

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Metzora

Leviticus 14:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 6-12, 2003

Having described, in the previous Parshah of Tazria, the manner in which the affliction of tzaraat is identified and the laws pertaining to a person thus afflicted, the Torah now proceeds to outline the process of the metzora's purification and rehabilitation:

*And G-d spoke to Moses, saying:*

*This shall be the law of the metzora on the day of his cleansing; he shall be brought to the priest.*

**The priest** shall go out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and see if the plague of tzaraat has been healed in the leper.

*Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two live and kosher birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop. And the priest shall command that one of the birds be slaughtered over an earthen ves-*

*sel with fresh spring water.*

The live bird, the **piece of cedar**, the scarlet thread and the bundle of hyssop are then dipped into the blood of the slaughtered bird and the spring water in the earthen vessel. The blood and water mixture is also sprinkled seven times on the metzora, and the live bird is "let loose into the open field."

*And he that is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and be clean, and after that he shall come into the camp; but he shall remain outside his tent seven days.*

On the seventh day, the metzora-in-purification once again washes his clothes, shaves his hair, and immerses in a mikvah.

On the eighth day he brings a series of offerings: two male sheep—one as a guilt offering and the other as an ascending offering—and a female sheep as a sin offering; all three are accompanied with "meal offerings" consisting of fine flour, olive oil and wine. A pauper who cannot afford three sheep substitutes two birds for the sin and ascending offerings.

Blood from the guilt offering is sprinkled on the cleansed metzora's earlobe, and on the thumbs of his right hand and foot. Oil from the meal offering is placed on these parts of his body and on his head, after being sprinkled seven times in the

## Commentary

## THIS SHALL BE THE LAW OF THE METZORA (LEVITICUS 14:2)

Said Rabbi Yochanan say in the name of Rabbi Joseph ben Zimra: One who bears evil tales will be visited with the plague of tzaraat... Resh Lakish said: What is the meaning of the verse, "This shall be the law of the metzora"? It means: This shall be the law for him who is motzi shem ra ('gives a bad name' through slander)."

Because of seven things the plague of tzaraat is incurred: slander, bloodshed, false oath, incest, arrogance, robbery and envy.

*(Talmud, Erachin 15b-16a)*

## THIS SHALL BE THE LAW OF THE METZORA... HE SHALL BE BROUGHT TO THE KOHEN (14:2)

Both the onset and the termination of the state of tzaraat are effected only by the proclamation of a Kohen. If suspect markings appear on a person, they are examined by an expert on the complex laws of tzaraat—usually, but not necessarily, a Kohen; but even after a diagnosis of tzaraat had been made, the state of ritual impurity does not take effect, and the metzora's banishment is not carried out, until a Kohen pronounces him "impure." This is why even after all physical signs of tzaraat have departed, the removal of the state of impurity and the metzora's re-admission into the community is achieved only by the Kohen's declaration.

The Kohen's function as a condemner and ostracizer runs contrary to his most

basic nature and role. The Kohen is commanded by G-d to "bless His people Israel with love"; our sages describe a "disciple of Aaron" as one who "loves peace, pursues peace, loves G-d's creatures and brings them close to Torah." But this is precisely the reason that the Torah entrusts to the Kohen the task of condemning the metzora.

There is nothing more hateful to G-d than division between His children. The metzora must be ostracized because, through his slander and tale-bearing, he is himself a source of divisiveness; nevertheless, the Torah is loath to separate him from the community. So it is not enough that the technical experts say that he be marked by tzaraat. It is only when the Kohen—whose very being shudders at the thought of banishing a member of the community—is convinced that there is no escaping a verdict of tzaraat, that the metzora is separated from his people. And it is only when the one doing the banishing is suffused with loving concern for the banished person, that the penalty will yield a positive result—the repentance and rehabilitation of the metzora.

There is another lesson here as well: it is not the fact of the tzaraat that renders the metzora impure, but the Kohen's declaration of his impurity. In other words, no matter how terrible a person's state may be, to speak ill of him is more terrible still. The Kohen's saying that he is impure affects his spiritual state far more profoundly than the actual fact of his tzaraat!

*(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)*

## TWO BIRDS (14:4)

Because the plague of tzaraat comes in punishment for evil talk, which is an

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Metzora

Leviticus 14:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 6-12, 2003

direction of the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary. Thus, "the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be purified."

## Tzaraat of the Home

Not only persons can be afflicted with *tzaraat*. In Tazria we read how garments, too, may be deemed "leprous"; now the Torah sets down the law of the contaminated **house**:

*And G-d spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying:*

*When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I will put the plague of tzaraat in a house of the land of your possession;*

*He that owns the house shall come and tell the priest, saying: "It seems to me there is as it were a plague in*

*the house."*

*And the priest shall command that they empty the house, before the priest go into it to see the plague, so that all that is in the house be not made impure; and afterward the priest shall go in to see the house.*

*And he shall look at the plague, and, behold: if the plague be in the walls of the house in greenish or reddish depressions, which in sight are lower than the wall, then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and shut up the house seven days.*

On the seventh day, the Kohen again examines the marking. If it has faded or disappeared, then that area is scraped clean and the house is pure. If it remains unchanged, he locks up the house for another week. However,

*If the priest shall come back on the seventh day, and shall look, and, behold, if the plague be spread in the walls of the house;*

*Then the priest shall command that they remove the stones in which the plague is, and they shall cast them into an unclean place outside the city. And he shall have the house scraped within round about, and they shall pour out the dust that they scraped off outside the city in an unclean place.*

## Commentary

act of chatter, therefore birds are needed for his purification, because these chatter continuously with a twittering sound.

*(Rashi; Talmud)*

## CEDAR WOOD... AND HYSSOP (14:4)

Because he has exalted himself like a cedar... he should humble himself like a grass.

*(Midrash Tanchuma)*

If the point is that he should show humility, why does he bring *both* a cedar and hyssop? But the true meaning of humility is not to be broken and bowed, but to be humble even as one stands straight and tall.

*(The Chassidic Masters)*

A person should have two pockets in his coat. One should contain the Talmudic saying (Sanhedrin 37a), "A person is commanded to maintain: For my sake was the world created." In the second pocket he should keep the verse (Genesis 18:17), "I am but dust and ashes."

*(Rabbi Bunim of Peshis'cha)*

## WHEN YOU COME INTO THE LAND OF CANAAN.. I WILL PUT THE PLAGUE OF TZARAAT IN A HOUSE OF THE LAND OF YOUR POSSESSION (14:34)

It is good news for them that these plagues would come upon them. Because

the Amorite [residents of Canaan] concealed treasures of gold in the walls of their houses during the 40 years the Israelites were in the wilderness, in order that these might not possess them when they conquered land, and in consequence of the plague they would pull down the house and discover them.

*(Rashi; Midrash)*

## I WILL PUT THE PLAGUE OF TZARAAT IN A HOUSE (14:34)

So is it when leprous plagues come upon man: First they come upon his house. If he repents, it requires only the removal [of affected stones]; if not, it requires tearing down the entire house. Then the plagues come upon one's clothes. If he repents, they require washing; if not, they require burning. Then the plagues come upon his body. If he repents, he undergoes purification; if not, "He shall dwell alone."

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

## "IT SEEMS TO ME THERE IS AS IT WERE A PLAGUE IN THE HOUSE" (14:35)

Even if he be a learned man and knows for sure that it is a plague, he shall not decide the matter as a certainty saying, "there is a plague in the house," but, "It seems to me there is as it were a plague in the house."

*(Talmud, Negaim 12:5)*

## THE PRIEST SHALL COMMAND THAT THEY EMPTY THE HOUSE (14:36)

The Torah is frugal with the property of the Jew.

*(Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 27a)*

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Metzora

Leviticus 14:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 6-12, 2003

*And they shall take other stones, and put them in the place of those stones; and he shall take other mortar, and shall plaster the house.*

The removed stones are replaced with new stones, the house is re-plastered, and closed for a second seven-day period. And the end of these seven days,

*If the plague come back, and break out in the house... it is a malignant tzaraat in the house: it is unclean.*

*And he shall demolish the house, the stones of it, and its timber, and all the mortar of the house; and he shall carry them out of the city into an unclean place.*

If the *tzaraat* does not return, the "healed" house undergoes a purification process similar to that of the healed *metzora*:

*...and [the Kohen] shall take the cedar wood, and the hyssop, and the scarlet, and the living bird, and dip them in the blood of the slaughtered bird, and in the spring water, and sprinkle the house seven times... and he shall let go the living bird out of the city into the open fields. And he shall make atonement for the house, and it shall be clean.*

## The Zav

Concluding the series of laws on **ritual purity** of the sections of Shemini, Tazria and Metzora are the laws of the *zav*, the *niddah* and the *zavah*.

The *zav* is a man who has a white, non-seminal discharge from his reproductive organ. The *zav* remains in a state of ritual purity throughout the time that the discharge continues and for seven days after it has stopped. During this time, anything he touches, moves, sits and lies upon, or is touched by any of his bodily fluids, is rendered *tameh*, ritually impure.

On the seventh evening he immerses in a *mikvah* and becomes pure. On the eighth day he brings two birds as offerings.

A seminal discharge (whether in coitus or otherwise) renders the person ritually impure for one day—until the next sunset and immersion in a *mikvah*.

## Niddah and Zavah

Woe to the wicked, and woe to his neighbor! [For if the afflicted wall is shared between two homes,] both must take out the stones, both must scrape the walls, and both must bring the new stones.

*(Talmud, Negaim 12:6)*

## Commentary

This is why the Torah commands to remove everything from the afflicted house before the Kohen arrives. Otherwise, if the house requires shutting up, all that is inside immediately becomes impure.

Over what is the Torah concerned in regard to ordering these precautions to be taken? If it had in mind wooden or metal vessels that need only be immersed in water in order to restore them to cleanness, he can immerse them and they will become clean. If it has in mind food and liquids, he can eat them during the time of his uncleanness. Consequently it follows that the Torah is concerned only about earthen vessels, for which there is no means of purification in a *mikvah*! (earthen vessels being the least valuable items in a household).

*(Sifra)*

A man says to his friend, "Lend me a *kav* of wheat," and the other says, "I have none"; or one asks for the loan of a *kav* of barley... or a *kav* of dates, and the other says, "I have none." Or a woman says to her friend, "Lend me a sieve," and the other says, "I have none" ... What does G-d do? He causes leprosy to light on his house, and as he takes out his household effects, people see, and say: "Did he not say, 'I have none'?" See how much wheat is here, how much barley, how many dates! Cursed be the house with such cursed inhabitants!

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

AND THEY SHALL REMOVE THE STONES IN WHICH THE PLAGUE IS... (14:40)

AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES AND TO AARON, SAYING... "WHEN ANY MAN HAS A RUNNING ISSUE OUT OF HIS FLESH..." (15:1-2)

One verse says, "Black like a raven" (Song of Songs 5:11), while other verses say, "His aspect is like Lebanon [from *laban*, white], excellent as the cedars" (ibid. 15) and "The appearance of them is like torches, they run to and fro like the lightnings" (Nachum 2:5)... This refers to those sections of the Torah which, though they appear as if repulsive and black to be spoken of in public, such as the laws relating to issues, leprosy, and childbirth, G-d says: They are pleasing to Me.

You have proof that this is so, since the sections relating to a man who has an issue and a woman who has an issue are not stated as one, but each by itself, namely, "When any man has an issue..." (Leviticus 15:1-18) and in a separate chapter (15:19-30) section, "And if a woman have an issue..."

*(Midrash Rabbah)*

"A prayer of David . . . Keep my soul, for I am pious" (Psalms 86:1-2). Thus spoke King David before G-d: Master of the world, am I not pious? All the kings of the East and the West sit with all their pomp among their company, whereas my

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## Metzora

Leviticus 14:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 6-12, 2003

*And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be seven days in her menstrual separation...*

A menstruant woman is a *niddah*; a woman who has a discharge of blood at a time other than her regular period is a *zavah*. Both are rendered ritually impure: the *niddah* for seven days (provided she has stopped bleeding); the *zavah* until the end of seven "clean days" which she begins counting after her flow has ceased completely. A man having relations with a *niddah* or *zavah*, in addition to transgressing a severe biblical prohibition (cf. Leviticus 18:19), is also rendered ritually impure. Both the *niddah* and *zavah* are purified through

**immersion in a mikvah.**

(In practice, **Torah law** rules that since it is very difficult to determine whether a discharge occurred precisely "in its time," every woman seeing blood should **count** seven "clean days" before immersing).

*And shall you separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness; that they die not in their uncleanness, when they defile my Sanctuary that is among them.*

*This is the law of him that has an issue, and of him whose semen goes from him, and he is rendered impure with it.*

*And of her that is ailing in her menstrual flow; and of one who has an issue, of the man, and of the woman; and of him that lies with her that is ritually impure.*

**Commentary**

hands are soiled with the blood of menstruation, with the fetus and the placenta, in order to declare a woman clean for her husband. And what is more, in all that I do I consult my teacher, Mephibosheth, and I say to him: My teacher Mephibosheth, is my decision right? Did I correctly convict, correctly acquit, correctly declare clean, correctly declare unclean? And I am not ashamed.

(Talmud, Berachot 4a)

AND IF A WOMAN HAVE AN ISSUE, AND HER ISSUE IN HER FLESH BE BLOOD, SHE SHALL BE SEVEN DAYS IN HER MENSTRUAL SEPARATION (15:19)

Why did the Torah ordain that the uncleanness of menstruation should continue for seven days? Because being in constant contact with his wife, a man might develop an apathy towards her. The Torah, therefore, ordained: Let her be unclean for seven days, in order that she shall be beloved by her husband as at the time that she first entered into the bridal chamber.

(Talmud, Niddah 31a)

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## From the Chassidic Masters

## ON THE ESSENCE OF RITUAL IMPURITY

One of the most widely misunderstood concepts in the Torah are contained in the words *tumah* and *taharah*. Translated as “unclean” and “clean,” or “impure” and “pure,” *tumah* and *taharah*—and by extension the laws of *Niddah* and Family Purity—often evoke a negative response. Why, it is asked, must a woman be stigmatized as *tameh*, “impure”? Why should she be made to feel inferior about the natural process of her body?

It might be said that, at bottom, these objections arise from a fundamental misunderstanding. *Tumah* and *taharah* are, above all, spiritual and not physical concepts.

The laws of *Tumah*, *Niddah*, and *Mikvah* belong to the category of commandments in the Torah known as *chukkim*—Divine “decrees”, for which no reason is given. They are not logically comprehensible, like the laws against robbery or murder, or those commandments that serve as memorials to events in our national past such as Passover and Sukkot. The laws of *tumah* and *taharah* are supra-rational, “above” reason. And it is precisely because they are of such high spiritual level, beyond what intellect can comprehend, that they affect an elevated part of the soul, a part of the soul that transcends reason entirely.

But even if the human mind can’t understand these Divine decrees logically, we can nevertheless try to understand them spiritually and search for their inner meaning and significance. In this endeavor, the teachings of Chassidic philosophy are of invaluable aid, for the study of *Chassidut* reveals the inner aspect of Torah, its “soul,” and can guide us through realms where unaided human intellect cannot reach. Chassidism strives for the direct perception of G-dliness underlying everything, and illuminates the spiritual sources of all physical phenomena.

***Tumah* as the Absence of Holiness**

Chassidic teaching explains that, in essence, *tumah*, “spiritual impurity,” is definable as the “absence of holiness.” Holiness is called “life,” “vitality”; it is that which is united with and emanates from the source of all life, the Creator. Chassidic philosophy further elucidates that true union with G-d, true holiness, means

that one’s own independent existence is in a state of *bittul*, “nullification” to G-d. On the other hand, that which is distant or separated from its source is called “death” and “impurity.” According to Torah law, death is the principal cause of all *tumah*; the highest magnitude of *tumah* comes from contact with a dead body.

The forces of evil are, in Kabbalistic and Chassidic terminology, the *sitra achra*, the “other side.” They are what is “outside,” what is far from G-d’s presence and holiness. They flourish in the realm where He is most concealed and least felt, where there is least holiness. In a place where G-d is least felt, there is naturally more room for “opposition” to Him. And hence, spiritually speaking, what is most evil and most impure in a person is, above all, the assertion of self: one pushes G-d’s presence away and creates a void, a vacuum where His presence should be.

That is the deeper meaning, according to Chassidic teaching, for the phrase “to cause a *chilul Hashem*,” to desecrate G-d’s name: one should not make a *chalal* (void), a place empty of His presence. Holiness is synonymous with *bittul*: it has no sense of any true existence independent of G-d. That is why, our Sages tell us, arrogance is equivalent to idolatry, for idolatry, in essence, means that something is regarded as independent of the Creator and asserts itself in place of Him.

Hence, if we strip the words “pure” and “impure” of their physical connotations, and perceive their true spiritual meaning, we see that what they really signify is the presence or absence of holiness.

**An Important Distinction Between Two Types of *Tumah***

At this point we must ask: Why must *tumah* exist at all? What purpose can it have in G-d’s creation?

“The Almighty has created one thing opposite the other,” the Book of Ecclesiastes tells us, and as Chassidic teaching interprets it, everything in the realm of holiness has its counterpart in the realm of unholiness.

On the one hand, these opposing realms are created so that we may have “free choice” in our behavior. On a deeper level, as Chassidism explains, when we reject the evil and choose the good and, moreover, when we further transform the evil itself into good, we effect an elevation not only in ourselves but in the entire world, bringing it closer to its ultimate perfection.

Hence, the ultimate purpose of *tumah*, the “other side,” is for us to achieve higher levels. As the well known Chassidic saying has it: “Every descent is for

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## From the Chassidic Masters

the purpose of a greater ascent,” and all concealments of G-d make way for a greater revelation. When the soul comes down to this world, for example, to be vested in a material body, it undergoes an incomparable descent from its previous purely spiritual existence. The purpose of this descent, though, is that the soul may rise even higher in its apprehension of G-d and attain a more elevated rank than it had before it descended to this world. It can attain this elevation only through the vehicle of the body, through serving G-d in this lower physical world.

On the one hand there is concealment and impurity in this lowly material world; on the other hand, only through its struggles here can the soul rise higher.

We must distinguish, then, between two types of *tumah*, two types of “descent.” There is the *tumah* that we ourselves create when we intentionally push G-d’s presence away and create a void; and there is the *tumah* that G-d creates as part of nature.

This distinction is crucial to our understanding of *Niddah* (laws pertaining to menstruation). The *tumah*, the impurity that attaches to a sin, is a void we create and by which we degrade ourselves. The *tumah* of *niddah*, however, is a built-in part of a woman’s natural monthly cycle. Her “descent” from a peak level of potential holiness (i.e., where a life is possible) does not mean that she is, G-d forbid, “sinful” or “degraded,” “inferior” or “stigmatized.” On the contrary, precisely because there is such holiness involved in a woman’s possession of the G-dly power to create, as if ex nihilo, a new life within her body, there is the possibility for greater *tumah*—but also a great elevation..

Let us try to understand further the idea that the more holiness, the more opportunity there is for the forces of impurity to enter. This is no contradiction to what was stated earlier—that the forces of the “other side” can flourish in the absence of holiness. The forces of evil are also called *klippot*, “husks” or “shells,” not only because they cover over and conceal the inner sparks of holiness that gives life to all things, but also because—like the husks or peels of a fruit—they can only derive whatever life they have from this inner spark, the truly living part. When separated from

the inner part, they have no more sustenance and “die.”

Hence, an excess of holiness can provide “room” for the extraneous forces to derive sustenance, just as, for example, if a barrel is filled to the top, some water will spill over and water weeds as well.

In this light we can further understand the explanation of the Kotzker Rebbe that *tumah* can set in only where holiness has been and gone. We can connect this with our understanding of the kind of *tumah* that is part of *niddah*.

The Torah says that when a woman gives birth, she is in a state of *niddah* for a variable amount of time: If the child is male, she will be *tameh* for seven days and if female, fourteen days.

Why should there be *tumah* at childbirth? The Kotzker Rebbe explains that *tumah* can set in only when holiness departs. As the Talmud tells us, G-d is directly involved with every childbirth and does not delegate any powers to His “messengers.” Thus, there is a very great level of holiness at birth; the birth of a child involves one of the most sublime powers of G-d, the ability to create ex nihilo—something from nothing. After birth, this intense holiness, this powerful force of G-d, “departs” and there is greater potential for *tumah*.

One might conjecture further that the reason the birth of a female involves a longer period of *niddah* is that a female contains within her the godly power to create yet another new life from “nothing.” Because of this higher potential for holiness, there can be more *tumah*.

The same is true of a woman’s monthly cycle: every month, this great potential for holiness, for a woman to engage in the sublime power of creation, reaches a peak in her body (an “ascent”). When the potential is not fulfilled and the holiness departs, the now-lifeless remnants are removed from the body. And therefore this “descent” is susceptible to *tumah*. It is precisely because of the high level of godliness involved in the procreative process that *tumah* can occur at all.

But here again this “descent” into *niddah* is for the purpose of a higher ascent, through purification in the *mikvah* and a new cycle of building up to a higher level of holiness the next month. The *mikvah*—as will be presently explained—enables one to ascend even higher than the previous month.

In this sense the *mikvah* and the monthly cycle of a woman may be compared to Shabbat and the weekly

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## From the Chassidic Masters

cycle of every Jew. The alternation of the holy day of Shabbat with the mundane days of the week is the same cycle of ascent and descent—reenacted every seven days. The six mundane days lead up to Shabbat, on which the world becomes elevated, purified, ascends to its source. Every Jew then receives an “extra soul,” which he again loses as the Shabbat departs, and he must “go down” again into the struggles of the coming week. Nevertheless, it is these very struggles to purify ourselves and the world that we confront during the six days that become elevated on the Shabbat and enable us to ascend higher and higher every week, in constant progression.

Or, let us take another cycle: the daily alternation of sleeping and waking. According to Torah law, every person upon awakening should wash his hands, to remove the “impure spirit” that adheres to them during sleep. In sleep, there is a “departure of holiness” from the body—the soul, it is said, “ascends to its source” above. Again, this “natural law” allows for impurity to set in. Our hands are *tameh* upon awakening, to be sure, but they are not “evil.” The same is true of *tumah* during a woman’s monthly “natural low.” It is the result of a departure of holiness but not a state of degradation, inferiority, or shame.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, offers an even more profound understanding of the inner nature of these “lows,” these descents. Since, he says, the descent is in fact a necessary preparation for the ascent, and its ultimate purpose is the ascent, the descent is nothing other than a part of the ascent itself. The Rebbe explains why the Torah, in speaking of all the journeys of the Jews in the desert, also describes the places where they only rested as “journeys.” Since the resting was a preparation for the journey that followed, the resting places are in fact part of the journey onward. Or as in our previous example: sleep gives strength to elevate oneself even more the following day, and is thus part of that ascent itself—though it appears to be a lower state for the body.

And on a broader level, the same is true, the Rebbe explains, of the exile of the Jewish people among the nations. If the exile were only for the purpose of pun-

ishing us for our sins, it should have lessened with time. Instead, it grows worse from day to day. (The concealment and darkness, however, are a preparation for—and their ultimate purpose is—a great revelation, the great light that will come in the era of Moshiach; and so the closer we approach that great light, the thicker the darkness becomes.) The inner purpose of the exile is that through refining ourselves and the world, we will ultimately attain a higher level of holiness and unity with G-d than existed even during the times of the First Temple.

## A Comparison with the Moon

In essence, these “natural lows”—absences of holiness that G-d has created within the monthly cycle of a woman, the weekly cycle of Shabbat, the nightly cycle of sleep, or the entire life cycle of the Jewish people as a whole—are, in their innermost sense, all parts of the process of spiritual ascent.

Nor is the connection between these different cycles artificial. The Talmud compares the Jewish people to the moon, for just as the moon waxes and wanes every month, so, too, do the Jews undergo phases of concealment and renewal in exile and redemption. The appearance of the new moon, *Rosh Chodesh*, is a minor holiday, marking the beginning of a new month. And this day is also a special holiday for women, given to them as a reward for not participating in the making and worship of the Golden Calf. A woman’s body, of course, also follows a monthly cycle, and Chassidic teaching illumines a deeper correspondence between the cycle of *niddah* and the new moon.

The third Lubavitcher Rebbe (the “Tzemach Tzedek”), explains that on *Rosh Chodesh*, the moon is renewed, “purified,” and again “unites” with the sun; it again receives its reflection. This union of the sun and the moon on *Rosh Chodesh* corresponds to the union of man and woman after the days of *niddah* are over. And in the same way that a woman is renewed monthly, so will the Jewish people be renewed at the time of their redemption, which will culminate in their higher union with G-d.

As the Talmud states, when the Jews were exiled, the *Shechinah*, the “indwelling presence” of G-d, went into exile with them. And as the Tzemach Tzedek points out, the Hebrew letters of the word *niddah* also mean *nod Heh*; “G-d wanders.” He is in exile with the people of Israel.

Hence the reunion of the sun and the moon on *Rosh Chodesh* reflects the union of man and woman, and of G-d and the Jewish people whose relationship is com-

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## From the Chassidic Masters

pared to that of husband and wife.

**Understanding Mikvah**

We have understood that these natural descents are aspects of ascent. Why, however, must this process be accompanied by immersion in a *mikvah*, and what has water to do with changing one's status from *tameh*, "impure," to *tahor*, "pure"?

The Chassidic masters explain that in progressing from one level to another, there has to be a period of "nothingness in between." For example, when a seed is planted in the ground, it must first disintegrate, lose its first existence, in order to be able to flower. To reach a higher state, one must first lose or nullify his previous state.

This is the inner purpose of the *mikvah*: to enable one to attain this state of *bittul*, "nullification," the "nothingness in between" the two progressive levels. As Chassidic teaching points out, the letters of the Hebrew word for *bittul* when rearranged spell *tevilah*—"immersion"—a further indication of their spiritual interconnection.

To fulfill the mitzvah of *mikvah*, one must immerse completely, be entirely enveloped by the waters. This total immersion of self means losing one's independent existence, going out from oneself, elevating oneself by becoming a vessel for holiness. Maimonides writes in his code of Jewish Law, the *Mishneh Torah*, that this immersion requires the intent of the heart, the intent to purify oneself spiritually from all wrongful thoughts and bad traits, to bring one's soul into "the waters of pure understanding."

*Chassidut* makes a further illuminating connection between this concept of *mikvah* and the nature of the great flood that occurred in the days of Noah. Why, the question is asked, was water the chosen instrument for removing the wicked from the world, and why did the flood have to last for such a long time, forty days and forty nights? Surely if G-d had wanted to punish the sinners, He could have done so immediately.

The answer, Chassidic teaching explains, is that the flood was not just a punishment, but also a purification for the world. It completely enveloped the earth and its

forty days and forty nights correspond to the measure of forty *seah* of water required to make a ritually fit *mikvah*. The waters of Noah cleansed the world by immersion in the same way one is purified by immersion in the waters of the *mikvah*. This separation and removal of all extraneous and undesirable elements has the ultimate purpose of bringing the world (and a person) to a higher level.

And this brings us back to the beginning: the ultimate cause of *tumah* is separation from G-d; and to be united means to be "nullified" to Him, to lose the sense of one's independent existence and be attached to one's source.

According to Torah Law, however, one is purified only upon leaving the *mikvah*, not while inside it. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, this means that the ultimate purpose of our elevated spiritual states, our "ascents," is not to be removed from the world; the purpose of creation is "to make a dwelling place for G-d in the lower worlds." That is, we must affect the "outside"—bring holiness into the very lowest levels. Despite one's high spiritual state, one is not purified until "going out"—until affecting the "outside."

In practical terms, this means that "the essential thing is the deed"—action in the world, in the refinement of one's inner self, and also one's particular "share" of the world, to make a "dwelling place for G-d." Just as the elevated state of *Shabbat* is called the "source of blessing" for the entire week, and *Rosh Chodesh* that for the entire month, so, too, the purification of oneself in the *mikvah* should permeate all one's thoughts, words, and actions when one leaves the *mikvah*.

*Chassidut* further explains that the performance of mitzvot provides "garments" for the soul. The moment of conception is particularly crucial, for the frame of mind and purity of the parents determines, to a great extent, what manner of "garments" that soul will have. In sum, not only do the laws of Family Purity have a deep spiritual meaning, but as the Lubavitcher Rebbe explains, the fulfillment of this mitzvah has a profound, direct influence on both the spiritual and physical health of one's children—and by extension, on all Jewish generations to eternity.

By Susan Handelman. Reprinted with permission from *Di Yiddishe Heim and Total Immersion: A Mikvah Anthology* (Jason Aronson, 1996).

## PARSHAH SUMMARY &amp; COMMENTARY

## From the Chassidic Masters

## THE MONTHLY MARRIAGE

There are two kinds of human love: the intrinsic, calm love that we feel for people to whom we're related by birth; and the more intimate, fiery love that exists in marriage. This is why the husband-wife relationship is very different from the parent-child relationship.

The love within a family, between relatives who are born of the same flesh, is innate. The love between a mother and child, a brother and sister, two brothers, two sisters, comes easily. Since they're related by nature, they feel comfortable with each other. There's an innate closeness between them, so their love is strong, solid, steady, predictable, and calm. There's no distance that has to be bridged; no difference that has to be overcome.

The love between a husband and wife isn't like that. Their love wasn't always there; they didn't always know each other; they weren't always related. No matter how well they get to know one another, they aren't alike. They are different from each other physically, emotionally, and mentally. They love each other in spite of the differences and because of them, but there isn't enough of a commonality between them to create a casual, calm love. The differences remain even after they are married, and the love between them will have to overcome these differences.

After all, husband and wife were once strangers. Male is different from female, so in essence they must remain strangers. Because of this, the love between them can never be casual, consistent, or calm.

This acquired love is naturally more intense than the love between brother and sister. When love has to overcome a difference, a distance, an obstacle, it needs energy to leap across and bridge the gap. This is the energy of fiery love.

Because the gap between husband and wife will never really close, their love for one another will continually have to reach across it. There will be distance, separation, then a bridging of distance, and a coming back together, again and again. This sense of distance intensifies the desire to merge.

To come together, man and woman have to over-

come certain resistances. A man has to overcome his resistance to commitment, and a woman has to overcome her resistance to invasion. So, in coming together, husband and wife are reaching across great emotional distances, which intensifies their love. The absence of innate love actually makes the heart grow fonder.

If a brother and sister were to have a fiery love, their relationship would suffer. It's not the appropriate emotion for a brother and sister to have. Their love thrives when it's unbroken, unchallenged, constant, and calm. Not that they can't have disagreements, but those disagreements disrupt their love. On the other hand, if a husband and wife develop a calm love for each other, their relationship will not thrive. If they are too familiar with each other, too comfortable with each other, like brother and sister, their love will not flourish. True intimacy in marriage—fiery love—is created by constant withdrawal and reunion.

If a husband and wife are never separate, their love begins to sour, because they are not creating an environment appropriate to that love. The environment of constant togetherness is not conducive to man-woman love: it's the environment for brother-sister love or parent-child love.

That's why the ideal blessing for a married couple is, "Your honeymoon should never end." A honeymoon—when two people who were once separate come together for the first time—should never end, because that's what a marriage thrives on.

The love between a man and a woman thrives on withdrawal and reunion, separation and coming together. The only way to have an environment conducive to that kind of relationship is to provide a separation.

There are many kinds of separations. A couple can live in different places, have differences of opinion, or get into arguments and be angry at each other. Often the arguing isn't for the sake of arguing, but for the sake of creating a distance so that husband and wife can feel like they're coming together. That's not a very happy solution. Making up after an argument may be good for a marriage on occasion, but not on a regular basis. It isn't a good idea to go looking for arguments, especially since separations can take a more positive form.

The physical separation given to us by G-d for that purpose is a much happier solution. That separation is created by observing a collection of Torah laws

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deriving from Leviticus 15, called “the laws of family purity” or “the laws of *mikvah*.” The word *mikvah* refers to the ritual bath in which traditional Jewish women, since the days of the Bible, have immersed themselves following their monthly period and before renewing sexual relations with their husbands.

According to these laws of *mikvah*, during the time that a Jewish woman is menstruating, and for one week afterward, she is physically off-limits to her husband. For those days, the physical separation is total: no touching, no sitting on a swing together, no sleeping in the same bed.

Through the ages, all sorts of explanations have been given for these laws, but all of them have one thing in common: Separation protects and nurtures the intimate aspect of marriage, which thrives on withdrawal and reunion.

This understanding is not unique to Jews. In most cultures throughout the world, the ancients practiced varying degrees of separation between husband and wife during the woman’s menstrual period. Some, such as certain tribes of American Indians, actually had separate living quarters, menstruant tents, where a woman would stay during her period. Later these customs deteriorated into myths, taboos, fears, superstitions, hygienic arguments, and other rationalizations, in an attempt to make sense of a delicate and sensitive subject. But separation was such a universal practice that I wonder if human beings know instinctively that male-female love thrives on withdrawal and reunion, on coming together following a separation. The body is actually respecting an emotional state. Just as the love between man and woman cannot be maintained at full intensity all the time, but needs a certain creative tension without which it will not flourish, the body has a similar need.

As far as Jews are concerned, we know these cyclical changes were created for that very purpose. This is much more than a coincidence: It is how the body reflects the soul, how the body is created in the image of the soul.

Like everything else that exists in our lives, the cycle of withdrawal and reunion that exists in marriage is meant to be a reflection of our relationship with G-d. The two kinds of love, calm love and fiery

love, exist not only among human beings, but between ourselves and G-d.

When we refer to G-d as our Father, it’s an innate and intrinsic relationship. We don’t have to work for it; it’s just there. It’s a steady, constant love, an indestructible love, a love compared to water-calm love.

But we also talk about how G-d is infinite and we are finite; G-d is true and we are not; G-d is everything and we are barely something. Because of these differences, we feel a great distance from G-d, and the need to create a relationship with Him. Establishing a relationship in spite of the differences, in spite of the distance, is more like a marriage. That’s a stormy relationship—fiery love.

More precisely, our soul loves G-d like a child loves a parent, because our soul is of G-d. That love is innate and calm. When G-d tells this soul to go down into a body, that’s a separation. Then our soul loves G-d with a fiery love, which, like the love between a husband and wife, does not come automatically. Acquired love is by nature intense and fiery.

Eventually, the soul will be reunited with G-d more intimately than before, just as the intimacy between a husband and wife is deeper when they come together following a separation. Therefore, when G-d says that a husband and wife have to be modest with one another, that they may be together and then separate, come together and separate again, according to a monthly cycle, it’s not an artificial imposition. It may produce discipline, which is nice. It may keep the marriage fresh, which is important. But there’s more to it than that. It is, in fact, the natural reflection of the type of love that must exist between husband and wife. In order to nurture that stormy, fiery love, our way of living has to correspond to the emotions we are trying to nurture and retain.

If there’s going to be a separation—and there needs to be one—consider the following: Rather than wait for a separation to develop, where a husband and wife get into a fight or lose interest in each other, let’s take the cue from the body and create a physical, rather than emotional, separation. Everyone is saying, “I need my space.” It’s true. Keeping the laws of *mikvah*, when they apply, is one way of creating that space.

*From Doesn’t Anyone Blush Anymore? (Harper San Francisco, 1990), by Rabbi Manis Friedman*