

# ***Tumaah* and *Taharah* – Moral & Spiritual Dimensions**

Parashat Tazria Metzora

R. Yonatan Cohen

The Rambam's commentary on the laws of contamination and purification (*tumaah* and *taharah*), many of which appear in this week's double Torah portion, Tazria Metzora, begins with a clear statement about the nature of these commandments. The Rambam writes: "It is a clear and apparent matter that the concepts of 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* [inexplicable decrees]" (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Taharah, Hilkhhot Mikvaot 11:12).

The Rambam further explains that the contamination of *tumaah* (impurity) is not physical in nature. This is so, even as the process of purification requires immersion in a Mikveh, an action which might mislead us to think of *tumaah* as actually affecting one's physical state of being. The Rambam writes: "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" (ibid.).

Given the Rambam's rational, non-physical as well as non-metaphysical, approach to this category of Jewish ritual practice, one might expect the Rambam to refrain from attributing further meaning to the laws of *tumaah* and *taharah*. Surprisingly however, the Rambam still offers important reflections on the moral and spiritual benefits wrought by these laws. This point itself is powerful. The fact that we don't know the ultimate significance of a specific area of practice, should not preclude us from exploring the meaning or benefit we might personally derive from it, at least on a personal level, even as this might not match up with its metaphysical purpose or meaning.

In the *Mishneh Torah*, the Rambam focuses on the moral dimension of purification. He writes: "Although it 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 Ezekiel 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.'" (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Sefer Taharah, Hilkhhot Mikvaot 11:12).

Although this is quite possibly not the reason for these commandments, the laws of *tumaah* and *taharah* may nonetheless create cyclical ritual opportunities for self-reflection and moral perfection. One's immersion in the mikveh could inspire inner purification or demarcate the conclusion of a process of moral transformation. Seen this way, the mikveh holds no magic, but instead presents a potentially powerful human tool.

In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the Rambam introduces a different idea altogether. The Rambam writes: "[...] The objective of the Sanctuary was to create in the hearts of those who enter it certain feelings of awe and reverence, in accordance with the command, 'You shall reverence my sanctuary' (Lev. 19:30). But when we continually see an object, however sublime it may be, our regard for that object will be lessened, and the impression we have received of it will be weakened. Our Sages, considering this fact, said that we should not enter the Temple whenever we liked, and pointed to the words: 'Make thy foot rare in the house of thy friend' (Prov. 25:17). For this reason, the unclean were not allowed to enter the Sanctuary, although there are so many kinds of uncleanness, that [at a time] only a few people are clean" (Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed III, 47).

In this passage the Rambam outlines an important spiritual principle. The lack of access to the Temple, and as a result, the disruption to religious practice, during periods of *tumaah* can deepen our sense of reverence for the Temple and Temple practice. This very lack of accessibility can inspire feelings of longings and help cultivate our desire to draw closer once again to this place of holiness. This is something that, ideally at least, can occur through the observance of the laws of *niddah* (a menstruant).

This particular insight resonates with me as I reflect back on this past year. Certainly, a year away from our shul building, a year off from hosting vigorously, and a drastic disruption of social gatherings and interactions in general, was straining and difficult for each of us to varying degrees. My sense is that the disruption also created opportunities for longing, reflection, and personal engagement. These set of questions might be helpful for us as we seek to “purification” from this pandemic:

How did this past year enrich your and or our religious practice?

As we begin to return to aspects of life as it once was, how might we give expression to the sense of longing we experienced this past year, a longing to draw closer to each other, to community, to Torah, and to God?

And finally, how might we mark this return in a way that will further invigorate our religious growth in the weeks, months, and years to come?