

Mitzvas Kinui: Anna Karenina and Parashas Sotah

By: ASHER BENZION BUCHMAN

וְהִיטָה אִם-נִטְמָאָה וְתִמְעַל מֵעַל בְּאִשְׁוֹהָ וּבְאוֹרְחָהּ הַמְּאָרְרִים לְמַרְיָם וְצָבְתָה בַטָּהָה
וְנִפְלְאָה יִרְבֶּה וְהִיטָה הָאִשָּׁה לְאֵלֶּהָ בְּקִרְבָּ עִמָּהּ: וְאִם-לֹא נִטְמָאָה הָאִשָּׁה, וְיִטְהַרָה הָרֹא-
וְנִקְתָּהּ, וְנִזְרָעָה זָרַע (במדבר ה: כז-כח)

Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, sayeth the L-rd.
(Tolstoy's epigraph to Anna Karenina from *Devarim* 32:35, also found in the Christian Bible.)

I write this article as a tribute to my Rebbe, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, ז"ל, who believed that there is value in studying the best works of literature. I attempt to show that we can gain insight and appreciation into the parashah of Sotah by reading Leo Tolstoy's classic novel Anna Karenina. And conversely, that understanding these Torah principles helps us in analyzing this work considered by many the greatest novel ever written.¹ Tolstoy's novels are often referred to as "life itself" and help us to better understand human motivation. This helps us to understand how the Torah addresses human needs.

The Death of the Sotah

Tolstoy explained that his epigraph "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, sayeth the L-rd" meant that man's evil will be punished, not by men but by G-d. Anna's husband forgives her for the deep pain she has caused him and does not demand vengeance. She has the opportunity at one

¹ The essay is intended primarily for those who have read the book, hopefully carefully; the insights into human nature are drawn from my interpretation of the novel, and are not my own, so if the reader disagrees with these understandings of human nature, it is a disagreement with my interpretation of the novel or perhaps with Tolstoy himself.

Asher Benzion Buchman is the author of *Encountering the Creator: Divine Providence and Prayer in the Works of Rambam* (Targum, 2004) and *Rambam and Redemption* (Targum, 2005). He is the editor-in-chief of *Hakirah*.

point to divorce, to marry her lover and take her son, but she refuses it. Her destruction was self-imposed; its seeds are planted at the moment of her sin. Her guilt, her addiction to what she considered love, and the distorted perspective of life her sin breeds within her, cause inner torment that cannot be abated. And then, finally, she comes to a horrific end that mirrors physically that of the *sotah* whose body is torn open, “her belly shall extend and her thigh sag”² while, strikingly, her beautiful head and hair are left perfectly intact (8:5), reminiscent of the uncovering of the head³ that is done in the process of *hasbkaas sotah*.^{4,5} *Chazal* explain⁶ that in some cases the death of the *sotah* is not immediate, as the merits she has earned in her lifetime, and, most specifically, the merit of her Torah learning, delay the final outcome for as much as three years.⁷ Anna’s many virtues, including her great intellect and learning,⁸ stretch her final destruction over a period of almost three years. The *mayim ham’oririm*—the bitter waters that the Torah has the suspected *sotah* drink—are a metaphor for the effects of sin on the consciousness of one who has strayed. This “water” invades Anna’s soul and takes her step by step to her bitter death.

A Nice Life

While some critics say that Anna is trapped in a loveless marriage to a dull, older man and thus seeks the true love of the dashing soldier, Tolstoy explains throughout the book that this is not the case. She sought nothing for herself in her journey to Moscow, but the fire of desire was lit within her by a handsome hero. When she recognizes that she was in danger of being corrupted, she flees from him and from this desire. She would have rid herself of it had she escaped from him—but she is pursued relentlessly by her seducer. Yet, it takes “almost a year” for her to

² וְצָבְתָהּ בְּטֶגֶף וְנִפְלְתָה יָרֵכָהּ.

³ וּפּוֹרְעִין אֶת רֵאשֵׁיהָ.

⁴ The ordeal to which the *sotah* is subjected to test whether she has indeed committed adultery.

⁵ It is possible that Tolstoy was influenced consciously or unconsciously by *parasbas sotah* in writing his novel.

⁶ TB *Sotah* 20a.

⁷ זְכוּת תּוֹלָה.

⁸ The Gemara says that one should teach his daughter Torah so that she should know that if the waters do not affect her, it is because *zechus toleh* and not think there is no judgment by G-d; i.e., a woman of depth and knowledge, when tempted, will understand that even though G-d’s retribution for a good person will not be immediate, still destruction will eventually come.

succumb to temptation (2:11). She leaves Moscow to return to her “nice life” with her husband and son in Petersburg. “Thank Heavens tomorrow I shall see Seryozha and Alexei, and my life, my nice life, to which I am accustomed will go on as before” (1:29). At the moment the thought of succumbing first becomes real to her, Tolstoy reveals to the reader that her marriage until then had been one in which her concern for her husband was so great that she would take heed if he went to sleep five minutes late. Their relationship was so close that she shared every event of her life with him—both joys and sorrow:

knowing that whenever he went to bed five minutes later than usual, she noticed it, and asked him the reason; to him, knowing that every joy, every pleasure and pain that she felt she communicated to him at once. (2:9)

When close to death after a difficult childbirth she begs her husband for forgiveness, she expects it to be granted, for she thinks of him as a saint—as indeed his central characteristic is compassion, something only she is aware of. She looks at him at this time with “tender and ecstatic emotion” (4:17) so that when her lover remembers “Anna’s face with its burning flush and glittering eyes, gazing with love and tenderness not at him but at Alexei Alexandrovich” he is driven to attempt suicide.

The “real Anna” (4:17) had lived her life as a model of rectitude combining all the characteristics of an ideal woman. She was envied by the decadent denizens of Petersburg high society who were later to delight in her fall. The *parashas sotah* is only relevant if the husband is also without sin. If the husband has committed any sexual transgression, the waters would not affect the *sotah*, and Alexei Karenin and his wife were, until that point, both without sin. Beyond that, although unknown to both of them, Karenin was so bound to her and in his way loved her so much that he could not function without her. With her leaving him, his life as a productive human being comes to an end (5:21).

Tolstoy explains the changes that take place in Anna’s character when her lust and craving for romantic attention are aroused and her modesty dissolves. He describes a lack of modesty that arouses men as “the suppressed fire of life and a consciousness of her own attractiveness” (2:30).⁹ How she is perceived by others and how she perceives them changes as soon as this fire is lit. The children of her brother, who had a day earlier adored her and instinctively flocked to her, are no longer drawn to her. And upon her return to Petersburg she perceives her

⁹ He says Veranka lacks it and the unmarried young Kitty has too much.

husband as less attractive and suddenly feels that there has been something insincere in her relationship with him, something she had never felt before. Even her son now seems less appealing than before; and other things as well that she had previously liked, she now finds fault with. Yet in this stage, before her fall, her old self, the “unimpeachable” loving wife and devoted mother, feels she has returned to her old self when her old routine resumes, and the fire that had been lit seems to die, but its traces still remain.

Romantic Love and the Duties of Marriage

Anna’s blazing passion for the suitor is not because of his handsome features and noble qualities, although they arouse strong desire, and she is drawn to him from their very first meeting.¹⁰ Her virtue allows her to combat this desire and overcome it, as she time after time rebuffs Vronsky’s advances. She is seduced by his “love.” Near the end of the novel, Tolstoy reveals her thoughts—his identity is “love” and his burning love for her is what she craves and what she finds irresistible.

In her eyes the whole of him, with all his habits, ideas, desires, with all his spiritual and physical temperament, was one thing—love for women, and that love, she felt, ought to be entirely concentrated on her alone. (7:23)

At the end she is addicted to the opium she takes to calm her inner angst, but she is equally addicted to her lover’s love. In her madness, she chooses suicide so that his love, compassion, and desire for her will increase, though she will not be alive to experience it.

Moralists read the novel as Tolstoy’s condemnation of romantic love, believing only the love of husband and wife within the family is “real.” But in fact one cannot deny the reality of this love, no matter what one thinks of it. *Shlomo HaMelech* describes its presence in the reciprocal love between the *shunamis* and the *dod* (lover) in *Shir HaShirim* which Rabbi Akiva says is *kodesh kodashim*, holy of holies. *Hilchos Teshuvah* comes to its end with Rambam explaining the obsession¹¹ of love of

¹⁰ Tolstoy downplays his physical attraction as a factor in two ways. He has a bald spot, and in a few years he will be as bald as her husband, and perhaps not much more attractive. Both are referred to as “stout,” probably meaning “a fine figure of a man.” A rival of Karenin of his age is introduced as the lover of a celebrated beauty. Karenin’s position and power makes him a desirable suitor.

¹¹ שגערון.

a man for a woman whose intensity we are commanded to channel towards G-d. This is the allegorical meaning of *Shir HaShirim* as well.

[ג] וכיצד היא האהבה הראויה: הוא שיאהב את ה' אהבה גדולה יתרה רבה, עזה עד מאוד, עד שתהא נפשו קשורה באהבת ה', ונמצא שוגה בה תמיד--כאלו חולי האהבה, שאין דעתם פנויה מאהבת אותה אישה שהוא שוגה בה תמיד, בין בשוכבו בין בקומו, בין בשעה שהוא אוכל ושותה. יתר מזה תהיה אהבת ה' בלב אוהביו, ושוגים בה תמיד, כמו שציוונו, "בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך" (דברים ו,ה) והוא ששלמה אומר דרך משל, "כי חולת אהבה אני" (שיר השירים ב,ה) וכל שיר השירים משל הוא לעניין זה. (הלכות תשובה י:ג)

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love G-d with a very great and exceeding love until his soul is bound up in the love of G-d. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her; when he sits down, when he gets up, when he eats and drinks. With an even greater [love], the love for G-d should be [implanted] in the hearts of those who love Him and are obsessed with Him at all times as we are commanded [Deuteronomy 6:5]: "Love G-d... with all your heart and with all soul." This concept was implied by Solomon [Song of Songs 2:5] when he stated, as a metaphor: "I am lovesick." [Indeed,] the totality of the Song of Songs is a parable describing [this love].

Though this love is to be directed to G-d, the allegory is based on the love between man and woman and it too is true, as Rambam's use of this metaphor would indicate that this love is not inappropriate.¹² Anna is not some exception to womanhood in her obsessive love. Kitty has the same passionate feelings aroused in her by Vronsky as Anna does and chooses him over Levin. When he rejects her, she becomes so ill that her family fears for her life. And who critics think of as the "sainted" Dolly, the epitome of motherhood and womanhood, tells Anna at one point that she envies her and then proceeds to fantasize about running away with the perfect lover. She "constructed on parallel lines an almost identical love affair for herself, with an imaginary composite figure, the ideal man who was in love with her" (6:16). Vronsky represents every woman's fantasy.

¹² Although the word שגעון may be related to madness and חולת אהבה is a sickness.

Physical love is the concretization of this romantic love, and this is one meaning of the Biblical imperative “they shall become one flesh.”¹³ The only means of creating *Kiddushin*, marriage, that is explicitly stated in the Torah is with the act of love, *biyah*¹⁴ and *ki yikach ish ishah u’vaalah*¹⁵ which, in its simplest rendering, means that marriage is for the purpose of intimate relations and its very essence is the bond of intimate relations.¹⁶ The Torah tells us that the obligations of husband to wife in marriage are *she’erah*, *kesusah*, *v’onasah lo yigra*¹⁷ which, according to halachah¹⁸, encompass support, food (*she’erah*) and clothing (*kesusah*) as well as marital relations (*onasah*). But Ramban¹⁹ tells us the literal rendering is of three aspects of the physical relationship, meaning that marriage must incorporate three emotional qualities that the act of love should embody.²⁰ *She’erah* is the intimacy that makes a wife the husband’s closest relative²¹ and in this is implied that they share common goals and purpose in life. *Kesus* is feeling that he is her protector, her hero.²² *Onasah*²³ is the periodic total devotion of all his being to his beloved. The central obligation of a husband to a wife is to fulfill the natural needs of a woman to be loved, and a husband makes this commitment in order to have exclusive rights to his wife’s love.

Karenin may be older, he may not be handsome, but his wife has lived happily with him, yet later she will say she had not loved him. Some essential element is missing from their marriage. Immediately upon her fall, she has torturous nightmares where she is married to both men.

One dream haunted her almost every night. She dreamed that both were her husbands at once, that both made passionate love to her. Alexei Alexandrovich was weeping, kissing her hands, and saying,

¹³ והיו לבשר אחד (בראשית ב:כד).

¹⁴ See Rambam in *Sefer HaMitzvos, Aseh* 213.

¹⁵ “If a man takes a woman and has intercourse with her” (*Devarim* 24:1).

¹⁶ The Gemara also proves this from the Torah’s use of the term בעולת בעל.

¹⁷ *Shemos* 21:10.

¹⁸ See *Hilchos Ishus* 12:1–2 and *Sefer HaMitzvos, Lav* 262.

¹⁹ *Ramban al HaTorah, Shemos* 21:10.

²⁰ Ramban does not speak of these “emotional” qualities but I believe that this explanation is implicit in his description.

²¹ שר as in והיו לבשר אחד and the rabbinic concept of providing her food arises from the concept that he gives her life, she becomes an extension of him.

²² Literally כסות refers to covering her.

²³ ענה means time.

“How happy we are now!” And Alexei Vronsky was there too, and he too was her husband. And she was marveling that it had once seemed impossible to her, was explaining to them, laughing, that this was ever so much simpler, and that now both of them were happy and contented. (2:11)

She could not resist the love that Vronsky gave her, but she wanted that love from her husband.

The Mitzvah of *Kinui*

Tolstoy almost explicitly tells us that Alexei Karenin could have saved his marriage. The process of *hashkaas sotah*—testing the wife to see if she has been unfaithful—begins with a jealous husband who fears that his wife is attracted to another man and fears she may betray him.

וְעָבַר עָלָיו רְיוּס־קִנְיָה וְקָנָא אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָוּא נִטְמָאָה אוֹ-עָבַר עָלָיו רְיוּס־קִנְיָה וְקָנָא
אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְהָיָא לֹא נִטְמָאָה:

A fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about the wife who has defiled herself; or if a fit of jealousy comes over him and he is wrought up about his wife although she has not defiled herself. (*Bamidbar* 5:14)

The term *v'kinei* literally means jealousy and refers to the act of expressing jealousy and warning. The sacrifice brought during the *hashkaas* process is called *minchas kenaos* and *kinui* is the central term used by *Chazal* when referring to the Torah chapter of *Sotah*. Rabbi Yishmael says there is permission for the husband to take this step. Rabbi Akiva says it is an obligation.²⁴ Rambam formulates this obligation at the end of *Hilchos Sotah*.

יח מצות חכמים על בני ישראל לקנות לנשיהן, שנאמר "וקינא את אשתו" (במדבר ה, יד) וכל המקנא לאשתו, נכנסה בו רוח טהרה. ולא יקנא לה לא מתוך שחוק, ולא מתוך שיחה, ולא מתוך קלות ראש, ולא מתוך מריבה, ולא להטיל עליה אימה...

יט אין ראוי לקפוץ ולקנות בפני עדים תחילה, אלא בינו לבינה בנחת ובדרך טהרה והזהרה, כדי להדריכה בדרך ישרה, ולהסיר המכשול. וכל שאינו מקפיד על אשתו ובניו וביתו, ומזהירן, ופוקד דרכיהן תמיד, עד שיידע שהן שלמין מכל חטא ועוון--הרי זה חוטא, שנאמר "וידעת, כי שלום אוהלך ופקדת גורך, ולא תחטא (איוב ה, כד). (ד:יח, יט)

²⁴ TB *Sotah* 3a.

It is a mitzvah for Israelites to issue warnings to their wives, [as implied by Numbers 5:14] “And he shall warn his wife.” [Our Sages said that] whoever issues a warning to his wife has become possessed by a spirit of purity. A warning should not be issued in a spirit of levity, nor in the midst of conversation, nor with frivolity, nor in the midst of an argument, nor with the purpose of instilling fear...

It is not proper for a man to rush and at the outset issue a warning in the presence of witnesses. Instead, he should [first speak to his wife] privately and gently, in a spirit of purity and caution, in order to guide her to the proper path and remove obstacles. Whenever a person is not careful regarding [the conduct of] his wife, his sons, and the members of his household, warning them, and scrutinizing their ways at all times so that he knows that they are perfect without sin or transgression, he is himself a sinner, as [implied by Job 5:24]: “And you shall know that your tent is at peace and scrutinize your dwelling, and you shall not sin.” (*Hilchos Sotah* 4:18–19)

The act of *kinui* is actually an expression of an attitude towards life and education of the family, and Rambam extends it to the raising of children. It is aroused by a feeling of *tabarah*, purity. Why is it *tabarah*? The passionate love for a wife and the demand that her reciprocal love be exclusively to him is *tabarah*. Rabbi Akiva who saw *Shir HaShirim* as *Kodesh Kodashim* also sees *kinui* as *tabarah*.

When Karenin sees his wife acting inappropriately with Vronsky, for the first time in his life he realizes that she has a will that is not in accord with his—the bond of *she'erah* has been severed and more likely never existed²⁵—and he is frightened (2:9). He debates within himself if he should be *mekaneh* his wife. She is beyond reproach, and he considers jealousy a bad trait and personally humiliating. He hesitates in fear of insulting her and also in fear of what he may discover. Tolstoy has told us earlier, that when Anna had told him of a declaration of love made to her by another, he made light of it, saying it was something to be expected in society. She uses this to justify her hiding from him the aggressive advances of Vronsky. And even when he concludes it is his duty to act, it is with insufficient wisdom and force to reach her. He makes a conscious decision not to delve into the feelings of her heart which he places in the province of religion, when in fact this is to be a central facet of *kinui* and of the marital relationship itself. He starts by referring to

²⁵ In “A Nice Life” we suggested it did exist, but in fact it was incomplete. He had not drawn her as a partner into his purpose in life.

the scandalous impression she is making upon others, and this immediately minimizes his impact. “He doesn’t care... but they noticed it in society and that worries him,” she thinks. He refers to his love but makes it secondary to his concern for her son and her own spiritual welfare. To this, having just left the all-consumed would-be lover, she responds in her heart, “He does not even know what love is.” He says he will not delve into the depth of her heart while it is imperative that he do so.

As Rambam makes clear, if the first *kinui* does not have effect, the process must be escalated. Tolstoy describes how, after his first warning, Karenin could not find the words with which to reach Anna, and thus he refrained from warning again.

He simply seemed to be slightly displeased with her for that first midnight conversation, which she had repelled. In his attitude to her there was a shade of vexation, but nothing more. “You would not be open with me,” he seemed to say, mentally addressing her; “so much the worse for you. Now you may beg as you please, but I won’t be open with you. So much the worse for you!” he said mentally, like a man who, after vainly attempting to extinguish a fire, should fly in a rage with his vain efforts and say, “Oh, very well then! You shall burn for this!” (2:26)

Anna, in fact, longs for his *kinui*, as they lie down next to each other that fateful night:

She was expecting every moment that he would speak to her again. And she was afraid of it and yet she wished it. But he was silent.

She wants to be saved. Later, after her fall, Karenin knows in his heart that his wife is deceiving him and yet hides it from himself. After Anna reveals the truth she hates him for doing nothing, saying she could have borne the situation better if he had killed her or Vronsky (3:16). And when he decides to accept the affair but keep it quiet in order to save face, she rages, “Could a man of any feeling live in the same house with his unfaithful wife? Could he talk to her, call her ‘my dear?’... Oh, if I’d been in his place, I’d long ago have killed, have torn to pieces a wife like me” (4:3). Indeed, part of her hatred, even when she keeps her affair secret, is defensive to justify to herself “the terrible thing she had done to him” (2:23). But even more, it is because Karenin did not fight for her before her fall to save her and afterwards to redeem her. In his early neglect and pride and later in his anger and shame he does not show her his love.

And after her illness and his forgiveness, when in his great compassion he gives her full freedom and even the right to take her son, this triggers hatred.

Would you believe it, that knowing he's a good man, a splendid man, that I'm not worth his little finger, still I hate him. I hate him for his generosity. And there's nothing left for me.

Had he wished to win her back he should have fought for her, proclaimed his love and told her how he could not live without her, which was the truth. Vronsky, who had witnessed the deep feelings of warmth and respect that the untainted Anna had for her husband, attempts suicide in a supreme act of demonstrating his love; consequently, the "new" Anna springs back to life and directs all her love to Vronsky and her hate grows for her husband.²⁶

Karenin's conduct contrasts sharply with that of Levin, the main character of the parallel story in the novel. While Anna is tearing down a model household, Levin is finding his way towards building his home. When a society dilettante flirts with his bride, he is outraged, complains to his wife and eventually throws the offender out (6:6–7, 14–15). Kitty, a righteous woman like Anna, and also a woman like Anna in whom the fire burns a little too brightly (as Tolstoy tells us), is first upset with her husband's jealousy but "in her heart she was glad of the force of love for her which found expression in his jealousy" (6:7). In fact, she understands that the flattery does have some effect on her and it is best that she be protected from it. The dilettante then goes to Vronsky's home to flirt with the corrupted Anna (6:22) where her new "husband," the one for whose love she gave up everything, is unbothered. His love is primarily one driven by a desire for conquest, and when he becomes a "husband" he relates to her out of the duty of the husband. The romantic love that he has for her wanes, and with it the will to be *mekanei*.²⁷

²⁶ Even though she expresses this hatred for her husband so vividly, she shortly after takes it back and says she is uncertain whether she could go on living with her husband and give up Vronsky. We can be certain, had he come forth strongly and taken her back she would have stayed with him and Vronsky would have gone off to war.

²⁷ We will prove this later in the essay.

Maaseh Bruriah

It is in the nature of both man and woman to have a sex/love drive and also to be affected by another showing them admiration and by the feeling of being loved. But *Chazal* add that it is the nature of woman to be more vulnerable to seduction as these declarations of love have even a greater impact and emotion is more likely to overcome reason—*nashim daatan kalos* (*Kiddushin* 80a).²⁸ Rashi (*Avodah Zarah* 18b) quotes a tradition—probably of Geonic origin, with an allegorical message rather than a historical one—that a *maaseh Bruriah*²⁹ that caused R. Meir shame refers to the seduction of Rabbi Meir's exalted wife Bruriah, that occurred because she rejected *Chazal's* belief of *nashim daatan kalos*.³⁰ None are exempt from temptation. In fact, the process of *hashkeas sotah* includes words of compassion and absolution to the *sotah*, in pleas that she admit her guilt and not complete the process that will require the erasing of G-d's name:

ב הגיעו לירושלים, בית דין הגדול מושבין אותה ביניהן, ומאימין עליה שלא בפני בעלה, ומפחידין אותה פחד גדול שלא תשתה. ואומרין לה, בתי, הרבה יין עושה, הרבה שחוק עושה, הרבה ילדות עושה, הרבה שכנים הרעים עושים: אל תגרמי לשם הגדול שנכתב בקדושה, שיימחה על המים. ג ואומרין לה, בתי, הרבה קדמוך ונשטפו, ואנשים גדולים ויקירים תקף יצרן עליהן ונכשלו; ומגידין לה מעשה יהודה ותמר כלתו, ומעשה ראובן בפילגש אביו על פשטו, ומעשה אמנון ואחזתו, כדי להקל עליה עד שתודה. אם אמרה הין נטמאתי, או איני שותה—יוצאה בלא כתובה, והולכת לה. (סוטה ג:ב)

When they arrive in Jerusalem, the High Court has her sit in its presence while her husband is not present, and they alarm her, frighten her, and bring upon her great dread so that she will not [desire to] drink [the bitter water]. They tell her: “My daughter, [we know that] wine has a powerful influence, frivolity has a powerful influence, immaturity has a powerful influence, bad neighbors have a powerful influence. Do not cause [G-d's] great name, which is

²⁸ Literally “women’s minds are light.” The Talmud makes this statement with regard to the more stringent requirements in the laws of *yibud* that are placed on women than on men. It would seem to mean that they are more easily persuaded, more subject to the emotional argument and hence more easily seduced. See TB *Shabbos* 33b and Ramban and Tur on *Devarim* 29:17, and Rashi, *Bereshis* 3:16.

²⁹ An event that occurred with relation to Bruriah.

³⁰ Supposedly Rabbi Meir precipitated it to demonstrate to her that in fact it was true. We can be assured that Rabbi Meir would do no such thing, and thus the story has an allegorical message.

written in holiness, to be blotted out in the water.” And they tell her: “There are many who preceded you and were swept away [from the world]. Men of greater and more honorable stature have been overcome by their natural inclination and have faltered.” [To emphasize this,] they tell her the story of Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law, the simple meaning of the episode concerning Reuben and [Bilhah], his father’s concubine, and the story of Amnon and his sister, to make it easier for her to admit [her guilt]. If she says: “I committed adultery,” or “I will not drink [the water],” she is to be divorced without receiving [the money due her by virtue of] her *ketubah*, and the matter is dismissed.

Tolstoy surprisingly has no chapter showing the development of Anna’s character—telling the story of her early years and of her marriage from her perspective—as he has for other key characters, such as Karenin, Vronsky, Oblonsky, and Levin. We know more about the Countess Ivanova’s (a fairly minor character) youth and marriage than we know about Anna’s. Tolstoy does not wish to depict her as a unique product of a certain upbringing.³¹ We are first introduced to her at the very moment she meets Vronsky and is attracted to him. We see her as “joyful and giving joy,” but yet Kitty senses in her moments of sadness an inner private life and Tolstoy subtly conveys to us her sense of longing. Later we see her fantasizing while she reads romances and even her “nice life” seems unsatisfying under that influence. She is “woman,” the ideal woman whom every man wants, and we meet her as a virtuous woman (*eisbes chayil*) with a prominent and respected husband (*noda ba’sbearim baalah*) who loves her and trusts her (*batach bah lev baalah*). But from the very beginning he did not convey his feelings of love to her. Later he fails to convey it by not properly being *mekanei* her. We are accustomed to saying of someone who lacks the capacity to express love, that it is a function of personality or character, but to the Torah this is no excuse nor is it an explanation. The obligations of marriage are *she’er, keesus, v’onah*. This demands of a husband an all-encompassing love that is palpable to the recipient. Rambam tells us that the husband is required “to love her as himself”³² and this includes the mitzvah of *kinui*. Later, when Anna has left him, Karenin reflects upon his actions to her—how

³¹ At the end she says she does not know herself but only knows her appetites. We can take her at her word on her deathbed, that the real Anna was speaking. Largely, she is molded by influences, and yet there is an inner core that is pure.

³² ואוהבה כגופה. See the end of Chapter 16 of *Hilchos Ishus*. The full text will be brought later in the essay.

from the very first he never expressed deep love for her and how he shamefully ceded her to Vronsky rather than challenging him. Karenin bears the pain of his failure to provide this all-encompassing love.

Love and Vanity

Ultimately Anna is responsible for the tragedy that befalls her. Lust is the cause of her downfall, and critics have convincingly argued that a recurrent “dirty peasant” appearing in her dreams and placed in strategic places in the novel represents sexual desire, and apparently illicit sexual desire with its excitement and fantasy nature. Despite the argument to excuse her because of not feeling sufficiently loved, it is still the responsibility of a G-d-fearing person to overcome this desire.

Tolstoy also adds another element to the understanding of her sin. Anna is motivated by a will for freedom. “He has crushed my life, crushed everything that was alive in me” (3:16), she says. And her husband admits (2:8) to not having considered that his wife has a will independent from his. She longs for “the freedom of love” (3:16). But, in fact, marriage implies possession (*baalus*) and limitation to the wife’s freedom. Constantly, with Vronsky, she relishes her dominance over him—her *baalus*. “She remembered his words, the expression of his face, that recalled an abject setter-dog, in the early days of their connection.” And when Vronsky becomes complacent and confident in his position she turns to hate him (7:23, 29, 30).

Anna feels herself in a battle to maintain her dominance. But in the act of love itself that she so craves with him, in the fulfillment of her desire, she loses that dominance and the resultant dependency generates the same displeasure she had in her original marriage.

“Yes, there was the triumph of success in him. Of course there was love too, but the chief element was the pride of success. He boasted of me. Now that’s over. There’s nothing to be proud of. Not to be proud of, but to be ashamed of. He has taken from me all he could, and now I am no use to him... My love keeps growing more passionate and egoistic, while his is waning and waning... If I could be anything but a mistress, passionately caring for nothing but his caresses; but I can’t and I don’t care to be anything else. And by that desire I rouse aversion in him, and he rouses fury in me, and it cannot be different.” (7:30)

She identifies in his desire for her “not love so much as the satisfaction of vanity,” and we are to understand that this is what she craves as well. She does not want marriage to Vronsky with all its trappings which will be based on loyalty and duty—this she had before, and this she left

for him. He is “love of woman” and this is what she wants on a continual basis, this desire for her and the fulfillment of this desire, but not the consequences, which is the lessening of this desire on the part of her lover.

Asserting *Ba'alus*

The *mitzvah* of *kinui* is intended to counter the revolt against the *baalus* of a husband that is triggered by the wife’s vanity. The act of *kiddushin* is a *kinyan*,³³ an act of acquisition of a wife’s love, and *kinui* is an act of asserting this *baalus*. Thus, though he states the *mitzvah* of *Kinui* in *Hilchos Sotah*, Rambam also records it in *Hilchos Ishus*.

יז וחובה על כל איש, לקנות לאשתו; אמרו חכמים, אין אדם מקנא לאשתו, אלא אם כן נכנסה בו רוח טהרה. ולא יקנא לה ביותר מדיי; ולא יאנוס אותה, ויבעול בעל כורחה, אלא לדעתה, ומתוך שיחה ושמחה. יח וכן ציוו חכמים על האישה שתהיה צנועה בתוך ביתה, ולא תרבה בשחוק וקלות ראש בפני בעלה, ולא תתבע תשמיש המיטה בפיה, ולא תהיה מדברת בעסק זה; ולא תמנע מבעלה, כדי לצערו עד שיוסיף באהבתה, אלא נשמעת לו, בכל עת שירצה. ותיזהר מקרוביו ובני ביתו, כדי שלא יעבור עליו רוח קנאה; ותתרחק מן הכיעור, ומן הדומה לכיעור. (הלכות אישות טו:יז)

It is an obligation for a man to admonish his wife. Our Sages declared: “A man will not admonish his wife unless a spirit of purity enters his being.” [Nevertheless,] he should not admonish her more than necessary. [A man] should never compel [his wife] to engage in sexual relations against her will. Instead, [relations] should be with her agreement, [preceded by] conversation and a spirit of joy. Similarly, our Sages commanded a woman to conduct herself modestly at home, not to proliferate levity or frivolity before her husband, not to request intimacy verbally, nor to speak about this matter. She should not deny her husband [intimacy] to cause him anguish, so that he should increase his love for her. Instead, she should oblige him whenever he desires. She should keep her distance from his relatives and the members of his household so that he will not be provoked by jealousy, and should avoid scandalous situations—indeed, any trace of scandal. (*Hilchos Ishus* 15:17–18)

As Rambam explains, the consequence of this *baalus* is that it leads to *tznius*, modesty, on the part of the wife. The married Kitty meets Vronsky with whom she was infatuated and describes her reactions:

³³ The first Mishnah in *Kiddushin* begins בשלשה דרכים האשה נקנית.

The only thing Kitty could reproach herself for at this meeting was that at the instant when she recognized in his civilian dress the features once so familiar to her, her breath failed her, the blood rushed to her heart, and a vivid blush—she felt it— overspread her face. But this lasted only a few seconds... she was perfectly ready to look at Vronsky, to speak to him, if necessary, exactly as she spoke to Princess Marya Borissovna, and more than that, **to do so in such a way that everything to the faintest intonation and smile would have been approved by her husband, whose unseen presence she seemed to feel about her at that instant...** She was pleased with herself. She had not expected she would have had the power, while keeping somewhere in the bottom of her heart all the memories of her old feeling for Vronsky, **not only to seem quite calm and indifferent in his presence but also to be so.** (7:1)

The result of a successful *kinui* by a husband is not only to suppress all amorous feeling for another but even to annul it.³⁴

Husband and Wife

After stating the mitzvah of *kinui* in *Hilchos Ishus*, Rambam defines the relationship of husband and wife:

יט וכן ציוו חכמים שיהיה אדם מכבד את אשתו יותר מגופו, ואוהבה כגופו; ואם יש לו ממון, מרבה בטובתה כפי הממון. ולא יטיל עליה אימה יתרה; ויהיה דיבורו עימה בנחת, ולא יהיה עצב ולא רוגז. כ וכן ציוו חכמים על האישה שתהיה מכבדת את בעלה ביותר מדיי, ויהיה לו עליה מורא, ותעשה כל מעשיה על פיו, ויהיה בעיניה כמו שר או מלך: מהלכת בתאוות ליבו, ומרחקת כל שישנא. וזה הוא דרך כל בנות ישראל ובני ישראל הקדושים, הטהורים בזיווגן; ובדרכים אלו, יהיה יישובן נאה ומשובח. (הלכות אישות טו:יט-כ)

Similarly, our Sages commanded that a man honor his wife more than his own person, and love her as he loves his own person. If he has financial resources, he should offer her benefits in accordance with his resources. He should not cast a superfluous measure of fear over her. He should talk with her gently, nor should he be sad nor angry.

And similarly, they commanded a woman to honor her husband exceedingly and to be in awe of him. She should carry out all her deeds according to his directives, considering him to be an officer

³⁴ Perhaps this element should be associated with *kesus*, the husband's protective element in his relationship to his wife.

or a king. She should follow the desires of his heart and shun everything that he disdains. (*Hilchos Ishus* 15:19–20)

As we noted above, a husband is not only required to demonstrate his *baalus* of his wife's love, but more fundamentally he is required to have and show his own love whose nature lies in *ishto k'gufu*, she is a part of him. Yet this love should not be stifling. The act of love may not be done by force but rather with the wife's will and with her joy, *mitoch sichab v'simchab*. Also, a husband must show his wife more honor and do for her more than he does for himself. He must be happy, so that he can transmit happiness to her. From his perspective, marriage is primarily obligation to her, and actually the most explicit obligations of marriage in the Torah are *she'erab kesusab v'onasab lo yigra*. The only expectations of a wife are modest conduct and conjugal fidelity. In fact, the wife has a *baalus* on the husband's love and support.

On the other hand, the consequence of a husband's obligation is the impact it has on his wife. His conduct is reciprocated with a feeling of great respect, with a wife seeing her husband as an exalted person. The look of "tender and ecstatic emotion" that Anna had for her husband on her sickbed when she spoke of his compassion that only she knew of, reflects this relationship. Actually, the word "love" is not used there by Tolstoy.³⁵ It is a unique and deep feeling. But near her end, she looks back at it and refers to that relationship as one that "is also called love." In the Chumash as well, we hear of the love of husband to wife,³⁶ but not that of wife for husband. Love is not an obligation on the wife. Rather, the husband is to stir within his wife unique feelings of admiration that we "call love."

G-d's Vengeance—*HaMayim HaM'oririm* and *Zechus Toleh*

Vronsky the seducer is not presented as an evil character. In fact, some readers think of him as a noble hero. But he is the seducer who causes all the destruction. He is not aware that he is evil because he is a product of a decadent society that "turns men like him out by machine."³⁷ He is the best of the lot, yet though he sees the harm that he inflicts and feels guilt, he is never repentant. His only real pain is when he feels he has lost Anna upon her illness, and then when he finally does, upon her death. The corrupt society from which he learned his values is the real

³⁵ Vronsky witnessing it calls it love.

³⁶ Yitzchak loves Rivkah and Yaakov loves Rachel.

³⁷ The phrase used by the noble prince Sheribatsky.

villain. Although he was a man of ambition, his total dedication to the pursuit of Anna and the consequences of his conquest curtailed his military career and he accepted this. For him, the underlying reason for living is satisfying his vanity and the conquest of Anna took the place of success in his career.³⁸ When Tolstoy wrote “I will repay” he had him in mind as well and at the end, as a broken man, he marches off to his death.

But the brunt of the punishment is reserved for Anna. Passion can be controlled.³⁹ Anna’s decision to dance at all, when her customary modesty inhibited her from dancing at balls, was her first misstep. Then her decision to dance with Vronsky when she knows that Kitty is expecting his attention, leads her to become “intoxicated with the wine of admiration she had aroused.”⁴⁰ Her decision to hide Vronsky’s advances from her husband and to appear more frequently than previously in the social circle Vronsky frequents is a sinful desire to bask in the love of her suitor, to “satisfy her vanity.” Then after the *kinui* of her husband—weak as it was—her decision to engage in seclusion, *stirah*⁴¹ with him seals her fate as a *sotah*. When she falls, she admits her sinfulness but claims she had no choice (3:15) and Vronsky was her destiny. Indeed, by the time she succumbs, the intensity of her love and desire is irresistible but her initial steps were her own doing.

Step by step the *eishes chayil*, the woman of valor, descends into decadence. Having cut herself off from the religious society of her married life, she adapts the decadent values of Vronsky’s society. She finds her old society, her husband, and her old life repugnant. She finds pleasure in her lying and deception (3:17) though this was contrary to her old nature.⁴²

³⁸ Many have noted that the competition of the steeplechase is a metaphor for Anna being the vehicle for him to experience victory, as he rides to death his beloved mare.

³⁹ The character of the modest, spiritual Veranka, who accepts losing the man she loved to another and is able to remain happy is in part introduced by Tolstoy to show that there is always choice.

⁴⁰ Kitty saw in her expressions while dancing something “devilish” and something “cruel in her charm.”

⁴¹ The warning issued by the husband is that she should not seclude herself with the suspected lover.

⁴² She says her husband is evil, having “crushed” the life out of her (3:15). But in no way do we understand in which way he has been doing this. He was a kind husband. She says she needs “to live, to love,” expressing a need for excitement and fulfillments of fantasy. Her “need to love” is to give her the “love

But *zechus toleh*, and a battle wages within her being as if the bitter waters, *mayim ham'oririm*, which represents her sin, has infected her and is transforming her while her soul fights it. Tolstoy develops the theme of two Annas and thus both her husband and lover bear the same name "Alexei." One Anna desires the role of wife, mother, and irreproachable grande dame of Petersburg. The other seeks the fulfillment of romantic love. There is an Alexei for each Anna.

At first, before and even after revealing her affair to her husband, and while being uncertain of her lover's full commitment to her, she clings to her son and her elevated place in society and maintains the shell of her old life (3:16). But during that time she is racked with guilt and the feelings of *tumah* (impurity) and expects death will come shortly to release her from the state of sin (4:3). And when her body and hence her physical desires have been weakened, the real Anna emerges and she tells her husband, "That other woman tried to make me hate you" (4:17). All the hate for, and recrimination of her husband was a consequence of the sinfulness that infected her. Still, when the body recovers and the call of the lover is stronger than that of the husband, the old Anna is defeated forever. Though death does not come immediately—*zechus toleh*—the process of her dying has begun⁴³ and the death of this once delightful Anna is a painful ordeal.

In this next stage she is even able to abandon her son—he is a part of the life she is leaving—and Tolstoy makes the point that he looks like her husband.⁴⁴ Yet, the inner Anna that reemerged on her sickbed remains tormented by guilt, and by a longing for her past life of purity. She refuses the divorce, partially because the conscience of the old Anna does not allow her to let her husband sacrifice his reputation for her sake. But in her final soliloquy she suggests another motivation for that action. She says Vronsky will say, "You were unwilling to be divorced

she needed," a love in which she feels mastery over her lover and instinctively reflects it back to him.

⁴³ Even as she tells Vronsky she will go with him, she proclaims, "Why did I not die?"

⁴⁴ She says she must choose, though there was a moment when in fact her husband would have agreed to let her take her son. She feels that choosing Vronsky means leaving the son of her husband as well, and in fact, in her passion for living completely by his love, she has no need for her son. Immediately after her adultery she tells Vronsky, "I have nothing but you." At this point she knows her husband is good and hates him for his goodness. His forgiveness and goodness are the cause of her fall. Had he fought for her and loved her "as he should," she would have found contentment.

from your husband, no doubt so that you might go back to him.” In fact, this is true. The inner Anna still longs for family and for her son. The inner Anna still holds out hope for her salvation.

In the final stage of death, her *zechuyos* have run out. She is addicted to opium and to Vronsky’s love. She accedes to the divorce, to break forever any tie to her old self.⁴⁵ At the end Anna hates Vronsky “more than anyone she has ever hated” (7:29) and she has much hate for everyone. She never loved Vronsky for his qualities, only for his love, and whether it exists or not at this point, her heart told her it did not because it tells her that she is not worthy of being loved. On the one hand a marital bond could not be made with Vronsky as he is a man without G-d. On the other hand, she remembers the purity of her old life and the bond to husband and son and longs for it, but it has been forever destroyed.⁴⁶ Her deep pain is that of her guilt, the knowledge of the pain she has caused others, and of the loss of her virtue. She regrets that she did not die on her sickbed amidst her repentance.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ She needs to do so to bind Vronsky’s love to her but that love turned now into the love of marriage. It does not satisfy her needs as it is a feeling of duty, not desire, and her addiction is to passionate, palpable, self-absorbed love. With Vronsky she sees even their own child as an impediment to his love, and she does not love their daughter. Moreover, the home she would build with Vronsky has no appeal to her and gives her nothing to live for, as it is a home built on Vronsky’s superficial values. Dolly is cured of her desire to run away with an imagined lover after spending a day at Vronsky’s table.

⁴⁶ The *sotah* who admits her sin and stops short of drinking *mayim ham’oririm* can be rehabilitated and does not die. Still, the halachah is that she is *assur l’baal v’assur l’boel*—forbidden both to husband and lover. She could not rehabilitate her relationship with her husband, and with her partner in sin it is impossible to create a new life.

⁴⁷ The final lunge to her death begins with remembering her sickbed experience when this death spiral began. She wonders “of how Alexei Alexandrovich would look at it... At the bottom of her heart was some obscure idea that alone interested her, but she could not get clear sight of it. Thinking once more of Alexei Alexandrovich, she recalled the time of her illness after her confinement, and the feeling which never left her at that time. ‘Why didn’t I die?’ and the words and the feeling of that time came back to her. And all at once she knew what was in her soul. Yes, it was that idea which alone solved all. ‘Yes, to die!... And the shame and disgrace of Alexei Alexandrovich and of Seryozha, and my awful shame, it will all be saved by death. To die! and he will feel remorse; will be sorry; will love me; he will suffer on my account.’ With the trace of a smile of commiseration for herself she sat down in the armchair ... vividly picturing from different sides his feelings after her death.”

In her last minutes of life, Anna sees only evil in the world. Throughout her life she returned love while being loved. So too, when feeling self-contempt, she projects feelings of contempt upon all others and returns it to them. But in her last seconds, when she leaves hold of life, the old Anna returns.

That familiar gesture of making the sign of the cross brought back into her soul a whole series of girlish and childish memories, and suddenly the darkness that had covered everything for her was torn apart, and life rose up before her for an instant with all its bright past joy.

In that second she knows it is not the evil of the world that has destroyed her, but the bitter waters she has drunk, the evil within herself. In her final words she asks for forgiveness: “L-rd, forgive me everything!”

V'nizra Zera

The husband of the suspected *sotah* takes her to the *Beis HaMikdash*. The sacrifice she brings is the *minchas kenaos*, and *Chazal* say that the plural⁴⁸ reflects the jealousy and vengefulness of husband and of G-d. G-d put into nature, and into human nature, the quality that sin is destructive. Anna realized she could not seek help in religion for it demanded she leave her sin and sin was all she lived for. But if the wife has not yet fallen, this process of coming to the *mikdash* will result in *v'nizra zera*, flourishing.⁴⁹ Acknowledging temptations and overcoming them is uplifting to the human soul. She can be cured of her desire and find her inner *mikdash*. Had Anna's husband, after the *kinui*, found a way to implant in her the connection to the *mikdash*—with the love that transcends that of the physical, that is directed outward rather than inward—she would have been saved.

Levin, after marrying the woman he passionately loves and having a child with her, finds himself contemplating suicide because his philosophies can provide him with no meaning to life. Reason, the same reason that Anna references in her decision to die, sees a world based only on selfishness and competition. Only when Levin gives in to faith and sees the good in G-d's world does he find peace and happiness. The allegory of *Sbir HaShirim* works on two levels. The passionate love between man

⁴⁸ *Kenaos* rather than *kinah*.

⁴⁹ Literally “have seed,” i.e., have children.

and woman is the gift of the benevolent Creator, and in the appreciation of this love lies the recognition of G-d's benevolence to man and this gives man peace and happiness.

Perhaps the framing of Anna's story with Levin's revelation is to demonstrate the futility of the famous lines in Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" that claim all that is meaningful and that can bring happiness is the love between man and woman. Indeed, *Kobeles* says רָאָה חַיִּים עִם-אִשָּׁה רָאָה חַיִּים עִם-אִשָּׁה, "find life with the woman you love," but that love is not the end of man's quest. The love of G-d for which marital love is only a metaphor is the purpose of life. A couple, bound by love, must dedicate their existence to the love of G-d's good and His mercy. The gift of the love between man and woman should elevate us and bring us to the love of G-d. ❧