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# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

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## NASO

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### With Respect to Others

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נָשָׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן גַּם הֵם

*Count the heads of the sons of Gershon as well.<sup>1</sup>*

It is interesting to consider that our parsha actually begins in the middle of a topic, for the first of Levi's three families – Kehas – was counted at the end of the previous parsha. Why divide one topic between two parshiyos?

The Abarbanel explains this division by noting that although Kehas was the first son to be counted, he was not the firstborn, for he was actually the second son. The reason Kehas was counted first is in recognition of the fact that members of his family carried the Aron, which is the repository of the Torah – the ultimate value in Judaism. However, this now beckons the question: What about Gershon, the firstborn? Granted, he does not receive the honor of being counted first, but is he not deserving of honor nonetheless – as mandated by the Torah itself – and if so, how can this be arranged?

The response to this issue was to end the previous parsha after the counting of Kehas, so that Gershon would then have the distinction of having his family opening a new parsha. In this way, the honor due to him was not overlooked, even as he was not counted first.

There is a profound lesson here. Ultimate honor accrues to the Torah itself. However, with just a little forethought and attentiveness, it is not hard to arrange for others also to receive the honor due to them – the accordance of which is itself a Torah value.

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<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 4:22.

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## Learning the Parsha of Sotah

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The beginning of chapter five of Chumash Bamidbar outlines the procedure for the *sotah*, a woman whose husband has grounds to suspect her of adultery. As the verses describe, she is brought to the Beis Hamikdash and made to drink water into which a parchment with the *sotah* verses written on it is dipped. If she has indeed committed adultery, she dies by drinking the water, while if she has not, then her name is cleared.

Upon initial consideration, we may be inclined to see the goal of this procedure as that of meting out just punishment to the woman if she is guilty, allowing Divine justice to be served. However, upon further reflection, it is very unlikely that this is actually the goal. After all, heaven has infinite means of dispensing punishment for this wrongdoing – as well as any other, for that matter. It is thus not necessary to have a whole procedure in order for Divine justice to be served. Rather, R' Yaakov Kamenetzky explains that the goal of this mitzvah is in the opposite direction – to clear the woman's name in the event that she is innocent!<sup>2</sup>

The whole *sotah* situation begins with a husband seeing her wife keeping company with another man and suspecting her of being unfaithful. It is the nature of suspicion that, once aroused, it is not easily allayed. Lack of evidence will not dispel such feelings. Even if witnesses somehow attest to the fact that nothing happened, this will not entirely put the husband's concerns to rest. As such, it is practically impossible for the two of them to move past this matter and continue to live normally. To this end, Hashem instructed that she be brought to the Beis Hamikdash and drink water into which His holy name has been erased from the parchment and dissolved. In this way, Hashem Himself is, so to speak, signing off on the results of the procedure, so that if nothing happens to the woman, the man can now know without any doubt that she was innocent.

It is possible to adduce support for this approach from an episode recounted in the *Talmud Yerushalmi*, involving R' Meir.<sup>3</sup> The gemara tells of a certain woman who used to attend R' Meir's lectures. Upon hearing this, her husband became so enraged he told her not to return home until she spat in R' Meir's eye! When R' Meir heard of her predicament, he approached the woman and said, "Please excuse me, I have a terrible pain in my eye, and I know that the only thing which will relieve the pain is if you spit in my eye." Somewhat stunned, and unable to believe her luck, the woman complied, and thus returned home to her husband.

When the students heard this, they were mortified. How could the great R' Meir allow himself to suffer this indignity for the sake of a jealous husband? R' Meir responded that his conduct was a simple application of a section in the Torah. When a man suspects his wife of adultery, he brings her to the Temple and she drinks the *sotah* waters, which contain the parchment with the verses of *sotah* written on them. Putting this parchment into the water causes Hashem's name to be erased, but nevertheless it is done in order to clear her of her husband's suspicions. Said R' Meir, "If Hashem allows His name to be erased in order to restore peace to a Jewish home, then the name of R' Meir can certainly undergo some indignity for the same cause."

Hear we have a lesson in what it means to learn Chumash. Surely, no parsha in the Torah would seem to be more remote from our practical experience than that of *sotah*. And yet, R' Meir lent a sensitive ear to this mitzvah and drew out a profound and beautiful message that is of relevance for any generation. Beyond this, R' Meir's lesson confirms R' Kamenetzky's assertion that the ultimate purpose of the *sotah* procedure is "to restore peace to a Jewish home."

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2 *Emes le'Yaakov*, Parshas Naso.

3 *Sotah* 1:4.