

ONE MITZVAH AT A TIME<sup>1</sup> by Rabbi Aviva Richman

*Parashat Naso* includes the ritual of *sotah*. A husband brings his wife whom he suspects of adultery to the *Mikdash* (sanctuary) where a *kohen* gives her a potion of “cursed waters” that either acquit her or punish her. From our earliest sages to the present moment, many nuanced interpretations of this anomalous and troubling ritual have emerged.<sup>(1)</sup> We will focus on one Rabbinic principle that applies to the procedure of *sotah*, but has much wider implications for other rituals, **and paves the way towards a theology of *mitzvot* embedded in honoring the dignity of each individual.**

The Talmud asks whether one *Sotah* ritual could be used for two suspected adulteresses at the same time. Why not save water and the Divine Name and have them both drink from one potion? In response, the Talmud raises a concern that we should not “bundle” *mitzvot* together:<sup>(2)</sup>

*We do not make two suspected adulteresses drink at once; we do not purify two people with tzara'at (skin disease) at once; we do not pierce the ear of two slaves [who want to stay with their master] at once;<sup>(3)</sup> we do not break the neck of two calves [in response to an unresolved murder] at once<sup>(4)</sup>—because we do not do mitzvot in bundles (Talmud Bavli Sotah 8a).*

At face value, it looks like this principle of not bundling *mitzvot* already exists more generally. Yet, the origins and meaning of this principle are complex. When we trace the development of this concept, we find that **there are actually a number of different reasons to be concerned about an approach to *mitzvot* based in “efficiency.”**

In its earliest form, it seems that **the main concern about efficiency wasn't really about bundling *mitzvot* but about bundling people.** In an earlier version of the *baraita*,<sup>2</sup> there is a list of rituals that can't be performed as “two in one” but without the framing language “we don't bundle *mitzvot*.”

“The *kohen* makes her swear...” We do not make two suspected adulteresses swear at once; we do not burn two [red] heifers at once; we do not break the neck of two calves at once; we do not execute two men at once; we do not quarantine two people with *tzara'at* at once; we do

not diagnose two people with *tzara'at* at once (*Sifrei Zuta*<sup>3</sup> (Horowitz), *Numbers* 5:19).

The list suggests that there is a problem of combination with these specific cases, where ritual interfaces with an individual at a particularly charged moment in their lives. **The ritual means to achieve some kind of coming to terms for the individual**, a reckoning with the accusation of adultery, diagnosis or healing for a person with *tzara'at*, a test of resolve for the slave who wants to remain with his master, elders coming to terms with an unsolved murder in their precinct. **The idea that one accomplishes “two at once” would entirely undermine how the ritual works. The *mitzvah* is designed to bring a person's experience into full view, for the individual or community to sink into the complex feelings contained in this moment. To attempt “two in one” denies the intensity and subjectivity of this experience, and instead leads to a sense of being in a factory assembly line of formulaic motions.**<sup>(5)</sup>

From these origins that are really about **not bundling people** while performing a ritual for an individual, we see a shift towards the principle of **not bundling *mitzvot***. To the list we find in the earlier sources, the Talmud adds the frame that the concern is about “not bundling *mitzvot*.”

Now the concept takes on a life of its own, and in other sources we see that it is applied to *mitzvot* more broadly. This includes *mitzvot* that have nothing to do with individual people, such as mentioning two different concepts in one final phrase of a *berakhah*.<sup>(6)</sup> How does this leap work? If there is no longer an issue of honoring individuals in intense life moments, what is the problem with an “efficient” approach to *mitzvot*?

Rashi explains that doing two *mitzvot* at once makes it look like you are trying to get the *mitzvah* over with, that each *mitzvah* is a “burden” one wants to shrug off. **The idea of not bundling *mitzvot* reflects a theology of savoring**—rather than “bearing”—*mitzvot*.

We can use Rashi's framework to understand the end of the *parashah*, where the Torah separately lists the sacrifices brought by each head of the twelve tribes (besides the Levites) for the dedication of the altar. They all give the same gift. It would have been much more efficient to “bundle” this section rather than wasting words to list each gift separately. But **listing them separately reflects how God savors each and every gift.** When we imagine the head of each tribe bringing a gift in the newly constructed *Mishkan* (tabernacle), it is a turning point after members of their tribe participated in the sin of the golden calf. There must be such a mix of guilt, relief, and homecoming in bringing these gifts forward. God

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/one-mitzvah-time>

<sup>2</sup> *Baraita* is an **ancient oral tradition of Jewish religious law that was not included in the Mishnah**. The word *Baraita* means “Outside Teaching” or “Exclusion” in Hebrew. It is a tradition in the Oral Torah of Rabbinical Judaism that is not incorporated in the Mishnah. *Baraita* is a traditional Jewish interpretation or statement of biblical law dating from the tannaitic period.

<sup>3</sup> *Sifrei Zuta* (literally: little books) is a collection of midrashim on the book of Numbers. The text of *Sifrei Zuta* was not preserved and is known to us only through fragments quoted elsewhere. In modern times, scholars have reconstituted and published these fragments as a unified work.

meets each *korban* (sacrifice) with a unique intention and focus, **just as each person who brings a *korban* has a unique life circumstances and feelings from which the offering emerges.**

We can think of *mitzvot* as parallel to *korbanot*, not being bundled together but representing unique acts of devotion and attention. *Mitzvot* are about taking advantage of an opportunity to express how much we savor being in relationship with God, **not checking things off a list as quickly as possible.**

The Talmud applies this principle not only to *mitzvot* writ large but also to learning Torah, teaching that if one “bundles their Torah it will diminish.” Rashi explains that this is someone who takes in new material but doesn’t review it. One might think they have harvested “bundles and bundles” of Torah, but instead it disappears.

Beyond the quantitative perspective, not to learn too much too quickly, there is something deeper here in what it means to learn Torah. Torah can function like the rituals of the *Mikdash* in the earlier sources. It can meet us in the intensity of our lives and hold the complexity of each moment’s experiences. **Torah is to be savored as we encounter it in moments of joy, difficulty, and transition.** If we bundle up too much learning all together, it might not actually intersect with our lives and experiences. Like the leper who feels reduced to an object on an assembly line, **we might end up with a transactional<sup>4</sup> practice of Torah and *mitzvot*.**

We have traced the development of the concept of not “bundling” *mitzvot* and instead paying attention to each *mitzvah* individually. The origins of this principle stem from *mitzvot* as a means for paying close attention to people, as individuals go through moments in life that require specific rituals. When we become aware of these roots it can inform the way we practice *mitzvot*. Although the concept of “not bundling” people shifts into a concern about “not bundling” *mitzvot*, this does not mean that our attention to individual *mitzvot* should take over our attention to individual people. Rather, **love and care for each *mitzvah* can—and must—be fully intertwined with bringing our attention more fully towards love and care of individual people and their stories.**

(1) *Sotah* poses challenges to an halakhic approach that values fair legal procedure and evidence-based rulings. Much of the Mishnah’s interpretation of the biblical passage makes the ritual adhere more to Rabbinic approaches to procedure and evidence. *Sotah* is doubly troubling from a feminist perspective. Ishay Rosen-Zvi (in his book *The Rite That Was Not: Temple, Midrash and Gender in Tractate Sotah*) has described how the Mishnah’s interpretation of *Sotah* emphasizes an association between women and desire, guilt, and punishment,

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<sup>4</sup> The term “transactional” refers to anything related to the exchange of goods or services. It can describe processes involved in buying or selling, as well as communication between people in a business context. In essence, **it emphasizes the actions and interactions that occur during transactions.**

even though the Torah leaves room for an innocence. These tropes relate to negative attitudes towards the female body and sexuality that appear in other contemporaneous literature of late antiquity. **A different approach to the ritual presumes that the purpose was to confront male jealousy and create a process to clear the wife’s name and enable the marriage to continue.** There is much more to say about the arguments and implications of various readings. While these are not the focus of this essay, my discussion ultimately pushes back on a reading of *Sotah* that would propagate shame and humiliation of innocent women, and instead reaffirms an approach to *mitzvot* that puts individual dignity front and center.

- (2) This is cited in the printed version of the Talmud with a formula that normally means it is a quotation from a *mishnah*, but in this case it’s actually a *baraita*, a text in a similar style to the Mishnah but not in the Mishnah itself.
- (3) See Exodus 21:6.
- (4) See Deuteronomy 21:1-9.
- (5) See *Tosefta Sotah* 1:6 for a more specific discussion of why it is problematic to do two *Sotah* rituals at once.
- (6) In *Berakhot* 49a, the principle is used to explain why you don’t conclude a *berakhah* with two different clauses/concepts.

1. ***We will focus on one Rabbinic principle that applies to the procedure of sotah, but has much wider implications for other rituals, and paves the way towards a theology of mitzvot embedded in honoring the dignity of each individual ... In its earliest form, it seems that the main concern about efficiency wasn’t really about bundling mitzvot but about bundling people.***

a. Deuteronomy 24:16

<sup>16</sup>Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; **each will die for their own sin.**

b. Ezekiel 18:4

<sup>4</sup>For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child both alike belong to me. **The one who sins is the one who will die.**

c. 2Kings 14:1-6 (2Chron 25:1-4)

<sup>1</sup>In the second year of Jehoash ... king of Israel, Amaziah son of Joash king of Judah began to reign. <sup>2</sup>He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-nine years ... <sup>3</sup>He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not as his father David had done. In everything he followed the example of his father Joash. <sup>4</sup>The high places, however, were not removed; the people continued to offer sacrifices and burn incense there.

<sup>5</sup>After the kingdom was firmly in his grasp, he executed the officials who had murdered his father the king. **<sup>6</sup>Yet he did not put the children of the assassins to death, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses where the LORD commanded: “Parents are not to be put to death for their children,**

**nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin"** (Deu 24:16).

d. The Individual and Society<sup>5</sup> by Rav Chaim Navon

And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help to match him. (*Bereishit* 2:18)

This verse constitutes a fitting introduction to our discussion regarding the relationship between man and society, between individual and community.

The fundamental question is: Which of the two is of higher rank? Does the individual enjoy essential primacy over society, society being merely a collection of individuals; or does society take precedence over the individual, the individual being merely one small element of the community that surrounds him?

We know that Judaism assigns great importance to the community; many religious rites can only be performed in a communal context. The quorum of ten that is required for prayer teaches us the vital importance of society and community for religious life. God turns to the people of Israel and commands them as a single entity, "And there Israel camped ('*vayichan*' in the singular) before the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:2).

On the other hand, we are also familiar with the many sources that emphasize the value of the individual. Here too the starting point is the second chapter of *Bereishit*:

Therefore, man was created alone—to teach you that whoever destroys a single soul in Israel, Scripture regards him as if he destroyed the entire world. And whoever saves a single soul in Israel, Scripture regards him as if preserved the entire world. And for the sake of peace among people, so that one person should not say to his fellow: "My father was greater than your father." And so that the heretics should not say: "There are many powers in heaven." And to tell the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, for **man mints many coins with a single mold, and they are all similar to one another**. But the King, the King of kings, **the Holy One blessed be He, stamped every man with the mold of the first man. And not one is similar to his fellow**. Therefore, each and every person must say: "For my sake, the world was created." (Mishna, *Sanhedrin* 37a)

This assertion that every person must say, "For my sake, the world was created," greatly emphasizes the value of the individual. In one of our previous lectures, we discussed the fact that man was created alone in the context of man's rank in creation. We now

raise this point a second time in a different context: the status of the individual vis-a-vis society. In light of the fact that man was created alone, it is difficult to argue that the individual is merely an element of society with no independent significance of his own.

We mentioned earlier that the Torah was given to the entire Jewish people. Rabbi Chayyim Ibn Attar, author of "*Or ha-Chayyim*," emphasizes this point that the Jewish people received the Torah as a community ...

2. ***The mitzvah is designed to bring a person's experience into full view, for the individual or community to sink into the complex feelings contained in this moment. To attempt "two in one" denies the intensity and subjectivity of this experience, and instead leads to a sense of being in a factory assembly line of formulaic motions.***

a. 2Corinthians 10:12

<sup>12</sup>We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. **When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.**

b. Galatians 6:1-4

<sup>1</sup>Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person **gently**. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. <sup>2</sup>Carry each other's burdens, and in this way **you will fulfill the law of Messiah**. <sup>3</sup>If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. <sup>4</sup>Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, **without comparing themselves to someone else ...**

1) The "Law of Messiah"

The Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds ... a phrase found only once in the (Apostolic Writings) ... But the phrase appears in the Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 11:8;

"The *Torah* which a person learns in this world is 'vanity' in comparison with **the *Torah* of the Messiah**."

And its meaning there is essentially the same as in this verse: the *Torah* as it will be taught by the Messiah himself, the *Torah* as upheld by the Messiah.<sup>6</sup>

c. 1Corinthians 12:4-12

<sup>4</sup>There are **different kinds of gifts**, but the same Spirit distributes them. <sup>5</sup>There are **different kinds of service**, but the same Lord.

<sup>6</sup>There are **different kinds of working**, but in all of them and in

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/philosophy/issues-jewish-thought/topical-issues-thought/individual-and-society>

<sup>6</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, (Jewish New Testament Publications), p. 566.

everyone it is the same God at work. <sup>7</sup>Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good ...

<sup>12</sup>**Just as a body, though one, has many parts**, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Messiah ...

d. Drawing on general biblical knowledge, here are several examples where the Bible critiques or warns against religious practices that have become **rote, mechanical, or devoid of meaning**—akin to “a factory assembly line of formulaic motions”:<sup>7</sup>

- 1) **Isaiah 29:13**: God, through the prophet Isaiah, criticizes the people: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is based on merely human rules they have been taught.” **This is a classic critique of ritual performed without true feeling or intent.**
- 2) **Amos 5:21-23**: God declares, “I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me ... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.” **Here, ritual actions have become hollow because justice and righteousness are missing.**
- 3) **Micah 6:6-8**: The prophet questions whether impressive sacrifice or ritual alone is what God desires, concluding with the famous: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?”
- 4) **Matthew 6:7**: (Yeshua) warns against “vain repetitions” in prayer, critiquing empty, formulaic recitations.
- 5) These passages all highlight the danger of religious behaviors becoming “assembly line” motions—**performed without thought, feeling, or genuine intent.**

3. *Rashi explains that doing two mitzvot at once makes it look like you are trying to get the mitzvah over with, that each mitzvah is a “burden” one wants to shrug off. **The idea of not bundling mitzvot reflects a theology of savoring**—rather than “bearing”—mitzvot.*

a. **Malachi 1:11-14**

<sup>11</sup>My name will be great among the nations ... says the LORD Almighty. <sup>12</sup>“But you profane it ... <sup>13</sup>“When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?” says the LORD. <sup>14</sup>“**Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord.** For I am a great king,” says

the LORD Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.

b. **Acts 15:28-29**

<sup>28</sup>It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us **not to burden you** with anything beyond the following requirements: <sup>29</sup>You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality (associated with idolatry). You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

1) **Acts 15:1**

<sup>1</sup>Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: “**Unless you are circumcised**, according to the custom taught by Moses, **you cannot be saved.**”

a) Is “circumcision” the “burden” that James is talking about?

c. **Deuteronomy 30:11-14**

<sup>11</sup>Now **what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.** <sup>12</sup>It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” <sup>13</sup>Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” <sup>14</sup>No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

d. **Psalm 119:14**

<sup>14</sup>I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches.

e. **Luke 16:17**

<sup>17</sup>It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

f. **John 5:3**

<sup>3</sup>In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And **his commands are not burdensome** ...

1) **Psalm 38:4**

<sup>4</sup>**My guilt** has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.

4. *Rather, **love and care for each mitzvah can—and must—be fully intertwined with bringing our attention more fully towards love and care of individual people and their stories.***

**The concept of the Law of Moses as a burdensome yoke is a theme that emerges in various parts of the New Testament, reflecting the challenges and limitations of adhering to the Mosaic Law.** This perspective is particularly evident in the writings of the Apostle Paul and the early church’s deliberations on the role of the Law for Gentile believers.<sup>8</sup>

The Law of Moses, given to the Israelites at Mount Sinai, encompasses a comprehensive set of commandments, statutes, and ordinances. It includes moral, ceremonial, and civil laws designed to govern the life of the Israelite community. While the Law was intended to set Israel apart as God's chosen people and guide them in righteousness, **it also highlighted the inherent sinfulness of humanity and the impossibility of achieving perfect obedience.**

In the New Testament, the Law is often described as a yoke that was difficult to bear. In Acts 15:10, during the Jerusalem Council, the Apostle Peter addresses the assembly, saying, "Now then, why do you test God by placing on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?" This statement underscores the recognition that the Law, **with its extensive requirements, was burdensome even for the Jewish people who had been raised under it.**

The Apostle Paul further elaborates on this theme in his epistles. In Galatians 5:1, he exhorts believers, "It is for freedom that (Messiah) has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not be encumbered once more by a yoke of slavery". Here, Paul contrasts the freedom found in (Messiah) **with the bondage of the Law**, emphasizing that **adherence to the Law as a means of justification is a form of spiritual slavery.**

a. Galatians 5:1

*<sup>1</sup>It is for freedom that Messiah has set us free.*

1) Exodus 5:1

Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go, **so that they may hold a festival** to me in the desert.'"

2) Exodus 7:16 (cf., 8:1,20; 9:1,13; 10:3,7)

Then say to him, "The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has sent me to say to you: Let my people go, **so that they may worship me** in the desert. But until now you have not listened.

3) Psalm 119:44-45

<sup>44</sup>**I will always obey your law, for ever and ever.** <sup>45</sup>**I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts.**

4) Romans 6:17-19

<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. <sup>18</sup>**You have been set free from sin and have become slaves (or servants) to righteousness.**

5) Hebrews 9:15

For this reason, Messiah is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal in-

heritance—now that **he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.**

6) 1Peter 2:16-17

<sup>16</sup>**Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.** <sup>17</sup>Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.

b. <sup>1</sup>a yoke of slavery.

1) The Torah (properly observed) is NOT a "yoke of slavery"—What *does enslave* is **the legalistic observance of Torah commands.**

2) Berachot 14b—in a discussion about the "Shema"

One ... should first accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven and **then** accept the yoke of the commandments.

3) Yoma 85b

DEATH AND THE DAY OF ATONEMENT PROCURE ATONEMENT TOGETHER WITH PENITENCE. **Only TOGETHER WITH PENITENCE**, but not in themselves!—Shall we say that this teaching is not in accord with Rabbi? For it was taught: Rabbi said, For all transgressions [of commands of] the Torah, whether one had repented or not, does the Day of Atonement procure atonement, except in the case of one who throws off the yoke<sup>(20)</sup> [of the Torah ], interprets the Torah unlawfully.<sup>(21)</sup> or breaks the covenant of Abraham our father.<sup>(22)</sup> **In these cases, if he repented, the Day of Atonement procures atonement, if not, not!**

(20) I.e., denies the existence of God.

(21) Lit., 'reveals an aspect of the Torah (not in accordance with the correct interpretation)'; *or* 'acts in a bare-faced manner against the Torah.'

(22) Circumcision.

4) Romans 7:12-14

<sup>12</sup>So then, **the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.** <sup>13</sup>Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. <sup>14</sup>We know that **the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.**