

Drash Parsha Naso
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1. I accepted the invitation to do today's drash as this would be way to honor my father, whose 16th yahrtzeit I will mark beginning tonight.
2. I then realized that the parsha was Naso and reminded myself that I had led several discussions on this parsha, mostly focusing on what I view as one of the Torah's most enigmatic passages – the Sotah ritual.
3. In past drashes, my focus has been on trying to rationalize a procedure that seems so blatantly anti-woman – after all, per the text, it is the woman who has to drink the potion and who faces the risk of her belly distend and then die.
4. My argument was that the Bible authors knew the potion would not have any effect and so the trial by ordeal was designed to demonstrate the women's innocence in the eyes of her husband and the public. [I recently came across [a 2022 article by Yosef Lindell](#) in a Modern Orthodox journal, which summarizes the arguments of three 20th Century Jewish thinkers, including two from Orthodox rabbis, who conclude that the point of the ritual was to support the claims of the truly innocent woman, who would only drink the potion if she were not guilty.]
5. As I have grown older, my dissatisfaction with this interpretation has grown – after all, the outcome of the trial by ordeal, assuming my assumption, is that the women is shown not guilty and must go back to live with the husband who was willing to see her go through an ordeal that, in his mind, could have resulted in her death and, perhaps even worse, she would have a child with this jealous husband.
6. Hold that thought as I make a slight detour – this past week, at the recommendation of a friend, I read a 2021 book by Amanda Ripley entitled *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out*. Has anyone read the book?
7. The book combines science and social science with several archetype stories about “high conflicts” – her protagonists include a radical anti-GMO activist who ultimately changed his position, a Chicago gang member who now works to counter gang violence, a former FARC rebel in Colombia who accepted the government's offer of reintegration, the rabbi of the Bnai Jeshurun synagogue in NY who has created processes for community discussion on politically contentious issues , and most notably, Gary Friedman, a divorce attorney turned mediator in Marin County, north of California, who reminded me of our own John Spiegel, z'l.
8. As Shipley describes, sometime in the mid-1970s, Friedman shifted from a traditional divorce practice to the mediation of marital and other disputes. He popularized the techniques that John and others used – for example, letting the parties tell their stories in the presence of the other (and the mediator) and asking them to project their respective lives five-ten years down the road.
9. Friedman's story, however, takes a somewhat bizarre turn when in 2017 he decides to run for the Board of Muir Beach, the 300 person community where he had lived for 40 years. He wins the election, but the master mediator's term turns out to be a disaster for him and his reputation. I won't go into the details, but in Ripley's telling Friedman had fallen into a high conflict from which he could remove himself only when he reached a saturation point and was consciously willing to look for a way out.
10. Since many in this community may be curious about the Bnai Jeshurun connection, I will just say that the book closes with a story of how several BJ members spent a few days at

the homes of several Trump voting, corrections officers in Michigan, and two months later the correction officers visited the BJ members in New York.

11. The book is well worth reading, but what does it have to do with the Sotah ritual? So, here is my new interpretation: the biblical authors' goal was not to resolve the dispute between the jealous husband and the wife he suspected of adultery through some magic potion – rather, to avoid such an outcome, a mediator would sit with the wife and husband with a goal of getting them to agree to separate. The mediator would accomplish this by having the parties listen to each other carefully, to inquire whether the husband really would be satisfied seeing his wife suffer the supposed effects of the potion, and whether the wife really would want to raise a child with this husband.
12. Sometimes respectful separation is the right answer - whether in a marriage, a business partnership, a commitment to a political party, or between groups fighting over the same piece of land, as some of us have been arguing is needed in Palestine/Israel. Helping individuals to realize this outcome, particularly in the context of a high conflict, is complicated but the alternatives are often much worse.
13. A final word about my father: Most of all, I remember him as an excellent listener, who enjoyed a good debate at the Shabbat table, but would do all in his power to avoid high conflicts; while not a formal mediator, he definitely played that role many times as a synagogue and day school board member.
14. Three questions to consider in the context of the discussion:
 - a. Are there other ways to read the Sotah story that you find satisfying?
 - b. Is mediation, as opposed to adversarial adjudication, always the better approach for resolving high conflicts?
 - c. Can we imagine “listening” respectfully either in a one-on-one or group setting to those whose positions on specific issues – gun control, LGBT rights, Trump, Israel-Palestine – are fundamentally opposed to our own?