

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

The Parshiot of Tazria and Metzora **continue** the discussion of the laws of *Tumah v'Taharah*, ritual impurity and purity.

A woman who shall seed and give birth to a male child, shall be tameh seven days; as in the days of her menstrual period shall she be "impure."

On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

She shall then continue in the blood of her purifying for thirty three days: she shall touch no holy thing, nor come in to the Sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are fulfilled.

The birth of a daughter renders her mother ritually impure for fourteen days, followed by 66 days of "pure blood" (ordinarily, a discharge of blood renders a woman ritually impure, but in these days it does not).

At the conclusion of these periods—a total of 40 days for the birth

of a boy and 80 days for the birth of a girl—the mother brings two offerings: a lamb for an ascent offering and a pigeon or turtle dove for a **sin offering**. If she is poor and cannot afford a lamb, she brings a bird instead.

The Laws of Tzaraat

A person to whom shall occur in the skin of his flesh a se'ait, or sapachat, or baheret (patches of varying degrees of whiteness), and it be in the skin of his flesh the plague of tzaraat ("leprosy")—he shall be brought to Aaron the priest, or to one of his sons the priests.

And the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: if the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague be deeper in appearance than the skin of his flesh, it is a plague of tzaraat, and the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him tameh.

If, however, the white patch "is not deeper in appearance than the skin, and its hair not be turned white," the Kohen should order the afflicted person to be quarantined for seven days. If the white patch has spread, the person is pronounced ritually impure; if, it has not, the afflicted person is sequestered for an additional seven days.

And the priest shall look on him again on the seventh day. And, behold, if the plague be somewhat dimmer, and the plague spread not in the skin, the priest shall pronounce him pure: it is but a scab; and he shall wash his clothes, and be clean.

Commentary

AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES, SAYING: ... A WOMAN WHO SHALL SEED AND GIVE BIRTH (LEVITICUS 12:1-2)

Rabbi Simlai said: Just as man's creation was after that of cattle, beasts and birds, so, too the laws concerning his [ritual impurity and purity] come after those concerning [the impurity and purity of] cattle, beasts and birds. Thus it is what is written (Leviticus 11:46-47), "This is the law of the beasts and of the fowl and of every living creature... to differentiate between the impure and the pure"; and immediately thereafter, "A woman who shall seed..."

Why was man created last among the creations? So that if he is not meritorious, we say to him: "A gnat preceded you, a snail preceded you."

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

A WOMAN WHO SHALL SEED AND GIVE BIRTH TO A MALE CHILD (LEVITICUS 12:2)

If the woman gives seed first, she gives birth to a male; if the man gives seed first, she gives birth to a female.

(Talmud, Niddah 31a)

To understand this concept as it applies to the service of G-d:

It is known that the community of Israel is called the "woman" and G-d is called the "man", as it is written: "On that day, you shall call Me: husband" (Hoshea 2:18). So just as in the case of man and woman, when "the woman seeds

first she give birth to a male," so is it, by way of analogy, in the relationship between the community of Israel and G-d. When the "woman"—the community of Israel—"seeds first", meaning that there is an arousal from below which evokes an arousal from Above rather than the other way around [i.e., the person is aroused to come close to G-d from his or her own initiative, without requiring a divine intervention in their lives to rouse them], then the love that is born from this is a "male" offspring—an intense and enduring love.

(Torah Ohr)

A WOMAN WHO SHALL SEED (12:2)

There are three partners in man: G-d, his father and his mother. His father supplies the white seed, out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye. His mother supplies the red seed, out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye. And G-d gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time comes to depart from the world, G-d takes away His part and leaves the parts of his father and his mother with them.

(Talmud, Niddah 31a)

What is the form of the embryo? At the beginning of its formation it is like the [species of locust called] *rashon*; its two eyes resemble two fly-drippings, likewise its two nostrils and two ears; its two arms are like two threads of crimson silk, its mouth is like a barley-grain, its trunk like a lentil, whilst the rest of its limbs are pressed together like a formless object, and it is with regard to this that

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

But if the scab spread much abroad in the skin... then the priest shall pronounce him unclean; it is tzaraat.

However,

If the tzaraat breaks out abroad in the skin, and the tzaraat covers all the skin of him that has the plague from his head to his foot, as far as the priest can see... it is all turned white: he is clean.

A third sign of *tzaraat* (in addition to hairs on the afflicted area having turned white, or the white patch spreading following the quarantine) is the appearance of "live" (i.e., healthy) flesh inside the afflicted area.

Patches appearing on the hair-covered parts of the head or face are rendered impure by yellow, rather than white, hairs. Different rules apply to patches appearing on healed wounds or burns.

Commentary

the Psalmist said, "Your eyes have seen my unformed substance" (Psalms 139:16).

How does the embryo lie in its mother's womb? It is folded up and lying like a writing-tablet. Its head lies between its knees, its two hands rest on its temples, its two heels on its two buttocks; its mouth is closed, but its navel is open; its food is that which its mother eats, its drink is that which its mother drinks, and it does not discharge excrement lest it should kill its mother. When it issues forth into the open world, that which had been closed is opened, and that which had been open is closed.

(Midrash Rabbah)

Come and see the contrast between the power of the Holy One, blessed be He, and that of mortal man. A man might put his things in a sealed purse whose opening is turned upwards, and yet it is doubtful whether they would be preserved or not; whereas the Holy One, blessed be He, fashions the embryo in a woman's internal organ that is not sealed and whose opening is turned downwards, and yet it is preserved.

(Talmud, Niddah 31a)

ON THE EIGHTH DAY THE FLESH OF HIS FORESKIN SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED (12:3)

Isaac and Ishmael were engaged in a controversy... Said Ishmael to Isaac: "I am more beloved to G-d than you, since I was circumcised at the age of thirteen, but you were circumcised as a baby and could not refuse." Isaac retorted: "All that you gave up to G-d was three drops of blood. But lo, I am now thirty-seven years

The Leper

And the tzaruah in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and the hair of his head shall grow long, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and call out: "Unclean! Unclean!"

All the days during which the plague shall be in him he shall be unclean; he is tameh. He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be.

Such is his condition until he is healed of his affliction and undergoes the purification process to be described in the next Parshah, Metzora.

The Contaminated Garment

Garments, too, can be afflicted with *tzaraat*:

And the garment in which there is the plague of tzaraat, whether it be a woollen garment, or a linen garment; whether it be in the warp, or woof... whether in a leather garment or in anything made of leather...

If the plague be greenish or reddish in the garment... it is a plague of tzaraat, and shall be shown to the priest.

And the priest shall look at the plague, and shut up that which has the plague seven days... If the plague be spread.. he shall burn that garment... For it is a malignant tzaraat; it shall be burnt in the fire...

old, yet if G-d desired of me that I be slaughtered, I would not refuse."

(Midrash Rabbah)

Jewishness is not a matter of historical conscious, outlook, ethics, or even behavior; it is a state of being. This is the deeper significance of the debate between Ishmael and Isaac. When the Jew is circumcised on the eighth day of life, he is completely unaware of the significance of what has occurred. But this "non-experience" is precisely what circumcision means. With circumcision the Jew says: I define my relationship with G-d not by what I think, feel or do, but by the fact of my Jewishness—a fact which equally applies to an infant of eight days and a sage of eighty years.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

ON THE EIGHTH DAY THE FLESH OF HIS FORESKIN SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED (12:3)

A Jew is in essence "circumcised" even if, for whatever reason, his physical foreskin has not yet been removed. Thus the verse says, "On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised"—the flesh need to be circumcised, but, spiritually, the Jew is always "circumcised".

(Alshich)

ON THE EIGHTH DAY THE FLESH OF HIS FORESKIN SHALL BE CIRCUMCISED (12:3)

Said Rabbi Yitzchak: The law of the man and the law of the beast are equal. The law of man is that "On the eighth day shall be circumcised"; and the law of

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

And if the priest look, and, behold, the plague be somewhat dimmer after the washing of it; then he shall tear it out of the garment... [if it does not return and] the plague be departed from them, then it shall be washed the second time, and shall be ritually pure.

This is the law of the plague of tzaraat in a garment of wool or linen, either in the warp, or woof, or anything of leather, **to pronounce it tahor** (ritually pure), or to pronounce it tameh (ritually impure).

The Purification

In the second Parshah to comprise this week's reading, *Metzora*, the Torah proceeds to outline the process of the *metzora's* purification and rehabilitation:

And G-d spoke to Moses, saying:

Commentary

the beast is, "From the eighth day onward it shall be accepted as a fire offering to G-d" (Leviticus 22:27).

(Midrash Rabbah)

The number seven represents the natural, and the number eight represents the holy. This is why circumcision on the eighth day takes precedence over Shabbat, the seventh day.

(Keli Yakar)

AND WHEN THE DAYS OF HER PURIFYING ARE FULFILLED FOR A SON OR FOR A DAUGHTER, SHE SHALL BRING... A SIN OFFERING (12:6)

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was asked by his disciples: Why did the Torah ordain that a woman after childbirth should bring a sin offering? He replied: When she kneels in labor she swears impetuously that she will have no intercourse with her husband. The Torah, therefore, ordained that she should bring a sin offering [to atone for her false oath].

(Talmud, Niddah 31a)

A PERSON TO WHOM SHALL OCCUR IN THE SKIN OF HIS FLESH... THE PLAGUE OF TZARAAT (13:2)

The plague of *tzaraat* comes only as punishment for *lashon harah* (evil talk).

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 vessel 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

(Midrash Rabbah; Talmud; Rashi)

Why is the *metzora* different from all other ritually impure persons in that the Torah said, "He shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his habitation be"? With his gossip and slander, he separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor; therefore said the Torah: "He shall dwell alone."

(Talmud, Erachin 16b)

The Psalmist compares slanderous talk to "Sharp arrows of the warrior, coals of broom" (Psalms 120:4). All other weapons smite from close quarters, while the arrow smites from the distance. So is it with slander: it is spoken in Rome and kills in Syria. All other coals, when extinguished, are extinguished without and within; but coals of broom are still burning within when they are extinguished without. So is it with words of slander: even after it seems that their effects have been put out, they continue to smolder within those who heard them. It once happened that a broom tree was set on fire and it burned eighteen months—winter, summer and winter.

(Midrash Rabbah)

Evil talk is like an arrow. A person who unsheathes a sword can regret his intention and return it to its sheath. But the arrow cannot be retrieved.

(Midrash Tehillim)

To what may the tongue be compared? To a dog tied with an iron chain and locked in a room within a room within a room, yet when he barks the entire pop-

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

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 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

Commentary

ulace is terrified of him. Imagine if he were loose outside! So the tongue: it is secured behind the teeth and behind the lips, yet it does no end of damage. Imagine if it were outside!

(Yalkut Shimoni)

Evil talk kills three people: the speaker, the listener, and the one who is spoken of.

(Talmud, Erachin 15a)

The speaker obviously commits a grave sin by speaking negatively of his fellow. The listener, too, is a partner to this evil. But why is the one who is spoken of affected by their deed? Are his negative traits worsened by the fact that they are spoken of?

Indeed they are. A person may possess an evil trait or tendency, but his quintessential goodness, intrinsic to every soul, strives to control it, conquer it, and ultimately eradicate its negative expressions and redirect it as a positive force. But when this evil is spoken of, it is made that much more manifest and real. By speaking negatively of the person's trait or deed, the evilspeakers are, in effect, defining it as such; with their words, they grant substance and validity to its negative potential.

But the same applies in the reverse: speaking favorably of another, accentuating his or her positive side, will aid him to realize himself in the manner that you have defined him.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

A man once came to see Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch and proceeded to portray himself as a villain of the worst sort. After describing at length his moral

and spiritual deficiencies, he begged the Rebbe to help him overcome his evil character.

"Surely," said the Rebbe, "you know how grave is the sin of *lashon harah*, speaking evilly of a human being. Nowhere, to my knowledge, does it say that it is permissible to speak *lashon harah* about oneself."

A PERSON TO WHOM SHALL OCCUR IN THE SKIN OF HIS FLESH... (13:2)

Our Sages say that the occurrence of *tzaraat* was confined to biblical times, implying that later generations are not of the spiritual caliber that allows for this supra-natural affliction.

The reason for this can be understood from the opening words of the Torah's description of the *metzora*. "Shall occur" implies a happenstance, something out of character; "in the skin of his flesh" likewise indicates that the blemish is only superficial, affecting only the most external layer of the person. In other words, we are speaking of one whose inner being is free of imperfection, and in whom any "blemish" or malady exists only on the outside.

Thus the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98b) describes Moshiach as a *metzora*, signifying that the messianic age is a time in which evils which have infested the world and mankind rise to the surface, so that they can be decisively overcome and cured.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

SE'EIT, OR SAPACHAT, OR BAHERET (13:2)

The hues of the plague of *tzaraat* are two that are four [i.e., two categories—*se'eit* and *baheret*, each of which has a *sapachat*, or sub-category). *Baheret* ("bright") is a bright white like snow; its sub-category is like the lime of the Sanctuary. *Se'eit* is like the skin of an egg, its sub-category is like white wool; this is the opinion of Rabbi Meir. The [other] sages say: *Se'eit* is like white wool, its sub-category is like the skin of an egg.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

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.

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.

Commentary

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 86a)

(Talmud, Negaim 1:1)

AND THE PRIEST SHALL LOOK ON THE PLAGUE... IF THE HAIR IN THE PLAGUE IS TURNED WHITE (13:3)

There was once a Kohen who could not earn a living and decided to leave the Land of Israel to seek a livelihood. He said to his wife: Since people come to me to show me their plagues, let me teach you how to diagnose *tzaraat*. If you see that the hair in the afflicted area has died because its canal has dried, then know that the person is afflicted. Because for each and every hair G-d created its own canal from which to drink; if this canal dries out, the hair dries out.

Said his wife to him: If G-d created a separate canal for each hair to nourish it, how much more so yourself, who are a human being, and whose children depend on for nourishment—certainly G-d will provide for you! And she did not allow him to depart from the Holy Land.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

IF THE HAIR IN THE PLAGUE IS TURNED WHITE (13:3)

It was debated in the academy of heaven: If the white patch precedes the white hair, it is impure; if the white hair precedes the white patch, it is pure; but what if there is doubt (as to which came first)?

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: "It is pure."

The entire academy of heaven said: "It is impure."

Said they: "Who shall decide it for us? Rabbah bar Nachmeini." For Rabbah bar Nachmeini had declared: "I am singular in the laws of *tzaraat*..." They dispatched a messenger [to bring him to heaven]... Said [Rabbah]: "*Tahor, tahor* ('Pure, pure')."

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

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

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

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

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 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)

Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 12:1-15:33

Torah Reading for Week of April 7-13, 2002

Commentary

“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)

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)

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)

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 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 & COMMENTARY

On the Essence of Ritual Impurity

From the Chassidic Masters

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 eluci-

dates 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

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

On the Essence of Ritual Impurity

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known Chassidic saying has it: “Every descent is for 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

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

On the Essence of Ritual Impurity From the Chassidic Masters

woman may be compared to Shabbat and the weekly 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 punishing 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

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

On the Essence of Ritual Impurity

From the Chassidic Masters

G-d and the Jewish people whose relationship is compared 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.

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