

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5770, 2010:

Tumah, Taharah, and Serving Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

In honor of the *Yahrzeits* of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohen *aleha hashalom* and Avi Schreiber's father, Asher Zelig ben Avraham *aluv hashalom*, and in dedication to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra *aleha hashalom*, and the refuah shlaimah of Sarah bat Rachel, Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

A significant portion of our *parshiot* focuses upon the spiritual malady known as *Tzarat*. The study of this supernatural illness forms a major part of the general body of Jewish law known as *Tumah* and *Taharah* (Laws of the Ritually Impure and Ritually Pure). An entire section of the Mishnah is entitled "*Taharot*" ("Purities"), and page after page of the Talmud discusses the intricacies of this fundamental area of Halacha. Unfortunately, however, very few people today, regardless of their level of intellectual acumen and scholarly achievement, have mastered this area of study. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), in his paradigm-changing work entitled *Commentary on the Mishnah*, noted this lacuna of knowledge in his own time as well:

And you know that today, because of the multiplication of our sins, that if you were to encounter the leaders of the yeshivot throughout the Jewish people, and all the more so, those of the various synagogues, you would find that this entire subject remains difficult for them. This is the case, [even though] there are many explicit Torah verses and Mishnaic passages [that discuss this area of Halacha] and sources that are even clearer and simpler than these works. (*Introduction to Mishnah Kalim*, ed. Rabbi Yosef David Kapach, p. 22, translation my own)

Maimonides' observation regarding *Tumah* and *Taharah*, in general, is no less accurate when specifically applied to the myriad and complex laws of *Tzarat*. Indeed, very few people in our own time can claim expertise in this difficult and esoteric field of Jewish law.

According to *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory), *Tzarat* is a miraculous punishment for the transgression of speaking slander (*lashon hara*). The Rambam explained its progression and import in the following manner:

... at first this change appears in the walls. If the man repents, the purpose has been achieved. If, however, he continues in his disobedience, the change extends to his bed and his house furniture. If he still persists in his disobedience, it passes over to his clothing, then to his body. This is a miracle that was perpetuated in the religious community like that of the *waters of the woman suspected of adultery* [i.e. the *Sotah*]. The utility of this belief is manifest, there being also the fact that *Tzarat* is contagious and that, almost by nature, all men find it disgusting. (*The Guide for the Perplexed* III:47, translation, Shlomo Pines, pages 596-597 with my emendations)

In addition, the process of purification from *Tzarat*, and the specific constitutive components thereof, remains a complete mystery. In this sense, it is similar to the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer):

The reason why purification from it was effected by means of *cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet thread, and two birds*, is given in the *Midrashim*, but it does not fit with our purpose, and up to now I do not know the reason for any of these things; nor why *cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread* were used in the ceremony of the *Red Heifer* nor why a *bunch of hyssop* was used for the sprinkling of the blood of the *paschal lamb* [during the Exodus from Egypt] (Ibid., underlining and brackets my own)

Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (1080-1158), popularly known as the “Rashbam,” followed the general tone of the Rambam’s approach when he firmly urged us to follow our Sages’ interpretations of *Tzarat*, rather than rely upon our own intellectual and scientific efforts:

All of the sections dealing with the afflictions (*negayim*) affecting people, garments, houses and the manner in which they appear, as well as the number of days requiring sequestering, the white, black, and golden identifying hairs may not in any way be understood by following the simple and direct meaning of the text. Neither may we rely upon standard human knowledge and expertise. Instead, we must follow the analysis of the Sages, their decrees, and the inherited body of knowledge that they received from the earliest Sages. This is the essence [of this matter]. (Commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 13:2, translation my own)

In sum, if we are to have any understanding whatsoever of *Tzarat*, we need to rely upon *Chazal* and their inherited body of explanation and analysis. This notion is in line with the Rashbam's general proclivity of unmitigated loyalty to our Sages and their halachic conclusions.

Given the above, I believe we are now in a position to ask a fundamental and essential question, "What is the purpose inherent in the laws of *Tzarat*, and by extension, *Tumah* and *Taharah*?" Happily, we can once again turn to the illuminating genius of the Rambam to help us answer our question:

It is a clear and explicit concept that the various forms of impurity and purity are a Divine decree of the Torah. They are not in the class of those matters wherein man can use his intellect to make determinations. [Instead,] they are in the category known as *Chukim* [laws whose rationale currently elude us.] So, too, when it comes to the instance of immersion in a ritual bath (*mikvah*) to remove ritual impurity – it is in the category of *Chukim*. This is the case since ritual impurity is neither dirt nor bodily excretions that will be removed by the water – rather, the purification process is a Divine decree of the Torah – and the entire matter is dependent upon one's intention (*kavanat halev*) [and not just the physical immersion]...

Nonetheless, the Torah provides a hint of understanding [of *mikvah* and *Tumah* and *Taharah*]: Just like an individual with the proper intention to purify himself - once he immerses himself becomes ritually pure – even though nothing new has been created in his body, so too, one who has the intention to purify his soul from spiritual impurities such as wicked and evil thoughts – since he has made a heartfelt decision to remove himself from those ignominious ideas – he will be able to bring his soul back to the waters of pure and unsullied thought... May Hashem in His great mercy purify us from all inadvertent and purposeful sins, and from all manner and variety of guilt. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mikvaot* 11:12, translation and underling my own)

This passage is nothing less than a philosophic and spiritual *tour de force*. In relatively few words, the Rambam allows us to gain an insight into the complex and elusive world of *Tumah* and *Taharah* and its meaning for our time. In his view, the ultimate purpose of this entire body of law is to serve as a model for how we can effectuate substantive change in ourselves and become better, in kind and degree, than who we are today. The

laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah*, therefore, offer us the greatest hope known to man – the hope that we will return to our Creator with truly purified bodies, hearts, and souls – and become His true servants.

“May Hashem in His great mercy purify us from all inadvertent and purposeful sins, and from all manner and variety of guilt.” *V’chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom,

Past drashot may be found at my website:

http://home.mindspring.com/~rdbe/parashat_hashavuah/index.html.

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email: rdbe718@gmail.com.