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## 'Sota Project': Sealed With a Kiss

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[http://www.jewishjournal.com/culture/article/sota\\_project\\_sealed\\_with\\_a\\_kiss/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/culture/article/sota_project_sealed_with_a_kiss/)



Still from Ofri Cnaani's "The Sota Project," video installation, 2011. Photo courtesy of USC Fisher Museum of Art

The Talmud is on display this month at the USC Fisher Museum of Art, but if you're expecting a dry examination of rabbinic law and ethics, you've come to the wrong place. Ofri Cnaani's "The Sota Project" offers a daring and even graphic take on Jewish views of adultery, sexuality and sisterhood through a little-known but fascinating piece of talmudic text.

Sitting in a conference room at the Fisher Museum's offices, Cnaani was excited to discuss "The Sota Project," though a little disappointed to hear she'd missed out on Los Angeles' long-running heat wave. Born in Israel in 1975, Cnaani immigrated to the United States a decade ago to study art at New York's Hunter College MFA program, and though she apparently misses the warm Israeli summers, she's found great success in the States and in the New York art world, where her work has been on display at prestigious places like MOMA's PS1 and the Andrea Meislin Gallery. Her exhibition at the Fisher Museum marks her Los Angeles debut, and she seems particularly excited to be showing a piece like "The Sota Project," which is so close to her heart.

The name refers to particular tractate in the Talmud that deals with the procedures taken in ancient times when a woman was suspected of adultery. "Sota is a word in Hebrew that people don't use," Cnaani said. "The literal meaning of it is 'the pervert.' So it's a very harsh word. It's not like 'the adulteress'; it's not like 'infidelity.' And it's not like young Israelis who speak Hebrew know what it means; they don't really use the word.

"This specific story is a story about two sisters who look alike. One was married in one town; the other, in another town. And then the husband of one of them suspected his wife was cheating on him," Cnaani explained. "Her husband wanted to take her to Jerusalem to drink from the bitter waters."

The bitter waters ordeal was a process that was supposed to reveal whether a woman had cheated on her husband. A suspected woman would be taken to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the priests would concoct a bitter-waters potion from, among other things, ashes from the Temple, and ink used to write Torah scrolls. The woman would drink the potion, and, if she was guilty, she "very literally explodes from the location of the sin, which is her abdomen," Cnaani said. And, if innocent, she'd be blessed with a son in 10 months' time.

"There's this element of theatrical punishment," Cnaani said. "It's a very literal punishment, super grotesque."



**Still from Ofri Cnaani's "The Sota Project," video installation, 2011. Photo courtesy of USC Fisher Museum of Art**

In the story of the two sisters, though, the sisters come up with a plan to get around the bitter-waters test. "I usually say this is where Hollywood kicks in," Cnaani said, chuckling. The sisters trade places. The innocent sister goes through the ordeal and is found pure. It looks like they're going to get away with the deception, but the sisters meet up afterward and they kiss on the lips. "And it says because she smelled from the bitter water ... she died on the spot," Cnaani said of the guilty sister.

"I think it's a very beautiful story, and for me it was, from the beginning, a story about sisterhood, about two young women who understand the system, but kind of, in English you'd say 'work the system,' or make the system work against itself. And it's a story that ends sealed with a kiss."

Cnaani also acknowledges that "it's a very problematic story." It isn't even particularly Jewish in many ways, she said. "It's a very Hellenistic story of the pages of the Talmud. She's trying to avoid her destiny, but punishment finds her ... it's dark; it's grotesque."

Cnaani often makes video installations, so she decided that she wanted to bring the story of the sisters to life with her own unique interpretation. "The projection covers all four walls from floor

to ceiling, and the story develops not only in time — it's 20-something minutes long — but also in the form of a spatial narrative ... the space actually generates the story."

The work uses nearly a dozen projectors to form an immersive, kinetic film that unfolds around you and includes dialogue, music and text along with visual projections. The movement forces the viewer to become an active participant in the story, following the sisters as they move along, and even across, the walls.

"I looked at a lot of different forms in art history that use visual storytelling — mainly murals, because this is really a moving mural," Cnaani said of "The Sota Project." "It's very not-cinematic, in a way. There's no close-up, no shot-reaction shot. It's much more pictorial, even theatrical."

Selma Holo, the Fisher Museum's director, sees a lot to admire in Cnaani's approach. "She is without question an important, young contemporary artist on the international art scene. But she's not afraid, because of the way things have moved in the world, to be able to plumb her own history, the Jewish roots of it all. And that's a change from when the artists all wanted to be international, and barely show, in a way, where they came from," Holo said.

Another factor working in favor of the exhibition was its sponsorship by the Philip and Muriel Berman Foundation. Cnaani is the granddaughter of noted Israeli sculptor Yehiel Shemi (he died in 2003), one of whose major patrons was the late Philip Berman. Berman's daughter, Nancy, now the head of the foundation, was struck by Cnaani's work and decided to fund the exhibition. Additional funding was provided by the Six Points Fellowship, a grant given to emerging Jewish artists.

For Cnaani, who grew up fiercely secular on a kibbutz in Israel, the chance to engage with talmudic text is a special treat. "For various historical and political reasons, a lot of the ancient or classic corpus is being held and mainly actively studied by Orthodox people, and [has been] missing from the cultural identity, or the intellectual cultural identity of the secular intelligentsia."

Cnaani subscribes to the famous view of David Ben-Gurion that Orthodox Judaism and secular Judaism are "two fully loaded wagons" and that Jewish philosophy and classical texts belong to both worlds.

As a feminist, Cnaani knew that she'd have to deal with the issue of the Sota in a different way. "My good friend and teacher Ruth Calderon, who is a Talmud expert, wrote about this text, and she stopped before the kiss. She said, "They're my sisters; I'm not ready to kill them because they had another man."

But sometimes artistic integrity and theatricality get in the way of happy endings. "For me the story is sealed with a kiss, and that's part of what it is, and I don't want to kill that," Cnaani said. "I usually tell her, you're kind of saving them, but killing the drama. I want them to kiss again."

*"The Sota Project" is on display at USC's Fisher Museum of Art through Dec. 1. For information about the Fisher Museum, visit [fisher.usc.edu](http://fisher.usc.edu) or call (213) 740-4561.*

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