

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5778, 2018:

Tumah and Taharah Today

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parshiot* focus on the *halachot* of *tumah* and *taharah* (The Laws of Ritual Purity and Impurity). As is widely known, these are some of the most complex subjects in the Torah. 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 Jewish law. Unfortunately, however, very few people today, regardless of their level of intellectual acumen and scholarly achievement, have mastered this area of study. This lack of mastery was noted as early as the 12th century by the Rambam (Maimonides), in his paradigm-changing work,

Commentary on the Mishnah:

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)

Perhaps the challenges we face when encountering *tumah* and *taharah* stem from the inherent nature of these laws. The best-known example of this category of commandments is the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer), which the Torah introduces with the famous words: “This is the statute (*chukat*) of the Torah which the L-rd commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the

children of Israel and have them take for you a perfectly red unblemished cow, upon which no yoke was laid.” (Sefer Bamidbar 19:2, this and all *Tanach* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) We immediately note that the Torah uses the term, “*chukat*,” which informs us that the *Parah Adumah* is a *chok*, a statute, in contrast to the prohibition of murder, for example, that is a *mishpat*. The Rambam defined the main difference between these classes of *mitzvot* in the following manner:

The *mishpatim* are those commandments wherein their rationale is revealed and the value that obtains as a result of their performance is manifest in this world. For example: the prohibitions of stealing and murder, and the obligation to honor one’s father and mother. [In contrast,] the *chukim* are those commandments whose rationale is unknown. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Meilah 8:8*, translation and brackets my own)

By definition, as *chukim*, the rationale of *tumah* and *taharah* is unknown. Yet, there is more at stake here than our failure to discover the underlying basis of this area of *Halacha*; in actuality, there are no rationally-conceived principles as to why something renders an object or person *tamei* (ritually impure) or *tahor* (ritually pure). These are not physical processes; rather, the consequent changes in status are brought about through the absolute will of Hashem. The following *Midrash* sheds light on this matter:

[Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai’s students] said to him: “You dismissed the [the question of the non-Jewish inquirer regarding *tumah* and *taharah*] with a reed [i.e. in a simplistic manner,] yet, how will you respond to us regarding the same inquiry?” He said to them: “The dead person does not [in some physical manner] render [a person or an object] ritually impure, and neither does water bring about ritual purity [in a physical fashion,] rather, both of these effectuate [these] changes based solely upon the edict of the Omnipresent One (*gezeirato shel Hamakom*). For the Holy One blessed be He declared: ‘A statute I have proclaimed! A prohibition I have declared! And you have no permission to violate my edict.’” (*Pesikta Rabbatai, Ish Shalom* edition, *Piska 14, Parah*, translation and brackets my own)

It appears that the Rambam was strongly influenced by this midrashic passage, and utilized it as the underpinning for the following halachic decision:

It is a clear and explicit concept that the various forms of *tumah* and *taharah* 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*. 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] ... (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mikvaot* 11:12, this, and the next translation and underling, my own)

At this juncture, the Rambam provides us with a startling philosophic and spiritual *tour de force*. In relatively few words, he enables us to gain a deep insight into the elusive world of *tumah* and *taharah* and its meaning for our time:

Nonetheless, the Torah provides a hint of understanding [of *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 shameful ideas, 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. (Ibid.)

In my view, the Rambam is teaching us that the ultimate purpose of the body of law focusing upon *tumah* and *taharah* is to serve as a model for how we can engender substantive change in ourselves, in order to become better than who we are today. The laws of *tumah* and *taharah*, therefore, offer the greatest hope known to the Jewish people, the hope that Hashem will help us return to Him in spiritual purity so that we may glorify His Name in the world. As Rabbi Akiva taught us so long ago:

Joyous are you O’ Jewish people, before Whom are you purified, and Who purifies you? Your Father in Heaven. As the texts state: “And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you will be clean; (*mayim tehorim u’tahrtem*) from all your impurities and from all your abominations will I cleanse you,” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 36:25) and “The L-rd is the source of the hopes of Israel (*mikvei Yisrael*) ...” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 17:13, *Mishnah Yoma* 8:9, translation my own)

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.