

A WOMAN BEARING A CHILD BECOMES IMPURE!

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In *parashat hashavua* (weekly Torah portion) Tazria, we find a verse that begins, *Isha ki tazria v'yaldah*. . . . (אשה כי תוריע וילדה)—“When a woman has conceived and borne a child. . . .” And the verse goes on to say that she becomes “impure.” (Leviticus 12:2) (We are indebted to Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) for much of our understanding of this verse and those on the same subject that follow it.)

But how can this be? How is it possible that the most wonderful experience of giving birth could make someone impure? Or to put it another way, why would we want to *believe* such a thing?

In thinking about this, the first thing to remember is that the kind of impurity we’re talking about is *ritual*. The word for it in the Torah is *tamei* (טמא). And its opposite is *tahor* (טהור), which means “pure.” The root of *tahor* is *tet-hei-reish* (ט-ה-ר). It’s related to the root *tzade-hei-reish* (צ-ה-ר), which in Chaldean means transparent—that is, that which allows rays of light to pass through it.

You may remember that the window in the ark was called *zohar* (צהר). (Genesis 6:16) So that *tahor*, which is related to *zohar*, means *receptive*. When we are *tahor* we allow God’s rays of light to pass through *us*. When we are pure, we are receptive to the spiritual, the Divine. When we are pure, our minds, our feelings, and our bodies are penetrated with the godly.

So our receptivity depends on, among other things, our bodies, our *basar* (בשר), our flesh. It’s interesting to note that the root for the word *basar* and the root for the word “herald” or “messenger” are related. Which is why our rabbis say: The body is the messenger of the soul. Our bodies are, after all, the only medium of expression that we have in this world. Our spirit can only express itself through the medium of our body. We can

only think thoughts, however sublime and lofty, and only have feelings, however tender, through our brains, and nerves.

The opposite state to *tahor* is *tamei*—impure, from the root *tet-mem-aleph* (ט-מ-א), meaning closed up and non-receptive. And as the Talmud tells us, *av tumaah* (אב טומאה), the father or basic source of that non-receptivity or impurity, and the basis for understanding the concept of impurity, is a dead human body.

Why is that? Is there something magical and evil that emanates from a dead body?

No! It’s because when we come into contact with the dead body of a human being, it presents us with the picture of ourselves lying powerless under the forces of nature. Such an experience can make us think that we’re mere puppets in the hands of nature. And this way of thinking undermines the foundation of the whole Torah, because it makes us doubt our free will and our ability to live up to the Torah.

The Torah assumes that we do have the ability to live up to its demands. To assume otherwise is to say that we are born to sin, or that we can’t avoid sinning! The Torah teaches us instead that the goal of the whole development of humankind is the stage beyond this present state in which we have to fight constantly against our lower selves. It teaches us that there will come a time, and that in fact we are responsible to help create that time, when the holiness of God’s Torah will have so penetrated life that the difference between *chol* (חול) and *kodesh* (קדש), between the ordinary and the holy, will have disappeared.

At that time, the dwelling of the Shechinah (שכינה), God’s presence on earth, will reach everywhere, far beyond the walls of the Temple into all the everyday places where men and women live and work. And for the purpose of preparing

us to create that world, the Torah warns us: Do not be depressed. Do not let the fact of the death of physical life rob you of, or make you doubt, your moral abilities, or doubt the freedom of your god-like spiritual self, which does not come under the force and power of death.

And so, *ki tazria v'yaldah*—a woman who has conceived and borne a child—becomes ritually impure. The word used here for conceived, *tazria*—literally seeded—is the same word that is used for plants. That's because here, the mother's role in producing offspring is looked at purely from a physical point of view. The new mother is influenced by the recent experience of having had to submit physically, passively and painfully, to the forces of the physical laws of nature. And now she needs to establish again the consciousness of her own free will. Only after her consciousness of lacking freedom of will has completely passed away can she reenter the whole spiritual height of her calling.

And how does the reentry happen?

With water . . . and time. Water with its elementary character—water gathered in a hollow in the ground is a realm that impurity cannot reach. So much so, that when we immerse the whole of ourselves completely and directly in water of that nature, we step out of all connection with the realm of impurity. We leave the stage of humankind and for the moment we return to the sphere of the world of elements, to begin a new life. It is symbolic of a new birth. And also, with the passage of time, the day too is reborn for us—we pass into a fresh pure day.

In the Torah, the consecration of the morally free nature of human beings is spread over everything that the hand touches or does. All work and craft stand in service of this calling of humankind to be morally free and near to God. Whatever our work, we can feel ourselves spiritually elevated by

the consciousness that is brought into our work—that with our work we are accomplishing a moral need for a moral purpose, and thus we are making our contribution to carry out the morally free mission of humankind in the service of the Torah of God.

So it is that we find quite early in our history, the spiritual elite of our nation submitting their whole lives under the regime of the laws of ritual purity. They lived their whole lives, even the life of their senses, as if in the presence of the Sanctuary. In later times they were called by the name *chaveirim* (חברים). They formed a free open-to-all society whose members took, as the mission of their lives, the keeping of the Torah with intelligence and knowledge.

The very first stage of their mission has remained as a regular habit of life for the whole of the Jewish people, and it is still the mark of the observant Jew. And that habit is *netilat yadayim* (נטילת ידים), the washing of the hands before ordinary meals. In the Talmud, Bechorot 30b, this ritual is equated with receiving wings. For *netilat yadayim* is literally “a raising of the hands upwards.”

In Chaldean the root *natal* (נ-ט-ל) is equivalent to *nasah* (נ-ש-ה). *Netilat yadayim* is to be a reminder to us: to rise up, to elevate ourselves and our doings, out of the realm of merely giving satisfaction to our physical senses, into the character of a moral spiritual action.

Thus, on the heels of her death-defying experience of bearing a child, immersion in the *mikvah* waters and the passage of time help the new mother banish the belief that the forces of nature can overpower her free will, and they work to reinvigorate the moral spiritual force she needs to sustain her day-to-day striving upwards to God.

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