

# Tazria-Metzora

*Leviticus: 12:1-15:33*

For the week of April 18-24

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

A **woman** giving **birth** should undergo a process of purification, which includes immersing in a *mikvah* (a naturally gathered **pool of water**) and bringing offerings to the Holy Temple. All male infants are to be circumcised on the **eighth day of life**.

*Tzaraat* ("leprosy") is a supra-natural plague, which can afflict people as well as **garments** or **homes**. If white or pink patches appear on a person's skin (pink or greenish in garments or homes), a Kohen is summoned. Judging by various signs, such as an increase in size of the afflicted area after a seven-day quarantine, the Kohen **pronounces** it *tameh* (impure) or *tahor* (pure).

A person afflicted with *tzaraat* must dwell alone outside of the camp (or city) until he is healed. The afflicted area in a garment or home must be removed; if the *tzaraat* recurs, the entire garment or home must be **destroyed**.

When the *metzora* ("leper") heals, he or she is purified by the Kohen with a special procedure involving two birds, **spring water** in an earthen vessel, a piece of **cedar** wood, a scarlet thread and a bundle of **hyssop**.

Ritual impurity is also engendered through a seminal or other discharge in a man, and menstruation or other discharge of **blood** in a woman, necessitating purification through **immersion** in a *mikvah*.



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## Tazria-Metzora

Leviticus 9:1-11:47

For the week of January 4-10, 2004

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*

### Commentary

**continue:** *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)

**seed:** *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)

**birth:** *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

*days of her menstrual period shall she be "impure."*

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

### Commentary

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 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)

**flesh:** *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)

**circumcised:** *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 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)

*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.*

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## Commentary

**sin offering:** *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)

**degrees of whiteness:** *Se'ait, or sapachat, or baheret (13:2)*

The hues of the plague of *tzaraat* are two that are four [i.e., two categories--*se'ait* 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'ait* 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'ait* is like white wool, its sub-category is like the skin of an egg. (Talmud, Negaim 1:1)

*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***

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## Commentary

**the skin of the flesh:** *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)

**the priest shall look:** *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

*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.*

*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.

### The Leper

*And the tzaraat 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*

### Commentary

provide for you! And she did not allow him to depart from the Holy Land. (Midrash Tanchuma)

**a covering upon his upper lip:** 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 populace 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

**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.*

### Commentary

spoken of, it is made that much more manifest and real. By speaking negatively of the person's trait or deed, the evil speakers 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."

**alone:** 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). (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)

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 woolen 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...*

*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*

### Commentary

**to pronounce it tahor:** *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)."

(Talmud, Bava Metzia 86a)

**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:*

*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.*

### Commentary

**The priest:** *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

*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*.

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## Commentary

impurity. In other words, no matter how terrible a persons 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)

**birds:** *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)

**hyssop:** *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 Peshischa)

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 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 "leprosy"; now the Torah sets down the law of the contaminated **house**:

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

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## Commentary

**house:** *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 leprosy 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)

*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 if 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

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## Commentary

**afterward:** *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)

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.*

*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*

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## Commentary

**malignant:** *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)

*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

*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

**blood:** *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

## Commentary

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)

**separate:** *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)



## The Wonder that is Woman

By Yanki Tauber

*And G-d spoke to Moses, saying: "...A woman who shall seed and give birth..." (Leviticus 12:1-2)*

It happens 250 times a minute, almost 15,000 times every hour. It happens after years of effort and anticipation, or by "accident." It occurs on every socio-economic level in every country and village in the world. But no matter how frequently it transpires, no matter how commonplace an event it is, we always stand back in awe and say: a miracle.

That one being should give birth to, should *create*, another. If there is any area in which a creature emulates its Creator--if there is any act by which we express the spark of divinity at our core--it is the miracle of birth.

Yet it is in this, the most G-dly of our achievements, that we also most reveal the limitations of our individuality. Feeding, sleeping, thinking, producing a work of art or building a house--virtually everything we do, we can do on our own. But giving birth to a child is something we can only do together with another person. To give birth, we must cease to be an entity unto ourselves and become a part, a component, of a community of two.

Because if we are only what we are, we are most decidedly not divine. As beings unto ourselves, we are finite and self-absorbed things, manufacturers rather than creators. To create, we must rise above our individuality; to actualize our divine essence, we must transcend the bounds of self.

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It is the woman, so much more than the man, who gives birth. It is the woman who is most fulfilled in parenthood, and who most acutely feels the lack when parenthood is denied her. It is the woman who continues to mother her child long after the man has fathered it. It is the woman, according to Torah law, who exclusively determines the spiritual identity of her child.

Because it is the woman who most surrenders her selfhood to create life. She is the passive and receptive element in the procreation process. For nine months, her very body ceases to be hers alone as it bears and nurtures another life. So it is the

woman, so much more than the man, who "seeds and gives birth," and to whom motherhood is a state of being, rather than an "achievement" or "experience."

Yet everyone can become a "mother". What comes naturally to the female half of creation can be learned and assimilated by all, and not only in giving birth to children but in every one of life's endeavors. We all have the power to recognize that there is more to our existence than the narrow confines of individual identity.

We all have the power to become more than we are and to do more than we can--by becoming receptive to the divine essence that underlies the self and pervades the whole of existence.

## Schrieber the Jew

By Professor Abraham Beyarsky

In May 1934, a young doctor completed his studies in Warsaw and returned to Byalestok. With the help of his father, a well-to-do farmer who some years earlier had moved his family to the city, he set up a small office in view of the town clock.

As the months sped by, his reputation grew and with it the size of the crowd in his waiting room. Handsome and amiable, he was at ease in the social circles of Byalestok, quickly becoming the toast of the secular Jewish community. Wealthy industrialists vied for the opportunity to introduce their daughters to him and the intellectual elite was constantly after him to address their groups and attend their social gatherings. More often than not he declined their invitations, unimpressed by the glitter of their parties and by the all-too-familiar topics of their conversations. He devoted his time to his practice; his leisure hours he spent strolling through the streets and parks of the city.

Between patients, he often glanced across the room at the graduation photograph of his elementary school class, dated 1922. Time was passing quickly. He was a doctor, respected, almost famous in Byalestok, but he was not happy with his accomplishments - something was missing. The life around him lacked purpose and consistency. Even his work depressed him at times. The death of a young patient, as he looked helplessly on, touched

him deeply. What was the meaning of his life, he asked in his heart. Why did it have to happen?

One day late in October the Assistant Mayor of Byalestok, a tall educated Pole, called on the doctor.

A year earlier, the city administration had hired a new District Attorney, Andrei Maritus, who immediately set in motion a number of projects. The unabashed purpose of one of them was to close down all the *mikvehs* in Byalestok. On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, after hundreds of Jews had immersed themselves in the *mikveh* of the Main Synagogue, Andrei Maritus, accompanied by the City Health Inspector and three policemen, collected two samples from the water that had become dark and turbid. A day later all the *mikvehs* in the city were ordered closed, pending a hearing to be held two weeks hence. Late that same afternoon, the Assistant Mayor paid Dr. Schreiber a visit.

"It's simply a matter of health," said the Assistant Mayor, a tall, square-shouldered Pole with a rim of reddish hair around his bald scalp, smiling genially. "The community must be protected from an outbreak of typhoid fever. Why, only last month six cases were discovered in Olsztyn, another four in Siedlce." Dr. Schreiber stared expressionlessly across the table. The Pole met his gaze and grinned affectedly. "This is a sample taken from the *mikveh*", he said, placing the vial on the table. "We want you to examine it and report to us in three days."

"I see," Dr. Schreiber said. Now the purpose of the visit was clear to him: he, a respected member of the Jewish community, was to provide the conclusive evidence.

Sensing a hint of indecision in the Doctor's eyes, the Assistant Mayor said: "It is a simple matter of health, Dr. Schreiber - the water is clearly polluted. We want your confirmation. Needless to say, you will be handsomely rewarded for your time."

Dr. Schreiber sat for a long time at his desk. From the street below came the sounds of children playing. He went to the window and looked down. Squeezed between shadows the roseate sunlight of evening blanched the faces of the children. For the first time since he had taken occupancy in this office, he wondered if they were Jewish. At length, he turned around and picked up the sample. He placed a drop on a slide, then slipped it under the eyepiece of the microscope. One glance showed him that it was full of bacteria - he did not bother to analyze it further.

He apologized to the patients waiting outside his office and hurried down the stairs into the street. He walked through the main square with the pedestrian traffic, then strolled pensively through the gardens to the commercial center of Byalestok. From there he headed toward the Main Synagogue. The enormous, domed structure dominated the surroundings for many blocks. Here and there, Jewish children played in the dusty streets, dressed in rags, their earlocks drifting in the breeze. The doctor had never made real contact with the observant Jews of Byalestok; in his social circle they were regarded with disdain, as one thinks of a distant relative who is squandering his life, but at whom one can only shrug one's shoulders in helpless disapproval. He never understood their ways - then again, he never tried. His university days came to mind; there had been more than a trace of anti-Semitism in the air but, somehow, absorbed as he was in his studies, he made little of it, attributing it to the ignorance of a few misguided individuals in the faculty.

Suddenly, a five or six year old boy came out of a lane carrying a pail of water, and stood directly in front of Dr. Schreiber. A brown cap with a narrow visor extending over his brow covered his head, while a torn black coat concealed the little boy's body from neck to ankles.

"Where is your skull cap?" he demanded with a nuance of contempt, jutting his chin upward.

"I don't wear one," said the doctor, smiling.

"Every Jew must wear a skull cap!" asserted the boy, hot with anger.

"Not every Jew."

"Yes, every Jew!" he insisted stubbornly, pursed his lips, and shook his head reproachfully like an adult. "You wear glasses, don't you, but glasses are heavier than a skull cap," he said, with a talmudic thrust of the thumb.

The following week two elderly Jews came to Dr. Schreiber's office. One was the Chief Rabbi of Byalestok, the other Leib Orenstein, President of the Main Synagogue. They had learned that the doctor was scheduled to testify at the upcoming hearing.

"The *mikveh* is not a place to wash ourselves," said the aged Rabbi through the slit in his long, white beard. The axe-like handle of his cane leaned against his breast; he clasped it tremulously and went on, his narrow eyes set deeply between the swollen lids:

"The *mikveh* is life; it is like the waters of the placenta in which the fetus lives and develops - when the infant breaks through the waters, it is alive. And so it is with a Jew when he comes out of the *mikveh* in the morning; he is rejuvenated, eager to serve the Creator."

The wan cheeks of the Rabbi merged into his beard and all one saw was the dark, patient eyes and the serrated outline of his beard against the backdrop of his black coat. Dr. Schreiber nodded respectfully.

"Even if you do not understand what a *mikveh* means", said Leib Orenstein, a clean-shaven man of sixty, in a voice straining to be calm, "you must respect that it is of the greatest importance to thousands of Jews in Byalestok. When a woman goes to the *mikveh*, she feels assured of a healthy child. This is not a detail in our lives; it is everything!" Unable to contain his emotion, he went on: "And do not deceive yourself into believing that this is an isolated event and that it will end here. Should they, G-d forbid, force the *mikvehs* to close it will encourage them to attempt more; soon they will want to destroy our slaughter-houses - cruelty to animals they will charge! Then our schools will be attacked, and then Dr. Schreiber - I ask you - what will be left?"

Dr Schreiber gazed somberly at his visitors.

"The water is full of bacteria," he said frankly. "it is a health hazard."

"No Jew has ever become sick from a *mikveh*," stated Mr. Orenstein, his lips trembling at the Doctor's misconception.

"That may be so, but nevertheless the water does pose a danger to the health of the community," he said, weighing his words carefully.

"Science and logic are not everything, Dr. Schreiber," said the Rabbi. "The history of the Jews is ample evidence of that."

The visitors stood up to leave. The doctor accompanied them to the corridor. He expected them to plead with him, to evoke in him a sense of guilt. But they said no more, and he respected them for it. He extended his hand to them; the Rabbi held it lightly between both his hands as if to transmit a final message through it.

Dr. Schreiber took to wandering through the streets alone, a deeply troubled look on his face. In the

religious district he imbibed the hum of Torah talk seeping out of the windows and the smell of challah baking for Shabbos. He was touched by the simplicity and devotion of their activity, admiring with envy the consistency of it all. But in the Jewish secular districts he reverted to his concern for truth, his intellectual desire to defend it wherever it might be threatened.

The night before the hearing Dr. Schreiber made his way into the dark deserted *mikveh* room of the main synagogue. He switched on the small electric lamp. The stark nakedness of the dressing room made him shudder; the piebald walls were cracked in many places; the toilet, uncomfortably close to the benches, leaked a vivid brown fluid, and in the high corners of the room, spiders spun their gossamer webs. He stepped slowly over the wooden floor to the stairs leading down to the pool. The dressing room lamp shed a pale light over the murky water. He crouched for a better look, leaning to a side to allow the light past him. Here and there, little clusters of lint intertwined with hair floated on the dark, still surface of the water that had not been changed for weeks. He scooped up a handful and let it spill through his fingers. He smelled it, then wiped his hand thoroughly on the sleeve of his coat. A frown suffused his face and he could not remove it.

The highly publicized hearing attracted officials and journalists from all over Poland. The hall was crowded. In the front row to the left, sat three rabbis, the Chief Rabbi in the middle, his trembling fingers dovetailed over the handle of his cane. The stage was set. The District Attorney, a tall bespectacled Pole with a grape-sized growth in the middle of his right cheek, veritably bursting with confidence, strutted back and forth between his colleagues, adding the final touches. The judge, a towering man distinguished by his flowing gray hair and an involuntary smile, called the hearing to order.

Andrei Maritus wasted no time. First on the witness stand was a former janitor of the Main Synagogue, a drunkard named Babules. Anyone who was even vaguely acquainted with Babules knew that for a swig of whiskey he would testify that grass was blue. Today, however, he was a different man. Dressed in a new suit and tie, his pitch black hair slicked down, he indeed had the appearance of a decent, law-abiding citizen. Only his eyes betokened the real Babules; bloodshot, they strove in vain to follow the District Attorney as he paced back and forth in front of him a little too quickly. With a coherence that surprised many of the onlookers, Babules described conditions at the *mikveh* as he claimed to know them. Using adjectives and superlatives utterly alien to him,

his description of the squalid conditions brought the hostile audience to shouts of outrage.

"How often I pleaded with the rabbis to permit me to change the water daily!" he testified bitterly.

"And did they let you?" prompted the District Attorney, radiant with anticipation of victory.

"No! Never!"

"Why?"

"Money! What else?"

"You should have offered to do it for free," suggested Andrei Maritus magnanimously.

"I did! Out of the goodness of my heart, Babules offered! I could not endure the odor, Sir! You see - I should have mentioned this earlier - but the older men were not reluctant to sneeze into the water."

"That's all for now, Mr. Babules", said the District Attorney, smiling unrestrainedly as he fondled the growth on his cheek. He glanced meaningfully at the judge, who lowered his eyes to the notepad on his desk.

Six witnesses followed. The testimony of each was increasingly more devastating. However, it was clear that the prosecutor's case rested on statements of questionable witnesses. There was no hard evidence, no scientific facts. For that, he called on Dr. Schreiber, who was seated in the back row of the hall.

"Now, Dr. Schreiber," began the District Attorney, slowly and deliberately, "you were given a sample of water from the *mikveh* and asked to analyze it. I presume you have had an opportunity to do so."

"Yes, Sir," Dr. Schreiber answered politely, his stern gaze wrinkling the corners of his eyes into a tiny staircase of furrows.

"What are you findings, Doctor?" asked Andrei Maritus, pointing to the glass of blackened water which a court officer had placed on the ledge of the witness stand.

"The water is dirty," said Dr. Schreiber without a trace of hesitation, meeting the Attorney's eyes with a hard stare.

"How dirty, Doctor?" he continued with confidence, glancing discreetly at the judge.

"Very dirty," answered the Doctor in the same resolute tone. A wave of silence rippled through the room.

Feeling the firm ground of his case, Andrei Maritus glanced at the crowd with a slight inclination of the head. He could barely collect himself to pose the decisive question. Meanwhile the visitors had become noisy with excitement. The District Attorney beckoned the crowd to be silent. At length, he turned to Dr. Schreiber, straining to control his every muscle.

"Would you say, then, that the water is hazardous to health?" he asked in a tone that permitted only one answer.

"The health of whom, Sir?" the doctor asked with exaggerated politeness.

A sudden hum of voices coursed through the hall.

"Silence!" the Judge ordered.

"Humans, of course!" the District Attorney enunciated haltingly, a shocked look of outrage on his face. Then he grinned nervously at the judges and pinched his cheek.

Dr. Schreiber lifted the glass to his eyes as if to ponder the question.

"For humans?" he asked reflectively, pausing for one final glance at the water. Before the stunned eyes of the crowd he brought the glass to his lips and drank it down in one gulp. Showing no sign of discomfort he placed it back on the ledge in front of him. "Are there any more questions, Sir?" he asked courteously.

*Originally published in Di Yiddishe Heim Journal*