

Understanding the Biblical Meaning of Unclean

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He who touches the dead body of anyone shall be unclean seven days. He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean." (Numbers 19:11-13)

The Jewish Facts of Life

A few years ago, a young Jewish woman discussed where she stood on religious issues. She described her upbringing as traditional, but not Orthodox, which in practical terms means that she and her family kept only some observances, like the holidays and kosher laws, while in other areas, like modest dress and behavior, they were completely lax.

"I was raised traditional," she said, "but many of my beliefs aren't traditional. I believe that we can connect to God ourselves and don't need any intermediaries. And lately I don't believe just because I have my period that I'm unclean."

She was ignorant of the underlying concepts regarding the laws of menstruation. The shedding of an unfertilized egg is the loss of a soul of a person that might have existed. It's a spiritual thing, not a matter of being unclean or disgusting.

"But how do you know there's such a thing as a soul?" she asked. She was so out of touch with her own soul that she could not see how she had contradicted herself. She had just said that everyone has the power to connect to God individually, yet wasn't sure how it could be done. Her beliefs were full of inconsistencies and misinformation because these issues had never been properly explained.

Her concept that menstruation renders a woman "unclean" was possibly the worst of all. Words like "unclean" and "contaminated" are common, albeit wholly inaccurate, translations for the Hebrew word which describes the state resulting from menstruation, *tuma*. These mistranslations do not reflect the Jewish view on the matter at all. Tragically, these errors have done tremendous damage to the Jewish people because they alienate women from true intent of the word.

The word *tuma* cannot be translated into English. In the same way the Eskimos are said to have dozens of words for snow, referring to subtle differences outsiders cannot distinguish, Judaism has words for spiritual states for which Western languages have no equivalent. It is possible to explain the concept of *tuma* in English, but no single word can convey its meaning.

Fundamental in the beliefs of Judaism is the understanding that *Hashem* [i.e.: *the Name*] created everything in the physical world even though *Hashem's* Nature is purely spiritual and non-physical. Nonetheless, every physical thing in Creation — from inanimate rocks to unicellular amoebae to complex human beings — contains within it a spark of

Divinity. The clearest expression of this is in the human soul. Our souls are microcosms of *Hashem*.

The soul and body do not exist as forces which repel each other; rather, they are enmeshed together. Even the loftiest capacity we humans possess, the capacity of thought, is tied to neuro-chemical processes within the brain. This miraculous combination of Pure Spirituality, or Godliness, with physical nature is the basis of human life.

Death occurs when the tie between spirituality and physicality severs. The soul returns to its Source, *Hashem*, and the body remains, much like an empty shell. Without the soul to animate it, the body has lost that which gave it spiritual value. And this loss results in the state called "*tuma*." Thus, the simplest definition of the word "*tuma*" is the spiritual status that comes as a result of contact with death.

The dead body of a human being is the strongest form of "*tuma*" because it represents the greatest loss of spiritual potential. Similarly, the unfertilized egg that is shed during menstruation is also a form of *tuma* because it could have housed a soul if it had been fertilized. Never again will the minuscule egg have the opportunity to become a human being and carry the amazingly complex human soul.

The state of *tuma*, the state resulting from contact with death, is not a negative thing. If a person buries a dead person, he too becomes *tamei* (adjective form). He is not contaminated; in fact, burying a dead body is such an important *mitzvah* that it takes precedence over almost all others (Maimonides, *Yad HaChazkah*, Laws of Mourners, 14:9; *Shulchan Aruch*, "Escorting the Dead," 361:1). Thus, being *tamei* is most certainly not a state of spiritual inferiority. It means only that the person involved cannot participate in certain rituals.

A further indication that *tamei* does not mean unclean or contaminated is in the way a person can remove themselves from this state. The *tuma* that results from menstruation is removable by immersion in a *mikvah*, a special pool of water. If *tuma* meant uncleanliness, a shower would be sufficient. A woman is in fact required to bathe and shower before immersing in a *mikvah*. She must remove every speck of dirt from her body. But this does not remove the *tuma*. Only immersion in the *mikvah* can do that.

The underlying reason for *mikvah* also reflects the fundamental sanctity of life. Water is the primordial substance of the world; it existed before anything else in Creation. We see in the second verse of the *Torah*: "The earth was empty and desolate, with darkness on the face of the deep, and G-d's spirit fluttering on the face of the waters." The Jerusalem Talmud teaches us that it was from these waters that God developed the entire universe (*Chagigah* 2:1). The scientists' term "primordial soup" is quite apropos. Thus, in the words of Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, ". . . water represents the womb of Creation. When a person immerses in the *mikvah*, he is placing himself in the state of the world yet unborn, subjecting himself totally to God's creative power (*Waters of Eden*, p. 13.)" In this context, it is easy to understand why immersion in a *mikvah* removes *tuma*. After the contact with death, they submerge themselves in the substance from which life emerged.

Clearly the matter of *tuma* is a highly spiritual concept, far beyond simple cleanliness. Menstrual blood is NOT taboo in Judaism, nor is it something distasteful. The menstrual Laws, like all the Laws of Judaism, imbue a constant consciousness of the miracles which comprise our daily existence. Jews do not view the menstruation cycle as disgusting, or even as routine and ordinary. Rather, these Laws enable them to recognize the awesome potential of life as it regenerates itself within each woman's body.