

Parsha Ponders

Acharei Mos | May 3, 2019 | 28 Nissan 5779

The constant struggle¹

ואל אשה בנדת טומאתה לא תקרב וגו'

Do not approach a woman in her impure state of *niddah*²

The *gemarra* relates³ a conversation between a Sadducee⁴, someone who rejected Rabbinic Judaism, and the Sages of his time. He asked Rav Kahana, how could a man and woman be trusted to be alone together when the wife is a *niddah*⁵? Once she has her period, she and her husband are forbidden to each other until she immerses in a *mikveh* at the right time. He asked is it possible for a fire to kindle and not burn?

Rav Kahana responded that the Torah⁶ testifies upon the Jewish people that they are fenced with roses⁷. That is to say, they don't even breach a fence made of roses. They don't need a fence made of stones to stop them. Meaning, the lightest of prohibitions will prevent a Jew from sinning⁸. Reish Lakish responded with a different verse: כפלה הרמון רקתך, literally, your temples are like a slice of pomegranate⁹. The word רקתך, temples, is similar to the word ריק, empty. This tells us that even the emptiest of Jews are filled with *mitzvos* like a pomegranate is filled with seeds¹⁰.

Let's focus on the latter response. First of all, what does it have to do with the Sadducee's question¹¹? He for sure acknowledged the fact that the Jewish people fulfill *mitzvos*. However, he had a hard time believing that with regards *niddah*, a man and woman can be trusted to be alone together. The fact that they fulfill *mitzvos* doesn't say anything, because this particular *mitzvah* is very hard to keep. He felt it was essentially impossible. How did Reish Lakish prove otherwise?

Another issue is Reish Lakish's statement is seemingly incomprehensible. If he had said that even the emptiest of Jews have some *mitzvos*, it could have been understood. They could still be called empty, despite their miniscule amount of *mitzvos*. But to call them empty, despite being **full** of *mitzvos*, that's a contradiction. How can they be empty, and be like a pomegranate at the same time? A pomegranate is the complete opposite of empty.

An explanation could be based on a teaching of our Sages¹²: Anyone who sits and refrains from transgressing, gets reward as if they had actively performed a *mitzvah*. What this refers to is a case

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef to Leviticus 18:19

² Leviticus *loc. cit.*

³ Sanhedrin 37a

⁴ Our version of the *gemarra* says "heretic", but the Be'er Yosef quotes it as Sadducee

⁵ It sounds like from this question that this heretic held it was forbidden for them to be alone

⁶ The *gemarra* considers this verse to be from the Torah even though it's from the Writings

⁷ Song of Songs 7:3

⁸ Rashi to Sanhedrin *loc. cit.* s.v. סוגה

⁹ Song of Songs 4:3, 6:7

¹⁰ Rabbi Zeira gave a final response, with the verse about Yitzchak blessing Yaakov: וירח את ריח בגדיו (Genesis 27:27). The word for clothing is to be read as בגודיו, traitors. Meaning, even the traitors amongst the Jews are קורבן (*ibid*)

¹¹ See Tosafos *ad. loc.* s.v. התורה and וירח for how the first and third responses are related to *niddah*

¹² Makkos 3:15

where the opportunity arises to transgress, but the person refrains¹³. There's no greater *mitzvah* than someone who overcomes their desires¹⁴. Of all the possible transgressions a person can stumble in, which one is the most opportune? We would have to say the prohibition of *niddah*. All the other forbidden relationships aren't as accessible as one's own wife. When a person overcomes their desires and refrains from transgressing, this is considered like they performed a *mitzvah*. This is true every moment a husband and wife are alone together.

Now Reish Lakish's response makes sense. Even a person who is empty from the wisdom of the Torah, and doesn't perform good deeds, can be filled with *mitzvos*. This is from his refraining from transgressing with his wife¹⁵. The Sadducee couldn't see how a husband and wife could be trusted to be alone together. However, the Torah testifies that this is so. Even the emptiest of Jews are filled with *mitzvos* like a pomegranate. This is because every moment they refrain from transgressing with their wife, it's considered as if they performed a *mitzvah*. We see then that the Sadducee's astonishment was entirely misplaced.

Good Shabbos

¹³ Kiddushin 39b

¹⁴ Rashi ad. loc. s.v. התם שבא

¹⁵ The Be'er Yosef, after coming up with this insight, subsequently found that Shir HaShirim Rabbah 4:4 explicitly connects the statement of Reish Lakish with the *Mishnah* in Makkos