

Purity-Impurity: A Code of Life and Death

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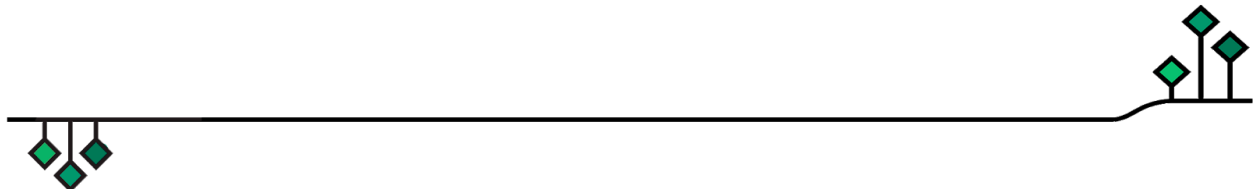
Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5781

Our double Torah portion contains the largest cluster of biblical ritual laws of purity and impurity. Being in a state of ritual impurity meant that people could not enter the sanctuary¹ or handle sacred items such as sacrifices, *terumah* (priests' portion), or sacred objects (such as appurtenances of the tabernacle). In biblical times, therefore, ritual impurity was a serious disruption of daily life. People would seek out purification and undergo the required rites to regain the state of purity as soon as possible.

With the destruction of the Second Temple, many of these laws became moot. Furthermore, most of the biblical ritual purification ceremonies (which involved sacrifices) were no longer available. Except for certain states of personal impurity, such as menstruation, most of these laws fell into disuse.² Even awareness of the consequences of purity and impurity dwindled.

¹ An umbrella term that covers both the *mishkan* / tabernacle of the wilderness period and also the first and second temples in Jerusalem.

² The laws of menstruation (*niddah*) are still operative in many Jewish communities today. Other areas of personal purity that outlived the Second Temple but are not practiced today include seminal emissions (*ba'al*



Nevertheless, if one studies our two Torah portions one can see that there was a worldview and attitude to life embedded in those rituals. Through the opposing states of purity and impurity, the Torah points us toward both upholding life, as well as dealing constructively with the inescapable—but often shattering—incurSION of death into our lives. This guidance is the burden of our *parashah*.

Leviticus teaches us to see that the forces for life and for quality of life are in binary opposition to the forces for death. The priests' role is to help people identify the life forces and work with them, while identifying the forces of decay, dissolution, and death and resisting them. Purity and impurity is the code of life and death; or, better said: the code of life versus death.

Life—especially in a state of vitality—is always pure. In fact, no living animal can contract impurity except for humans. Death, on the other hand, brings on a condition of ritual impurity. The death of a human generates the highest state of ritual impurity because the death negated the most evolved life. Decay, dissolution, or processes that fail to create life are labeled impure. However, living people come into contact with death regularly, either when they are together with a person who dies, or when they come into contact with a dead animal. This firsthand encounter with death communicates to them the power, the inescapability, and finality of death. Their state of ritual impurity is a symbolic statement that they have been battered by their encounter with death and feel a weaker hold on life.

The Torah offers rites through which the person is purified, i.e. removed from the grasp of death. In the case of human death, the high intensity rite using the ashes of a Red Heifer is

keri) and being pure in order to eat priestly—and sometimes even normal—foods (some of our practices of hand-washing around meals are residual expressions of this system).



employed to purge them of the powerful anti-life effect they have absorbed. This rite—as the other purification rites for lesser forms of impurity—climaxes in immersion in a *mikveh*, a pool of living water, that is, water still connected to its natural source. *Mikveh* is a rebirth ritual. The person removes all their clothes and totally immerses in the water, a symbolic return to the womb. Then he or she emerges, purified, to new life.

Our *parashah* walks us through various experiences of becoming impure. The main types are contact with human corpses³ or animal carcasses (Leviticus 11:24-45), genital discharges (12:2-8, 15:1-33), or scale diseases (chapters 13-14). As Jacob Milgrom points out, the common denominator of these impure states is that they symbolize the presence of death.⁴ Corpses and carcasses manifestly communicate the reality of death. Genital discharge—be it a woman’s bleeding in menstruation or male emission of semen—represents the loss of life, the egg or semen.⁵ The scale diseases exhibit a wasting away of flesh which is a kind of death-in-life experience. In all three cases, the observant person is asked to acknowledge the encounter with death by not contacting or entering the realm of the sacred, which is the zone of pure life and manifest divine presence.⁶ Still, the priest who diagnoses scale disease and brings the purification sacrifice in all these types of impurity reassures the person that they need not “surrender” or stay in death’s grip. They can act to remove impurity through

³ The laws for this encounter with ultra-impurity are actually in Numbers 19.

⁴ See Milgrom, *Leviticus*, Vol. 1, p. 733. This dvar Torah is inspired by Milgrom’s treatment of these Torah portions. See *ibid*, pp. 724-826.

⁵ Menstruation generates a week of impurity while the impurity from emission of semen is only for one day. I speculate that the disintegration of a woman’s egg generates a week of impurity because the egg takes a month to develop, whereas the semen (or the capacity to ejaculate semen) is renewed overnight, hence its loss generates a shorter term impurity.

⁶ See my essay on Parashat Tetzaveh, “On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>.



ablution and immersion in *mikveh*. They immerse in water, the womb of life, and are reborn to new, intensified life.

In all three types of impurity, the scenario is encounter with death, followed by withdrawal from the sacred, which represents life in all its intensity. These steps acknowledge the way that death (or consciousness of death) weighs on us and constricts our capacity to live. But this “retreat” (very much like the Shivah mourning ritual to this day) tells us to limit our recoil. During the ritual period, we build up the energy to resume living. The sacrifice and immersion experience draws us into the realm of the sacred, reminding us that God (and ritual) are with us spurring us on to re-engage in life. As devastating as death and loss of a loved one is in its impact, we are reassured that God and all the forces of the sacred are also powerful—and they are firmly on the side of life. They accompany us back into the work of expanding life in the world. That is, expanding the zone of holiness, where life is growing and dominant.

This individual experience of death and renewal of life brings us to the general worldview of Leviticus. There are two zones of living. The first is the sacred, which is all life. Jewish tradition teaches that if humans carry out their mission in partnership with God, some day the whole earth will be a zone of pure life. The other zone is the present state, the common⁷ where life and death are intermixed. In the interim, the sanctuary is an island of pure life in the midst of an unredeemed world where death is ever-present. God is manifestly present in the sacred in the zone of pure life but is also present in the common realm—although the Divine Presence there is obscured or hidden due to the presence of death. The collapse of

⁷ *Hol* in Hebrew, often translated as the “mundane” or the “secular” realm.



meaning and the deep loss in death encounter make it hard to feel God's presence, or to recognize the underlying ocean of life and growth in which all existence floats.⁸

Leviticus teaches us not to deny death or try to evade it by distraction or immersion in work or pleasure. Rather, we act every day to increase life and to extend it through our activities. This is our part in humanity's long term project to make this world—the common—into a holy realm where life is triumphant and increasing. However, when mortality inevitably comes—in the form of death or its symbolic surrogates such as wasting disease—we acknowledge it. We temporarily yield to it. Then, in partnership with the priests and the realm of the holy, we reaffirm life in ritual and in life behaviors. Thus, we do our share in the ongoing task of improving the mundane, increasing life's presence and turning the mundane into the holy.

We do not accept the common as fixed and unchangeable. Rather we embrace the mundane and participate in it, while all the time moving it toward the realm of the sacred. The mundane is not “secular,” or permanently flawed and incorrigibly flecked with death and failure. The mundane is the not-yet-holy. The human task is to make it holy.

POSTSCRIPT: In his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*,⁹ Ernest Becker argued that our awareness and fear of death leads us to create civilization as a process of denial of death. Becker suggests that many pathologies are driven by the denial mechanism. This includes various forms of addiction including drugs to escape the anxiety in the face of death. Others try to ignore the issue by tranquilizing themselves through preoccupation with the

⁸ Isaiah (25:7-8ff) compares death to a veil which blocks our ability to see the Divine Presence. When death is overcome the veil will be removed so all the nations can see life (in the bosom of God) as the true nature of existence.

⁹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (Free Press, 1973).



trivial aspects of living. The most destructive acting out may be the “immortality projects” by which humans imagine they (or their handiwork) can find a permanent existence. On the one hand, this drive for immortality leads to the creation of much of civilization. However, often this drive turns into the megalomania of totalitarian movements of world transformation, or into bigotry, racism, wars, and even genocide, as world leaders deny their own mortality through mega-projects that, all too often, inflict suffering and loss of life and freedom on millions.

In a way, our Torah portions are offering a prophylactic to the phenomenon of denial of death. Death is acknowledged, incorporated into life—but is then matched and even overcome by constant modest acts of renewing life and building a realm of holiness. Each individual purification or renewal may seem puny by comparison to the vast sea of death and mortality. However, collectively, millions of acts of life affirmation, generation after generation, add up to a healthy and human scale building of life in this world.

