

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora, 5772, 2012:

Achieving Purity in Our Time

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel.

A significant portion of our *parshiot* deals with the spiritual malady known as *tzarat*.

This disease does not correspond to any of the many skin ailments that exist in our own time. As such, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashi's grandson, known as the "Rashbam," 1080-1158) introduces our topic in the following manner:

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 (*midrash*) 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].

In a word, *tzarat* can only be understood from the Torah rather than from a physiological or medical perspective. This is because its etiology is not biologically based. Instead, it is a spiritual malady that manifests itself in a physical fashion.

Tzarat is a subset of the Laws of *Tuma'ah* and *Taharah* (Ritual Impurity and Impurity), and constitutes a significant section of the overarching category of commandments known as "*Chukim*" (laws whose rationale currently confound our understanding.) Given the Torah's extended treatment of *tzarat*, one must conclude that there is far more to our subject than we can initially comprehend. As in many matters of this nature, the brilliant insights of Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides, the "Rambam," 1135-1204)

illuminate the darkness of confusion that surrounds our subject. Part of the Metzora's (one afflicted with *tzarat*) purification process entails immersion in a mikvah (ritual pool) in order to effectuate his or her transition to complete purity:

The person seeking to effectuate the purification process shall then immerse his garments, shave off all his hair, and immerse [himself] in [mikvah] water, and become ritually purified. After this, he may enter the camp, but he shall remain outside his tent for seven days. And it shall be, on the seventh day, that he shall shave off all his hair: [that of] his head, his beard, his eyebrows; indeed, all his hair, he shall shave off. He shall then immerse his garments and immerse his flesh in [mikvah] water, thus becoming ritually purified. (*Sefer Vayikra* 14:8-9, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations)

As the Torah testifies, there is an inextricable link that obtains between *tzarat* and purification therefrom via immersion in a mikvah. As such, let us now turn to the Rambam's analysis of the mikvah's waters in order to advance the understanding of our difficult topic:

It is a clear and apparent matter that the concepts of [ritual] purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees and they are not matters determined by a person's understanding and they are included in the category of *chukim*. Similarly, immersion in a *mikvah* to ascend from impurity is included in the category of *chukim*, because impurity is not mud or filth that can be washed away with water. Instead, the immersion is a Scriptural decree and requires focusing the intent of one's heart. Therefore our Sages said: "When one immersed, but did not intend to purify himself," it is as if he did not immerse." (*Sefer Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mikvaot*, 11:12, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, brackets my own)

Maimonides first notes that the categories of *taharah* (ritual purity) and *tuma'ah* (ritual impurity) are concepts that defy human understanding and are, therefore, absolute commands of the Master of the Universe by which we must abide. He then states that the efficacy of immersing in a mikvah to effectuate the change in status from *tuma'ah* to *taharah* is one of the *Chukim* as well. This is the case since "impurity is not mud or filth that can be washed away with water." As a result, *kavanah* (intention) becomes the constitutive element for enabling the mysterious transformation from *tuma'ah* to *taharah*

to take place: “When one immersed, but did not intend to purify himself,” it is as if he did not immerse.”

Maimonides clearly recognized our difficulty in understanding the celestial “mechanics” of *tuma'ah* and *taharah*. Perhaps this is the reason for providing us with a far more accessible model of change, namely, the process by which one may purify his or her soul:

Although it [i.e. the purifying waters of the mikvah] is a Scriptural decree, there is an allusion involved: One who focuses his heart on purifying himself becomes purified once he immerses, even though there was no change in his body. Similarly, one who focuses his heart on purifying his soul from the impurities of the soul, which are wicked thoughts and bad character traits, becomes purified when he resolves within his heart to distance himself from such counsel and immerse his soul in the waters of knowledge. And *Sefer Yechezkel* 36:25 states: “I will pour over you pure water and you will be purified from all your impurities and from all your false deities, I will purify you.” (Ibid. , brackets and underlining my own)

May the Master of the Universe help us acquire the vision and understanding necessary to pursue lives invested with *kedushah* (holiness) and *taharah*. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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