled.’ In fact, the whole chapter merely supplements the laws of sotah that conclude here.”

The difficulties posed by the tractate’s arrangement can be explained, then, through a chance or associative connection: the sotah passage was linked to the other rituals recited in any language, and, incidentally, further matters recited specifically in the sacred tongue were introduced. Chapter 6 should have been incorporated into chapter 1, where it would supplement the laws enumerated there. On this account, the final three chapters bear no substantive connection to the tractate’s subject; after all, the sotah rite itself is ultimately recited in any language, not only in the sacred tongue. Such a justification is difficult to accept. If the tractate were a single literary unit with a central subject that answered a central question, or addressed a central problem, and thereby gave it meaning, it might have been possible to accept the associative justification. But even then we would have had to ask what the association meant: why did this subject arise precisely here, rather than elsewhere in the tractate? Yet in a situation in which so large a part of Tractate Sotah departs from its central subject, we must give the literary arrangement a cohesive answer. The same is true of the placement of chapter 6. In their glosses at the beginning of the tractate, the Tosafists tell us that these laws belong at its beginning. Why, then, were they not included there? Even if this is explained by a chronological justification, according to which an earlier omission was followed by a later addition, we must still ask why these laws were omitted and why they were added afterward.

According to these comments alone, then, the tractate’s first five chapters form one unit with a distinctive conclusion of its own, whereas its final three chapters form a second unit. The two are connected by the addition of a middle chapter into which laws of sotah omitted from the main corpus were gathered. In this chapter I wish to point to a profound connection between the two units: the chapters dealing with the sotah and the final three chapters, which deal with matters recited in the sacred tongue. My general contention is that, although the sotah rite is indeed the subject of the first five chapters, the tractate as it stands before us, through the way it has been arranged, is centrally concerned with the attitude toward messianism, and especially with messianism against the background of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

The tractate contains a sharp criticism of the messianic enterprise and of the messianic approach led by Rabbi Akiva during the revolt. It exalts a system in which God’s word is mediated by the sages as a group, in contrast to a situation in which God is revealed on earth in the figure of a Messiah. In this respect, the tractate’s arrangement uses the sotah rite as a metaphor: the people of Israel are the adulterous wife; they have betrayed their God, and the tractate seeks to explain their suffering after the revolt.

The theological explanation of the people’s condition after the revolt is that they behaved like a sotah, and were therefore overtaken by the troubles and decrees. Moreover, on this reading, the tractate constitutes the first link in our sources between messianism and idolatry: the metaphor of the people of Israel as a sotah is connected with their turning to idolatry, their abandonment of

God, their husband, and their adherence to other gods.[2] The tractate's editorial construction uses the sotah rite to make a claim about the people of Israel's relationship with their God and with messianism. The tractate's second part, the three chapters dealing with rituals recited in the sacred tongue, offers an alternative to the messianic model. It points to the "institutional mediation" of the priests and elders as the proper model for the relationship between Israel and their God. Institutional mediation is the correct model through which to convey God's word to the people of Israel; the messianic tendency, by contrast, leads to deterioration and destruction.

B. Matters Recited in the Sacred Tongue and the Case for Institutional Mediation

I wish to begin our discussion of the tractate with the explanation of the context of its final three chapters. These chapters, as noted, describe rituals recited in the sacred tongue. Thus, in chapter 7, mishnah 2:

"These are recited in the sacred tongue: the recitation over first fruits, halitzah, the blessings and curses, the Priestly Benediction, the High Priest's blessing, the king's passage, the passage concerning the heifer whose neck is broken, and the words of the priest anointed for war when he speaks to the people."

As the following mishnayot make clear (mishnayot 3–8), the central event on this list is the pronouncement of the blessings and curses at Shechem, on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The Mishnah concludes that, when the first fruits are brought and when halitzah is performed, the ritual is recited in the sacred tongue because Scripture uses the formula "you shall respond and say" or "she shall respond and say" in both cases. How do we know that these declarations were made in the sacred tongue? We learn this from the Levites at the pronouncement of the blessings and curses.

The Mishnah itself describes the procedure of that ceremony, which is recounted in Deuteronomy 27–28, at length:

Chapter 7, mishnah 3: "The recitation over first fruits: how is it performed? 'You shall respond and say before the LORD your God'; and elsewhere it says: 'The Levites shall respond and say.' Just as the response mentioned there is in the sacred tongue, so here it is in the sacred tongue."

Chapter 7, mishnah 4: "Halitzah: how is it performed? 'She shall respond and say'; and elsewhere it says: 'The Levites shall respond and say.' Just as the response mentioned there is in the sacred tongue, so here it is in the sacred tongue. Rabbi Judah says: 'She shall respond and say'—it must be said in this very language."

Chapter 7, mishnah 5: "The blessings and curses: how were they pronounced? Once Israel crossed the Jordan, they came to Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal in Samaria, beside Shechem,

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[2] This is a different claim, and in a certain sense even the opposite of Ishay Rosen-Zvi's claim. Rosen-Zvi argues that the imagined sotah rite in the Mishnah is based on the portrayal of the sotah, the people of Israel, in Ezekiel 16. It is certainly possible that the sotah rite itself is based on the descriptions in Ezekiel 16; but the tractate's arrangement as it stands before us returns to the fundamental conceptions of Ezekiel 16 and sees the people of Israel as a sotah. See Ishay Rosen-Zvi, The Rite That Never Was (Magnes, 2008), pp. 182–225 [Hebrew].

near the terebinths of Moreh, as it is said: 'Are they not beyond the Jordan …?' And elsewhere it says: 'Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, as far as the terebinth of Moreh.' Just as the terebinth of Moreh mentioned there is at Shechem, so the terebinth of Moreh mentioned here is at Shechem. Six tribes went up to the summit of Mount Gerizim, and six tribes went up to the summit of Mount Ebal. The priests, the Levites, and the Ark stood below, in the middle; the priests encircled the Ark, the Levites encircled the priests, and all Israel stood on either side, as it is said: 'All Israel, their elders, officers, and judges stood on either side of the Ark …' They turned their faces toward Mount Gerizim and began with a blessing: 'Blessed is the man who does not make a graven or molten image'; and both groups answered: 'Amen.' They turned their faces toward Mount Ebal and began with a curse: 'Cursed is the man who makes a graven or molten image'; and both groups answered: 'Amen.' This continued until they completed all the blessings and curses. Afterward they brought the stones, built the altar, plastered it with lime, and wrote upon it all the words of the Torah in seventy languages, as it is said: 'Very plainly.' They took the stones and came and spent the night in their place."

The ritual performed when the first produce and fruit of the trees are brought to the Temple must be recited in the sacred tongue, because the words "you shall respond and say" appear in the biblical command concerning first fruits, just as they do in the words spoken by the Levites at the blessings and curses. The same is true of halitzah, the ritual in which a woman removes the sandal from her brother-in-law's foot after her husband, his brother, has died without children. By doing so, she releases him from the obligation to marry her. The biblical command concerning halitzah likewise states that the woman "shall respond and say," just as the Levites "shall respond and say." The ritual of the heifer whose neck is broken, performed by the elders when a slain person is found and the manner of the killing is unknown, must also be carried out in the sacred tongue. The Mishnah does not say so explicitly, but here too the verbs "the elders shall respond and say: Our hands did not shed this blood" occur. Halitzah, first fruits, the heifer whose neck is broken, and the passages concerning the covenant made at Shechem are linked, then, by linguistic and ritual features that we do not find in the other rites: the Priestly Benediction, the High Priest's blessing, the words of the priest anointed for war, and the king's passage. Yet the editor of the Mishnah evidently considered it important to group these rituals together and ultimately to teach a second time about the pronouncement of the blessings and curses.

At this point a difficult question arises. How can a law requiring certain rituals to be recited in the sacred tongue be derived from the blessings and curses? What about the event at Mount Sinai? As expected, the Babylonian Talmud raised this difficulty: "And the Levites themselves—from where do we derive it?"[3] That is, how do we know that they spoke Hebrew when they pronounced the blessings and curses and the people answered "Amen" after them? The Gemara answers: we know this from the event at Mount Sinai. The Babylonian Talmud did not accept the primacy of the covenant-making ceremony at Shechem, ruling instead: "And the Levites themselves—from where do we derive it? It comes from 'voice,' from the 'voice' of Moses." In other words, how do we know that the Levites themselves spoke Hebrew? We learn this from the voice of God Himself. At Mount Sinai it is written: "Moses would speak, and God would answer him with a voice." Since

[3] Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 33a.

the assumption is that God spoke to Moses in Hebrew when He gave the commandments, the fact that the word "voice" is also used of the Levites teaches us that they too spoke Hebrew.

Yet, in doing so, the Babylonian Talmud downplays the great innovation in these chapters of the Mishnah. They place particular emphasis on the covenant at Shechem, making it the most significant event in the life of the community, and the source for every public event. What distinguishes the pronouncement of the blessings and curses as an event in its own right, setting it apart from Mount Sinai? The covenant-making ceremony at Shechem, performed on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal, has three significant features. First, the covenant is not accompanied by a heavenly revelation; rather, it is a covenant mediated by the Levites. Scripture explicitly states in the passage concerning the blessings and curses: "Moses and the Levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Be silent and listen, Israel; this day you have become a people to the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 27:9). The covenant is made between God and the people of Israel, but it is mediated entirely by Moses and the Levites. The Levites stand between them and read the words of the covenant to the people. God Himself does not reveal Himself or intervene unexpectedly. He is a party to the covenant who is not present, but is represented by the Levites.

A second distinguishing feature of the covenant at Shechem is its detailed account of reward and punishment for compliance or noncompliance with its terms. There is no such description in the covenant made at Mount Sinai. Reward and punishment for observing or violating the covenant are essential to the covenant at Shechem. Thus it is said there: "If you diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, taking care to perform all His commandments which I command you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; and all these blessings will come upon you … And if you do not listen to the voice of the LORD your God, taking care to perform all His commandments and statutes which I command you this day, all these curses will come upon you …" At Mount Sinai there is no mention of the consequences of complying or failing to comply with the covenant's terms; there is no reference to observing or failing to observe the Ten Commandments.

A third distinguishing element of the blessings and curses is that, in the account of the covenant at Shechem in the Book of Joshua, God appears as a jealous God, an anthropomorphic God addressed as a husband jealous for his wife, the people of Israel.[4]

The first element distinguishing the covenant at Shechem—the Levites' mediation between the people of Israel and God, their lord and husband—emerges as an essential feature when we examine the other rituals recited in the sacred tongue. When we try to identify what connects the recitation over first fruits and halitzah, the Priestly Benediction, the High Priest's blessing, the king's passage, the passage concerning the heifer whose neck is broken, and the words of the priest anointed for war when he speaks to the people, the immediate answer is that all are public rituals. Each has some bearing on the nation. The recitation over first fruits nurtures national memory. Each person bringing first fruits to the Temple must recite the familiar text: "A wandering

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[4] Joshua 24:19. Israel Knohl argues in his book Me'ayin Banu (Dvir, 2008), p. 200, that the element of jealousy appearing in Joshua 24 is an influence of prophecy, unique to the covenant-making ceremony at Shechem.

Aramean was my father; he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there became a great, mighty, and numerous nation. The Egyptians treated us harshly, afflicted us, and imposed hard labor upon us. We cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, signs, and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now, behold, I have brought the first fruit of the soil which You, LORD, have given me …" (Deuteronomy 26:5–10). These words, recited when the first fruits are brought, establish a consciousness that joins personal memory to national memory.

Halitzah is an event with significance for the community as a whole: it releases the widow from her bond to her brother-in-law and permits her to marry any man. The public aspects of the rite of the heifer whose neck is broken are likewise plain to see. The ritual releases the townspeople from responsibility for the slain person found in their territory; without this release, his blood remains poised to pursue the people of the town. The public aspect of the blessing lies in removing responsibility from the townspeople and in declaring this removal. The Priestly Benediction is God's blessing spoken by the priests. This is a unifying ceremony with a mystical quality: the blessing is pronounced in public, and it includes God's poetic address to those taking part. That address is carefully worded and divided into three parts: "May the LORD bless you and keep you; may the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the LORD lift His face toward you and grant you peace." The first part is physical; the second and third are progressively spiritual, moving from the reception of spiritual abundance to complete spiritual fulfillment.

On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest pronounces several blessings after completing the service. He represents the people before God, and his blessings, together with the atonement granted to him, seal the service. The blessings he pronounces are of importance to the people. The same is true of the king's reading of the Torah at the assembly, Hakhel, during the festival of Sukkot. His reading is symbolic, signifying the people's acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven and the renewal of their covenant with God. The public character of the words that the priest anointed for war must deliver is also clear. His words are more than encouragement: they symbolize God's presence in the camp of Israel's warriors, a presence expressed through the use of the sacred tongue.

Yet the public element in these rituals, clear and evident though it is, does not distinguish them from all others. Other rituals need not be recited specifically in Hebrew and nevertheless have public significance, such as the obligation to pray and to recite Grace after Meals. What, then, is the additional element uniting the items on the list of matters recited in the sacred tongue? It seems to me that what all these rituals have in common is that they are administered and mediated by one of the official representatives of Israel's religion. In other words, their administration and mediation by an official institutional intermediary is what unites them.

As noted, the covenant at Shechem between God and the people of Israel is made through the Levites, without God's direct revelation. Halitzah and the heifer rite are performed by the elders. The recitation over first fruits, the Priestly Benediction, the High Priest's blessing, and the words of the priest anointed for war when he speaks to the people are all performed by the priests or by

the High Priest. In all these Israelite rituals, the sacred tongue forms a kind of shared language among the institutional participants. Hebrew serves to reinforce their position as God's legitimate representatives.

It is no wonder, then, that the blessings and curses occupy so central a place in the Mishnah, and in these three chapters in particular. At first sight, what can a ceremony recited in the past tell us about rituals that are recited, or may potentially be recited, even at the time of the Mishnah's arrangement? The blessings and curses stand alone as a past event that will not recur. It is also difficult to understand the ruling that these rites "are recited in the sacred tongue." After all, the ceremony has already taken place, and cannot be repeated. Yet the making of the covenant at Shechem presents a model shared by all these rituals, in which mediation is inseparable from the rites themselves. The covenant at Shechem casts its shadow over these rituals: just as the Levites there serve as the people's legitimate representatives and, at the same time, as those who convey God's word to them, so do the elders, priests, or High Priest in all the other rituals described in this mishnah.

What place does institutional mediation have in a tractate such as Sotah? Why devote three chapters to exalting halakhic institutional mediation and God's revelation through His legitimate institutional representatives, as against His direct revelation? Moreover, we have also pointed to a third element: the connection between God's portrayal as a jealous husband and Tractate Sotah. In its first five chapters the tractate describes a relationship between a suspicious husband and his wife. Here, through its emphasis on the covenant at Shechem, it introduces a metaphor for the relationship between God and the people of Israel, as the relationship between a jealous husband and his wife. In that metaphor, any departure from the terms of the covenant amounts to adultery.

In fact, the matter is more complex. Ishay Rosen-Zvi has recently shown that the sotah rite itself, as it appears in Mishnah Sotah, is a softened reflection of the prophetic punishment of the adulteress described in Ezekiel 16.[5] Yet the function that the final three chapters perform, in the status they jointly confer upon the covenant at Shechem, casts the first five chapters in a different light. If the rituals detailed in the final three chapters are not only public, but also rituals in which mediation is central, and if they also bring to the fore God's image as a jealous husband, then perhaps the tractate's final arrangement expresses a return to the sotah metaphor in Ezekiel and its reworking. The laws of sotah enumerated in the tractate still concern a man who suspects his wife of sexual misconduct. But the tractate's large-scale arrangement, which requires those ceremonies recited in the sacred tongue to be understood in relation to the laws of sotah, creates a parallel between the sotah and the people of Israel. The question is: what is the editor's purpose in creating this parallel? To answer it, we must examine the mishnayot that conclude the tractate's first part.

C. Sotah Chapters 1–5 and the Criticism of the Messianic Orientation in the School of Rabbi Akiva

The tractate's opening chapters are arranged chronologically, from the husband's kinui—the halakhic term for a situation in which a husband is jealous for his wife and suspects that she has secluded herself with another man—to unbinding the sotah's hair. Chapter 1 concerns the laws of

[5] Ishay Rosen-Zvi, cited above, note 2, especially p. 208.

seclusion and the fulfillment of the halakhic conditions for seclusion to have legal effect. Chapter 2 details the procedure for bringing the woman to the Temple and having the priest administer the oath. Chapter 3 discusses the offering of the sotah's meal offering and the administration of the drink. Chapter 4 lists the women to whom the drink is not administered. The contents of chapter 5 raise a question about the tractate's editorial construction. Most of this chapter is devoted to laws from the school of Rabbi Akiva that were expounded "on that very day." It is a distinctive and beautiful collection of mishnayot. The collection deals with four different subjects whose connection is difficult to understand. The final mishnah of chapter 5, which deals with Job, is particularly surprising. It is one of the only appearances of Job in the Mishnah, and includes an explicit discussion of him. Here are the "on that very day" mishnayot in Tractate Sotah:

Chapter 5, mishnah 2: "On that very day Rabbi Akiva expounded: 'Every earthen vessel into which any of them falls—whatever is inside it shall become impure.' It does not say 'is impure,' but 'shall make impure'—rendering other things impure. This teaches that a loaf impure in the second degree imparts impurity in the third degree. Rabbi Joshua said: Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai? For you used to say: A future generation will pronounce the third-degree loaf pure, since there is no verse in the Torah establishing its impurity. Yet your disciple Akiva brings a verse from the Torah establishing its impurity, as it is said: 'Whatever is inside it shall become impure.'"

Chapter 5, mishnah 3: "On that very day Rabbi Akiva expounded: 'You shall measure outside the city, on the eastern side, two thousand cubits,' and so forth; yet another verse says: 'From the wall of the city outward, one thousand cubits all around.' One cannot say one thousand cubits, since two thousand cubits have already been stated, nor can one say two thousand cubits, since one thousand cubits have already been stated. How, then, is this to be understood? One thousand cubits are the open land, and two thousand cubits are the Sabbath limit. Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, says: One thousand cubits are the open land, and two thousand cubits are fields and vineyards."

Chapter 5, mishnah 4: "On that very day Rabbi Akiva expounded: 'Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and they spoke, saying'—there is no need for Scripture to say 'saying.' What, then, does 'saying' teach? It teaches that Israel responded after Moses to each and every phrase, as when reciting Hallel. That is why it says 'saying.' Rabbi Nehemiah says: As when reciting the Shema, rather than as when reciting Hallel."

Chapter 5, mishnah 5: "On that very day Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus expounded: Job served the Holy One, blessed be He, only out of love, as it is said: 'Though He slay me, I will hope in Him.' Yet the matter is still undecided: do I hope in Him, or do I not hope? [The uncertainty turns on the alternative Hebrew readings lo, 'in Him,' and lo, 'not.'] Scripture therefore says: 'Until I die, I will not put away my integrity.' This teaches that he acted out of love. Rabbi Joshua said: Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai? For throughout your life you expounded that Job served the Omnipresent only out of fear, as it is said: 'A blameless and upright man, fearing God and shunning evil.' Yet Joshua, your disciple's disciple, has taught that he acted out of love."

Each mishnah deals with a single subject. There are four subjects. Mishnah 2 concerns the transmission of impurity through food. It presents Rabbi Akiva's exposition, which teaches that food can contract impurity in the third degree. Before Rabbi Akiva's exposition, it was not clear whether a loaf that had fallen into an oven containing a creeping creature could render another loaf it touched impure. Since the creeping creature is a primary source of impurity, the oven contracts impurity in the first degree, and the loaf in the second degree. Rabbi Akiva's innovation is that the loaf does indeed render another loaf impure.

Mishnah 3 concerns the territory of the Levites' cities. The verses in the Book of Numbers dealing with the land of the Levites' cities contradict each other. In chapter 35, verse 4, it is written that the Levites are to be given land "from the wall of the city outward, one thousand cubits." Yet verse 5 says: "You shall measure outside the city, on the eastern side, two thousand cubits, and on the southern side two thousand cubits, and on the western side two thousand cubits, and on the northern side two thousand cubits, with the city in the middle; this shall be the open land of their cities." Isaac Abarbanel has already noted of these verses that they describe a square tract of land: "Each of its sides is two thousand cubits long, and its perimeter lies at a distance of one thousand cubits from the city walls in every direction."[6]

Mishnah 4 concerns the way the Song at the Sea was sung. The question is whether Moses and the people of Israel sang it together, or whether Moses sang the song and the people merely repeated a particular refrain. In the Mishnah's words: was the Song at the Sea sung in the manner of Hallel, with Moses saying the words and the people of Israel responding after him, or in the manner of the Shema, which is recited by everyone together? Rabbi Akiva expounds that the Song at the Sea was sung in the manner of Hallel: Moses led, and the people of Israel repeated after him. Mishnah 5 concerns the question whether Job served the LORD out of fear or out of love. In this momentous question, Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus rules that Job served out of love, against the dissenting opinion of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, who held that Job served out of fear.

The literary shaping of these mishnayot is almost entirely uniform. Each is introduced by the statement that its teaching was expounded "on that very day." The formula "on that very day" is not clear. Does it refer to the day on which Rabbi Akiva expounded his first exposition in this mishnah or this chapter? If so, what was so special about that day? Perhaps it refers to the day on which the academy was placed under the leadership of Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah, replacing Rabban Gamaliel? If so, what is distinctive about these expositions, and what connects them? On the expression "on that very day," Albeck writes: "It may be that 'on that very day' here means: on the day on which Rabbi Akiva expounded his exposition and Rabbi Joshua praised him, saying that Rabbi Zechariah ben Hakkatzav had already expounded it. On that day he also expounded other interpretations in Rabbi Joshua's presence, who praised him; and, finally, Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's exposition is also included as having been delivered on that very day."[7]

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6 Olam HaTanakh, Numbers, p. 201.

7 Hanoch Albeck, Shishah Sidrei Mishnah, Seder Nashim (Bialik Institute, 1959), pp. 384–385 [Hebrew].

Both Rabbi Akiva's exposition deriving the transmission of impurity through food from a biblical verse and Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's exposition that Job served the Holy One, blessed be He, out of love are accompanied by Rabbi Joshua's comment: "Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?"

Rosen-Zvi argues that Rabbi Joshua praises Rabbi Akiva when he says, "Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?" According to Rosen-Zvi, Rabbi Akiva has solved the problem that had troubled Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai: the absence of a biblical source for the transmission of impurity through food. Rosen-Zvi draws the same conclusion concerning the final mishnah in the chapter, which deals with Job and was appended to Rabbi Akiva's collection of expositions at a later stage. Here too, praise is voiced, and Rabbi Joshua again says: "Who will remove the dust from your eyes?" Rosen-Zvi writes of the collection of expositions itself:

"The collection as a whole offers a kind of catalog of Rabbi Akiva's exegesis, both in its subjects and in the exegetical techniques it employs. It contains an inventory of expositions from different fields that also display Rabbi Akiva's prodigious exegetical ability. In the sequence of the text, the collection's opening and conclusion, marked by Rabbi Joshua's praise, give the mishnayot in between—which present opposition to Rabbi Akiva's expositions—a similar cast, incorporating them into an overall account that testifies to his exegetical uniqueness. The entire collection is framed by approval of this approach and by the preference for it over the minimalist alternative. The formula 'on that very day,' which introduces the collection of mishnayot, should indeed be interpreted as referring to the day on which Rabbi Akiva expounded his expositions and Rabbi Joshua agreed with him. The whole collection may therefore be understood as a kind of foundation narrative of Rabbi Akiva's exegetical approach, which received 'on that very day' the approval of the greatest sage in his circle … Rabbi Akiva is not merely an exegete here, but represents a pinnacle of exegesis to which earlier generations aspired but which they did not attain."[8]

Two problems arise when we read Rosen-Zvi's explanation. First, it does not consider the subjects of the collection themselves, and in effect attributes arbitrariness to the selection of the subjects discussed in the mishnayot, so long as they provide a wide-ranging panorama of exegesis. Second, Rosen-Zvi explains the inclusion of the collection in Tractate Sotah all too loosely: "In its present location, the collection appears as a tannaitic manifesto presenting halakhah as inseparable from Scripture, rather than detached from it." This explanation could account for the placement of the collection in many other tractates. It cannot explain why it was placed specifically in Tractate Sotah.

These difficulties are joined by another: the ambiguity of the key sentence, "Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?" That sentence holds three different meanings within it. First: if Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai were here, he would take pride in the exegesis displayed in the Mishnah. Second: if Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai were here, he would feel discomfort at his own exegetical inferiority. Third: if Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai were here, he

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8 Ishay Rosen-Zvi, "Who Will Remove the Dust from Your Eyes? Mishnah Sotah Chapter 5 and the Exegesis of Rabbi Akiva," Tarbiz 75, pp. 95, 123 [Hebrew].

would be shocked by this exposition. We might perhaps resolve the ambiguity if we had earlier texts using the formula "Who will remove the dust from your eyes." Yet the only texts in our possession in which this formula appears are later than the Mishnah.[9] The lack of clarity in the phrase "Who will remove the dust from your eyes" is thus already latent in its first appearance in our mishnah. There are two possibilities: either Rabbi Joshua himself is uncertain whether he is praising or criticizing Rabbi Akiva, or this is a form of "writing between the lines" in the esoteric sense: an esoteric mode of writing designed to criticize Rabbi Akiva through what may appear at first glance to be an attempt to praise him, while simultaneously preserving the possibility of severe criticism.

A. S. Rosenthal read the statement in mishnah 2, "A future generation will pronounce the third-degree loaf pure," as a hopeful expectation that later generations would bring about the abolition of impurity transmitted through food. Such a reading of the Mishnah requires us to read Rabbi Akiva's exposition in that same mishnah critically, since it results in a loaf's imparting third-degree impurity. Consequently, the saying "Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?" takes on a critical meaning in that mishnah: if Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai were here, he would be shocked by the stringency his disciples have imposed. Rather than pronounce the third-degree loaf pure, they use exegesis to impose a stricter rule.

Another point to consider is the collection's placement. According to the tractate's "large-scale reading," the collection marks the conclusion of the part devoted to the sotah (chapter 6, as noted, is a connecting link between the tractate's first part and the part concerned with matters recited in the sacred tongue). This is therefore a conclusion. What does this conclusion mean? How do these mishnayot fit into Tractate Sotah? What is the point of the subjects of Rabbi Akiva's expositions? A reading such as Rosenthal's leads to the conclusion that, through this collection of mishnayot, the editor who concludes Tractate Sotah—the part dealing with the laws of sotah—sharply criticizes Rabbi Akiva's expositions. The criticism is so severe that it contains a kind of lament. If we interpret "Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai?" critically, as an appeal for Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai to rise from the grave, then this is undoubtedly an expression of lament for the present situation and a longing for earlier generations.

Moreover, this is not simply an exegetical criticism of Rabbi Akiva's method of study as compared with that of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. Rather, it is a criticism with implications for political and religious reality. As noted, there are four expositions: on the transmission of impurity through food; on the territory of the Levites' cities; on the manner in which the Song at the Sea was sung; and, finally, Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's exposition concerning Job. The presentation of the three expositions of Rabbi Akiva expresses sharp criticism of him in four different contexts—halakhic, political, theological, and in relation to his conception of leadership:

1. In the halakhic context: the excessive stringency he displays in the laws of purity and impurity.

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[9] In these texts, the formula appears precisely in the sense of rebuking the deceased, who is invited to rise from the dead and see reality. This is so in Genesis Rabbah, section 21, paragraph 14. It is also so in the Talmuds' interpretation of the wording in the Mishnah, where its meaning is specifically praise of Rabbi Akiva.

2. In the political context: his attempt to clip the wings of the people's natural leadership by restricting the territory of the Levites. Instead of one thousand cubits of open land and two thousand cubits of fields and vineyards, Rabbi Akiva grants the Levites only one thousand cubits of open land.

3. In the theological context: criticism of the conception of Job as one who served out of love.

4. In the context of leadership: a severe criticism of Rabbi Akiva, who sees the leader as ruling over the people, leading them, and elevated above them, while the people merely repeat after him, rather than sharing in leadership.

In the first case, mishnah 2, Rabbi Akiva turns the transmission of impurity through food from a rabbinic rule into a biblical one. Rabbi Joshua laments this:

"Who will remove the dust from your eyes, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai? For you used to say: A future generation will pronounce the third-degree loaf pure, since there is no verse in the Torah establishing its impurity. Yet Akiva, your disciple, brings a verse from the Torah establishing its impurity, as it is said: 'Whatever is inside it shall become impure.'"

Rabbi Akiva imposes a severe restriction in the halakhic context. Instead of pronouncing a loaf pure, something that would have been easier to permit, he uses his halakhic exegetical ability to impose a stricter rule.

In the second case, Rabbi Akiva tries to clip the wings of the Levites. He argues that all the Levites receive is a thousand-cubit tract of open land around their cities. He uses the remaining two thousand cubits to establish a biblical basis for the Sabbath limit. Against him stands Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean, who derives from a straightforward reading of the verses that the Levites receive "one thousand cubits of open land and two thousand cubits of fields and vineyards." Rabbi Akiva prefers to derive the Sabbath limit from the apparently redundant wording of the verses. The two tannaim are living in a generation after the destruction of the Temple, and each adopts a different position toward the Levites. Rabbi Eliezer's view expresses concern for the Levites' privileges even after the destruction, while Rabbi Akiva exchanges their privileges for a deepening of the biblical basis of post-destruction Jewish identity as a whole. This is the underlying criticism of Rabbi Akiva in this mishnah: even if the Levites' status was diminished by the destruction, there remains an obligation to preserve the tradition of concern for their needs. Harm to the Levites also harms tradition, and thus the people.

In the third case, Rabbi Akiva's exposition expresses an elitist conception of leadership in which the people are led and repeat after their leader. The leader recites the song, and they respond after him. In this case it is precisely leadership through participation that is elevated: the song is recited together. The question of the relevance of this mishnah, raised even more forcefully on a first reading, is answered. The singing of the song is a symbol of the relationship between leader and people, just as the transmission of impurity through food symbolizes stringency in halakhah, and the restriction of the Levites' open land exemplifies the restriction of the political sphere by halakhic exegesis.

Leadership that addresses the people from above rather than at eye level, leading them from the top down, reciting the song as one recites Hallel, is a negative form of leadership. Why? Perhaps this is a criticism of the very notion of leadership for the Jewish people, akin to the negative attitude toward a king: the Jewish people have one king, God. Every other charismatic leader threatens God's leadership, and is therefore negative. It may also be a criticism of the character of this leadership: it is detached from the people while seeing itself as their emissary and representative. It is a dangerous leadership, capable of bringing disaster upon the people. Unaware of their state of mind or of the limits of power, it may drag them into a hopeless adventure.

The concluding exposition, concerning Job, provides an apt ending to the tractate's first unit. It expresses a severe criticism of Joshua ben Hyrcanus. If Job served the Omnipresent out of love, why was he subjected to such suffering? The conclusion is that Job served the Holy One, blessed be He, out of fear, and this was his sin. The chapter ends with the statement of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai that Job served God out of fear. As noted, Rosen-Zvi argues that Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's exegesis is also exalted here. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai understands the verse about Job's fear of God in its plain sense, in contrast to the exegetical virtuosity expressed in Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's exposition. This very view is a simplistic reading of the Mishnah. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai debates the most basic questions of reward and punishment and concludes that there is an explanation for suffering in the world: Job served out of fear, so it is no wonder that the troubles befell him. Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus's view that Job served out of love cuts the ground from under those who believe in reward and punishment, and who do not believe that suffering is good in itself. According to Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, death and suffering always come as punishment for a transgression.

The assertion that Job served out of love therefore has grave theological and political implications if we read it in the context of the criticism of Rabbi Akiva found in all the other mishnayot. As we know, Rabbi Akiva supported Bar Kokhba and was one of the leaders of the revolt. He also exalted suffering endured out of love for God, seeing it as an expression of the perfect worship of God. The criticism here is severe: according to Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, the destruction itself testifies to the people's sin. Had the dust been removed from his eyes, he would have been bitterly disappointed, since he held that Job served God out of fear and that all his troubles befell him for this reason. Had Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai returned to life in the days of the Bar Kokhba revolt, he would have argued that the revolt failed because of the generation's sins.

The three preceding mishnayot concern Rabbi Akiva's expositions. Here, an exposition by a relatively obscure tanna is presented and criticized in the same language used to criticize Rabbi Akiva's view in the preceding mishnah. A simple explanation may be that the Mishnah is concerned with Rabbi Akiva's character and fate. Job in the Mishnah is not only Job, but Rabbi Akiva as well. Rabbi Joshua ben Hyrcanus tries to reread Job's life in light of what happened to Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva served out of love: he was prepared to give his life for the sanctification of God's name and did so, proving that he served God out of love rather than fear. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai, by contrast, offers the critical position found in the preceding mishnayot: Job served out of fear, which also explains why Satan and God attacked him. Rabbi Akiva's sufferings were his own fault. In the Mishnah's political context, he too served out of fear—fear of the foreign

ruler's domination—and proved his loyalty and service to God specifically through fear. Any other perspective implies a world in which suffering has no meaning.

The collection of mishnayot that concludes the tractate's first part can be read as an unprecedented criticism of Rabbi Akiva's halakhic and political path, his conception of leadership, and his theological outlook. Such criticism can be read as part of the historical and political context of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Excessive stringency in halakhah, clipping the wings of the people's previous leadership, a charismatic conception of leadership detached from the people, and the exaltation of "sufferings of love": all are severely criticized by the Mishnah. But what do they mean? Did these bring about the revolt's failure? Is this a pragmatic political statement about the conduct of the revolt, or a much deeper statement? At this point, we should turn to a large-scale reading of both parts of the tractate together.

D. Adultery and Messianism

The tractate's second part concerns those public rituals in which institutional mediation is also exalted. In all of them, God's direct revelation is precluded, and the ritual follows the pattern of the covenant made at Shechem between the people of Israel and their God: a covenant without revelation, in which God's word is mediated by the Levites.

If we connect the criticism of Rabbi Akiva expressed in the tractate's first part with its unqualified halakhic support for a political system administered through institutional mediation, an interesting picture emerges. Scholars are divided over whether Rabbi Akiva saw Bar Kokhba as a messianic figure or as a political figure who had come to save Israel. Bar Kokhba himself took the title nasi, "prince," which, on the face of it, is a political designation and does not necessarily carry eschatological connotations. There are, however, texts indicating that Rabbi Akiva did indeed see Bar Kokhba as a messianic figure.[10]

The picture that emerges from Tractate Sotah supports this messianic interpretation. A large-scale reading of the tractate, which deals with the laws of sotah, reveals its latent anti-messianic message. Its final part exalts the public rituals recited in the sacred tongue, a language of revelation grounded entirely in institutional mediation. Its concluding section in the part concerned with the laws of sotah holds up a harsh, critical mirror to leadership detached from the people, which attempts to clip the wings of its traditional leadership, imposes stringency in halakhah, and also exalts suffering as a way of expressing love of God. It is the support for Bar Kokhba as God's representative on earth, as God's embodiment, as Messiah, that is subjected to severe criticism here. Along with it, other elements that characterized the revolt's leadership are also fundamentally rejected.

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[10] Rabbi Akiva applied to him the verse: "A star shall come forth from Jacob, and a scepter shall arise from Israel" (Jerusalem Talmud, Ta'anit, chapter 4). David Flusser writes: "After the discovery of the scrolls in the Judean Desert, it is extremely difficult to argue that Bar Kokhba's title, 'Prince of Israel,' carries no messianic inflection whatever. It is true, however, that he did not call himself either Messiah or king." "The Bar Kokhba Revolt and Its Consequences," Mahanayim 21 (1961) [Hebrew].

The tractate's first part is thus composed of two levels. Its halakhic framework is the sotah rite and the laws associated with it. Yet placing the rite within a larger framework changes the way we view the tractate. That framework—the tractate's final three chapters and the conclusion of its first part—gives the tractate a new meaning: it supports institutional mediation between the people of Israel and their God, as opposed to God walking among human beings in the form of a Messiah. The framework also supports moderate leadership, both halakhically and politically, and expresses a conservative position toward the traditional leadership whose authority has been eroded: its rights must be preserved so as not to undermine the existing leadership altogether.

In this context, the laws of sotah in the tractate become a metaphor for the conduct of the people of Israel. The sotah is reread: she is the private sotah, but also the people of Israel as a whole. The tractate becomes a theodicy of Israel's condition after the Bar Kokhba revolt. The people's leadership failed: it was extreme and detached from the people, and, above all, it supported a messianic idea opposed to the institutional tradition that the tractate seeks to exalt.[11]

This context also clarifies the relationship between messianism and idolatry. In the Bible, the metaphor of Israel as an adulterous woman expresses the people of Israel's worship of idols.

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[11] Such a reading of the tractate also makes it possible to understand what the day on which Rabbi Akiva expounded his words was. Perhaps the Mishnah is referring to the day described in Deuteronomy 31:

> "(16) The LORD said to Moses: You are about to lie down with your fathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land into which they are entering. They will forsake Me and break My covenant, which I made with them. (17) My anger will burn against them on that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them. They will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will befall them. They will say on that day: Is it not because my God is no longer in my midst that these evils have befallen me? (18) But I will surely hide My face on that day because of all the evil they have done, for they have turned to other gods. (19) Now write down this song, teach it to the children of Israel, and put it in their mouths, so that this song may be My witness against the children of Israel. (20) For I will bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers; they will eat, be satisfied, and grow fat, and turn to other gods and serve them. They will spurn Me and break My covenant. (21) When many evils and troubles have befallen them, this song will testify against them, for it will not be forgotten from the mouths of their descendants. For I know their inclination, what they are doing this day, even before I have brought them into the land which I swore to give them. (22) Moses wrote this song on that day and taught it to the children of Israel."

The "on that very day" on which Rabbi Akiva expounded could refer to verse 17: "My anger will burn against them on that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them. They will be devoured, and many evils and troubles will befall them. They will say on that day: Is it not because my God is no longer in my midst that these evils have befallen me?" After the people of Israel have followed other gods, God punishes them. Through the addition of the words "on that very day," the Mishnah makes a connection between Rabbi Akiva's expositions and the tractate's central subject, the sotah. Rabbi Akiva's expositions, delivered "on that very day," take us back to verses that describe God's hiding of His face and the destruction, and thus reinforce the sense that the Mishnah's arrangement contains a criticism of these expositions. That criticism concerns the way the expositions express negative processes undergone by the Jewish people in the generation after the destruction, which ultimately brought about the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt.

Following other gods is the outcome of their adultery. This is so in Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.[12] Here, by contrast, the tractate's framework uses that metaphor to criticize the neglect of institutional mediation and the embrace of messianism. This is the first time a connection is made between the messianic idea and idolatry. The connection is made by transferring the metaphor of adultery from the worship of idols to messianism.

E. Conclusion and the Mishnayot on Measure for Measure

How can the people's condition after the Bar Kokhba revolt be explained? How can we explain the wholesale destruction of Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel following the great upsurge of belief in Bar Kokhba as Messiah? The sotah rite provides the editor with a means of understanding the destruction that followed the revolt and of pointing to a new path. In the Mishnah, the sotah rite is set between two units: the unit beginning "By the measure a person uses, that person is measured," which appears at the end of chapter 1, and the collection of Rabbi Akiva's expositions, "on that very day," which appears at the end of chapter 5.

I have already discussed the sharp criticism in the collection of "on that very day" expositions. In contrast to that collection of mishnayot, which raises a question about its very placement at the end of chapter 5, the collection of mishnayot beginning "By the measure a person uses, that person is measured," at the end of chapter 1, seems at first sight to belong where it is. This collection includes the explicit statement:

"By the measure a person uses, that person is measured: she adorned herself for a transgression, and the Omnipresent made her repulsive; she exposed herself for a transgression, and the Omnipresent exposed her" (mishnah 7).

Yet what place is there for the following mishnayot, which concern measure-for-measure treatment of leaders—Samson, Absalom, Miriam, and Joseph? The first two acted badly and were therefore paid back in kind; the latter two acted well and were therefore treated well:

Chapter 1, mishnah 7: "By the measure a person uses, that person is measured: she adorned herself for a transgression, and the Omnipresent made her repulsive; she exposed herself for a transgression, and the Omnipresent exposed her. The thigh initiated the transgression, and then the belly; therefore the thigh is struck first, and then the belly. The rest of the body does not escape."

Chapter 1, mishnah 8: "Samson followed his eyes, and therefore the Philistines gouged out his eyes, as it is said: 'The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes.' Absalom prided himself on his hair, and therefore he was suspended by his hair. Because he lay with ten of his father's concubines, ten lances were thrust into him, as it is said: 'Ten men, bearers of Joab's weapons, surrounded him.' Because he stole three things—the heart of his father, the heart of the court, and the heart of the people of Israel, as it is said: 'Absalom stole the heart of the people of Israel'—three darts were thrust into him, as it is said: 'He took three darts in his hand and thrust them into Absalom's heart.'"

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[12] Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, Idolatry (Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 9–36.

Chapter 1, mishnah 9: "The same is true of good deeds. Miriam waited for Moses for one hour, as it is said: 'His sister stood at a distance'; therefore Israel waited for her for seven days in the wilderness, as it is said: 'The people did not travel until Miriam was brought back.' Joseph merited burying his father, and none of his brothers was greater than he, as it is said: 'Joseph went up to bury his father,' and 'There went up with him both chariots and horsemen.' Whom do we have greater than Joseph, whose remains were attended to by none other than Moses? Moses merited attending to Joseph's bones, and no one in Israel is greater than he, as it is said: 'Moses took Joseph's bones with him.' Who is greater than Moses, whose burial was attended to by none other than the Omnipresent, as it is said: 'He buried him in the valley'? This was said not of Moses alone, but of all the righteous, as it is said: 'Your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall gather you in.'"

The context of these mishnayot is clear. Samson and Absalom pursued lust and personal honor, outward beauty and desire, just like the adulterous woman. Miriam and Joseph, by contrast, symbolize positive qualities: patience, respect for the people's sages and elders, and concern for the honor of the dead rather than outward bodily beauty. Miriam and Joseph are indeed positive figures, distanced from the test of adultery, whereas Absalom and Samson are perceived as negative figures in this context. One must remember, however, that these four figures are all leaders of one kind or another. The editor of these mishnayot was not concerned with a private individual as such, but with a figure whose qualities were qualities of leadership. It is no coincidence that these models for imitation or rejection are leaders: it is leadership as a model that is the tractate's subject.

In this sense, chapter 1 defines the dual character of the tractate as a whole. On the one hand, it concerns the halakhic procedure of the sotah rite: the husband's warning, taking a woman suspected of adultery up to Jerusalem, and bringing her before the priest. On the other hand, it concerns the great questions of proper leadership. Samson and Absalom are false, blind leaders, as against Miriam and Joseph as symbols of humble, responsible leadership that is rewarded accordingly. Chapter 1, as the editor has arranged it for us, is thus not a technical preparation for the performance of the sotah rite. It already contains an intensive discussion of the question of the revolt's failure. The chapter does more than explain why we must make the adulterous woman repulsive, measuring her by the measure she herself used; it also gives us a sharp answer to the question of how the people of Israel should be led after the Bar Kokhba revolt. The people went astray after unworthy leadership, which pursued private interests and personal honor, and neglected the sages and God.

Maimonides' words in Laws of Kings (11:3) are well known:

"Do not imagine that the messianic king must perform signs and wonders, bring new things into being in the world, revive the dead, or do similar things. It is not so. Rabbi Akiva was a great sage among the sages of the Mishnah, and he was the arms-bearer of King Ben Koziva. He would say of him that he was the messianic king; he and all the sages of his generation imagined that he was the messianic king, until he was killed because of sins. Once he was killed, they knew that he was not."

Yet where in rabbinic literature is the terrible disappointment in the messianic dream described? As noted, the central argument of this chapter is that Tractate Sotah should be seen as a response to the failure of the Bar Kokhba revolt and to the messianic idea in general. This claim contains a further claim: if Tractate Sotah does indeed criticize the view of Bar Kokhba as Messiah and extol the institutional mediation of the sages, then it is the first text in rabbinic literature to connect messianism with idolatry.

The adultery of the people of Israel, whose meaning in rabbinic literature is idolatry and following other gods, becomes following the messianic idea. Identifying the messianic idea with idolatry is no simple matter, since it was part of the theological worldview of people in the biblical period, and also of people in the rabbinic period. The editorial construction of Tractate Sotah implicitly contains a sharp criticism of the messianic idea and of the identification of the Messiah as a person living among the community. In the context of Sotah, the connection between the tractate's first five chapters and its final three highlights the idea that identifying a flesh-and-blood human being as Messiah is nothing less than idolatry.