

... here it is! Thanks for your interest.

Parshat Metzora  
April 7th, 1984  
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This week's portion, metzora, defines, several forms of ritual impurity and prescribes the purification ritual for each.

First we have the so-called leper, the person who is metzora or afflicted by tzaruas. This malady is to be understood not only as a physical disease, but also as a sign that the person is undergoing a crisis in his or her relationship with God, or was exhibiting anti-social behavior, such as lashon hara, conceit or miserliness, indicating that he or she had lost touch with his or her place in the community and was in conflict. All of these were understood to be difficult-to-correct faults, requiring the metzora to isolate him or herself in order to perform the serious introspection required to reach the necessary t'shuva or repentance. He or she was separated, not only from the camp or walled city, but also from other tamays, or ritually unclean persons. Other parts of the purification process included rending ones garments, as a mourner, letting ones hair grow wild, covering ones lips and on encountering anyone, declaring "Tamey, tamey." These isolation laws applied to everyone, including King David, after his liaison with Bat Sheva. According to the midrash, he was afflicted with tzara for 6 months, isolated not only from society, but from the shechinah. In his great sorrow, he composed the verses of Tehillim, chapter 51, in which he entreats The Almighty to pardon him: "Restore to me the joy of your salvation."

The Torah next describes the purification ritual for the metzora. After the t'shuva is finished, and the signs of tzara disappear, the kohen would take a new earthenware bowl, mix in it the blood of a bird, and mayim chayim, or living fresh water. Into this he would dip a bundle made of

ceder, hysop, red wool string, and a living bird, sprinkling the liquid seven times on the back of the leper's head. Then the bird was released, representing the new life of the recovered metzora.

Next, the leper was shaved completely and her and his garments were immersed in the mikvah. At this point he was allowed back into the camp or walled city, but he was still regarded as Av Hatumah, a primary source of uncleanness, who defiled others on contact. He was not permitted to enter the Temple Mount, partake of sacrifices, nor was he permitted to his wife. He had to count seven days and was shaved, and immersed again in the mikvah. He then prepared a sacrifice and was allowed back into the community. Please keep this ritual in mind; we will see it again.

Now the Torah describes classifications of impurity arising from issue from the reproductive organs. If a man had an issue, he became tamay, and defiled others. If the issue occurred twice, it was termed tzivut and required immersion in a mikvah. If the issue occurred three times, he counted seven clean days (!), immersed in a mikvah, and prepared a korban hatzav on the eighth day.

The same classification and procedures, including the Korban Hatzav, applied to a woman who experienced a flow of blood at an unusual time. Tzivut was regarded as a sickness, and required a korban upon its termination.

And here at the end of our parsha we have a very few verses (five) about the niddah, a word which comes from nadad, meaning separation or aloofness, and which means here a menstruant woman: Verse 19 "And if a woman have an issue and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be in her impurity (be-niddata) seven days...", verse 24 "And if any man lie with her and her impurity be upon him, he shall be unclean seven days." Further, in

verse 28: "She shall count seven days and then she shall be purified."

Interestingly enough, there is no specific mention of the mikvah as the purifier for the niddah; interesting because this is the only one of these cases of ritual impurity and purification that we observe today. Because there is no Temple and no sacrifice, only the law of the niddah remains intact. It affects the right to enter into sexual union in the same way as is affected the right to enter the Temple (which is a provoking equation). (By the way, we know that the mikvah is the final purification step from the Oral Tradition and from tangential references elsewhere in the Torah and rabbinic literature.)

From these few Torah lines come the entire concept of Taharat Mishpaha - family purity. The two institutions, mikvah and laws of family purity are central to a Torah observant lifestyle and I'd like to say a few words in their behalf because it seems that they are frequently dismissed as antiquated and anti-feminist without thorough examination.

As everyone knows, mikvah means pool or gathering of water. The Torah says "Only a spring and a pit, a gathering of water shall be clean." From the Torah sh'be-al-peh, we know that its volume must be at least 40 sa'a, or about 24 cubic feet, a significant proportion of which must be from a natural source, mayim chayim, living water, and that the vessel must be built directly in contact with the ground. The mikvah has four purposes these days; to fulfill the laws of family purity; the toiveling of utensils, of pots, and dishes; for conversion; and by men before holy days.

The first mention of the mikvah in the Torah is the original consecration of kohanim in the desert. Immersion in this case resulted in a change of status, from a b'nai Yisrael to that of a kohen. Before the Israelites were given the Torah, they were instructed to immerse - indeed immersion, along

with circumcision and sacrifice were what created the covenant between the Jewish nation and God. Mikvah has its roots at Sinai as one of the earliest Jewish rituals.

It is through participation in the two remaining elements of this process - circumcision and immersion - that a person converts to Judaism. Talk about change of status! A person enters the mikvah as a non-Jew, and emerges as a newly born Jew, with new mazel, a new name, and new parents - Abraham and Sarah.

I must interject here that as a convert this mikvah was one of the most significant events in my life. It felt so distinctly Jewish that I emerged feeling distinctly Jewish, which proved to be very important to me during those times when my status was questioned - times which every convert encounters. I don't think I would have had the same sense of complete change had the ritual not included mikvah.

The Torah describes the world's most primitive status as water: Genesis 1:2 "The earth was empty and desolate with darkness on the face of the deep, and God's spirit fluttering on the face of the water." Water represents the womb of creation. When a person immerses in the mikvah, he or she is placing him or herself in the state of a world yet unborn, subjecting him or herself totally to God's creative power. It was this profound surrender that was so important in the healing process of the metzora. Remember that his or her fault was in losing touch with his or her role and responsibility in the community, placing all of one's trust and hope (another definition of mikvah) in God, corrects one's perspective.

Here is what Anyeh Kaplan has to say about the significance of mikvah in her wonderful book "Waters of Eden."

Mikvah cannot be made in a vessel or tub, but must be built

directly in the ground, for in a sense, the Mikvah also represents the grave. When a person immerses, he is temporarily in a state of nonliving, and when he emerges, he is resurrected with a new status. (#1, p.14)

The representation of the Miknah as both womb and grave is not a contradiction. Both are places of non-breathing and are end points of the cycle of life. Indeed, it is interesting to note that the Hebrew word Kever, which usually means a "grave", is also occasionally used for the womb. Both are nodes in the cycle of birth and death, and when a person passes through one of these nodes, he attains a totally new status.

The Talmud tells us that all the water in the world ultimately has its root in the river that emerged from Eden. In a sense, this river is the spiritual source of all water. Even though a person cannot re-enter the Garden of Eden itself, whenever he associates himself with these rivers - or with any other water - he is re-establishing his link with Eden. (#1, p.35)

We find a Midrash which tells us that after Adam was driven from Eden, he repented by sitting in this river. Although he had been permanently barred from the Garden itself, he tried to maintain a link through this river...

Our sages teach us that the word MikVaH has the same letters as Ko(V)MaH, the Hebrew word for "rising" or "standing tall." It is through the Mikvah that man can rise from things associated with his fallen state, and re-establish a link with the perfected state that is Eden. (#1, p.36)

Kaplan goes on:

We have seen that Mikvah entails two basic concepts, namely, water and the number forty. Both of these concepts are contained in a single letter, namely, the Hebrew letter Mem.

The letter Mem derives its name from Mayim, the Hebrew word for water. Furthermore, the numerical value of the letter Mem is forty. Therefore, it is not very surprising to learn that the letter Mem is also said to represent the Mikvah. (#1, p.72)

The number forty alludes to the physical creation of man, since according to our sages, the embryo's formation takes forty days, and to spiritual renewal since the tablets were handed to Moses after a forty day stay in heaven. There is also the forty days of the flood: Mayim Chayim and rebirth on a grand scale.

Another concept that we find associated with the letter Mem is that of the womb. The closed (final) Mem is the womb closed during pregnancy, while the open Mem is the open womb giving birth...

In order to understand the meaning of this letter on a deeper level and see how it relates to Mikvah, we must delve into a most interesting Midrash. The Prophet say (Jeremiah 10:10,) "The Lord, God, is Truth (Emes)." The Midrash then gives the following explanation:

What is God's seal? Our Rabbi said in the name of Rabbi Reuven, "God's seal is truth."

Resh Lakish asked, "why is Emes the Hebrew word for truth?"

He replied, "Because it is spelled Aleph Mem Tav. Aleph is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Mem is the middle letter, and Tav is the last letter of the alphabet. God thus says (Isaiah 44:6) "I am first and I am last."

From this, we see that the letter Mem has a most interesting property...Mem is the letter that represents transition.

We see this most clearly in the word Emes itself. The first two letters, Aleph Mem, spell out Em, the Hebrew word for mother. This is the beginning of man. The last two letters, Mem Tav, spell out Met, the Hebrew word for death, the end of man.

Most important here, Mem represents the concept of transition and change. Aleph is the past and Tav is the future, so Mem represents the transition from past to future. As such, it is the instant that we call the present.

The past is history and cannot be changed. We have no way of even touching the future. Therefore, the arena of action, where all change takes place, is the present...

Thus, when a person enters the Mikvah, he or she is actually entering the concept of the ultimate present. Past and future cease to exist for him or her. What he or she was in the past no longer counts. Even the forty days of formation are no longer an expanse of time, but a volume of water - forty sa'a. Then, when he or she emerges from the Mikvah, he or she reenters the stream of time as if he or she were a new being. (#1, p.73)

As for the laws of family purity, which of course go hand in hand with an understanding of the purpose and function of mikvah, the kabbalah teaches "The shechinah dwells in a home only when a man is married and he cohabits with his wife." The commandment to propagate the race is the first ever given to man; it is a sacred duty. Additionally, as put forth by Norman Lamm in his book A Hedge of Roses:

...Sexual comradeship is an intrinsic good, beyond the demands of procreation. In the Bible's first account of the creation of man, in which is presented as essentially a natural creature, he is immediately commanded to be fruitful and multiply and rule over all the rest of nature - the instinctive urges of sex and power (Gen.1:26-28). However, in the second and more detailed account, where the moral nature of man is elaborated, there is no mention of propagation. Instead, "And the Lord God said,

it is not good that man should be alone. I will make a help meet for him...Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh" (Gen.2:18-25). The loving comradeship of husband and wife is an end in itself, a virtue sanctioned and sanctified by the Creator. "It is not good that man should be alone" - man's inner capacity for goodness can never be realized unless he has a mate upon whom to shower his selfless affection. (#2. p.7)

Mikvah becomes the sacred instrument whereby morality and sexuality are reconciled. The laws of family purity establish a rhythm in which love and sexuality are juggled and merged, the spiritual/moral character harmonized with the sexual /physical existence. For those who are not familiar with these laws, they say basically that husband and wife separate at the onset of her menses, counting seven clean days after the last day of bleeding, as we have seen is the formula for purifying rituals impurity. Then she immerses in the mikvah, changing her status from one who is tamay, or ritually unclean, to one who is tahor, or ritually clean.

Many couples find that these cycles add variety and depth to their marriage, and certainly lead to the awareness and sanctification of the biological rhythms of life and conjugal relations. Lamm says that this is the reason that women did not need the time bounded commandments. A woman does not need to be told to sanctify time because she is already aware of the holiness of time in a manner far more profound and intimate than any artificially imposed method.

Why is a niddah tamay, ritually impure? Because the Torah says so is a good answer. Why does the Torah say so? Since this is a Huk and no reason is given, we can only speculate, but an analysis of the various species of tumah reveals that "what they have in common is the awareness of death. The most potent source of impurity is, indeed, a corpse or a part thereof. The other kinds of tumah imply, indirectly, the suggestion of death, even if only the loss of potential life. For instance, the metzora is in a

state of tumah. This disease includes the withering or the sying of the limbs of the leper (cf. Nu. 12:12). That is why the Rabbis taught that a leper is considered as if her were dead. Hence, his leprosy puts him into a state of impurity." (#2. p.83) When a woman is niddah, during her menses, she loses an unfertilized ovum and it is thus loss of potential life, this whisper of death, that confers upon her the state of unpurity.

Rabbi Samson Rapheal Hirsh writes that the Hebrew word Tumah, which we usually translate as "unclean", belongs to a phonetic family of words relating to the lack of freedom and independence. Thus, all things associated with ritual uncleanness are things that indicate man's lack of freedom. Of all these, death is the ultimate subjugation to the laws of nature. (#1, p.77)

In this awareness and awe of the power of death is an even stronger love of life which is what Taharat Mishpaha teaches.

One last thing worth mentioning about these laws, to put their place in traditional Judaism into perspective, is the punishment that the Torah prescribes for their violation: Karet - excision, being cut off from the people of Israel, the same as for transgressing the Yom Kippur fast, Pesach, of Shabbat. Moreover, the sense of the law assigning priority to family purity over public prayer and Torah reading indicates that if a community cannot afford all three communal ventures, the building of the mikvah takes precedence over the building of the synagogue and the writing of the Torah scroll.

This bring me to my last issue in this topic. Up to quite recently, Orthodoxy has been the only brach of Judaism to treat mikvah with the reverence we can see it should be afforded. All mikva'ot, with a very few exceptions, are run by orthodox institutions, and trying to use a mikvah on an but all of their terms is like eating challah on Pesach - it just is not done.

Additionally, conservative and reform rabbis who until recently wanted to perform halachically complete conversions were denied access to the existing orthodox mikva'ot.



Mikvah is clearly one of the footballs in the continuing play-offs between the Orthodox and non-orthodox elements of Judaism, and unfortunately it is the women and converts, both of whom are searching for fuller participation and increased validation in institutional Judaism, who lose out. Baruch Ha Shem, we have a new mikvah here in Los Angeles under the auspices of the Conservative movement, at the University of Judaism. It can be used by appointment, and is a great opportunity to acquaint oneself with, and perhaps grow into the observance of Taharat Mishpaha, if you are not already. I know there are women here who do, and I know you share my concern about this issue. Obviously, the new mikvah also offers itself to use by new converts.

At a discussion about women's rituals, I asked one female rabbi how, with only three co-called women's mitzvah, we could afford to abandon mikvah, as she had pointedly not mentioned it in her presentation. She said that her experiences with mikvah were so negative that there was no way she could ever look at it as a possibly positive experience, that it supported every negative association she had with Judaism. This may be true of the past, but I think it is up to us to make new associations, building on the past a brighter future, and taking the opportunity to unite ourselves in experience with people people who choose Judaism, and with Jewish women everywhere and for all time.

## Bibliography

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