

Parashah Eighty-Six

Leviticus 15:1–33; Hosea 6:1–9; Matthew 23:25–26

notes by Tim Hegg

Clean, Unclean, and the God of Life

Our *parashah* this Shabbat is the primary Torah text outlining the laws of personal purities, and forms the basis for the involved discussion of *halachah* in the rabbinic literature on purities. But before we discuss the various issues related to the specific laws themselves, it will do us well to look at the end of the “story,” or the conclusion. Note carefully that at the end of our *parashah* (15:31) a serious warning is given:

“Thus you shall keep the sons of Israel separated from their uncleanness, so that they will not die in their uncleanness by their defiling My tabernacle that is among them.”

The whole issue of purities, with all of the details given, has one primary focus: the need to reckon with a God Who dwells in the midst of His people. It could be easy to lose sight of this ultimate purpose for our *halachah* (the rules we live by)! If we are not constantly reminded why we do what we do, we may make our doing an end in itself. The whole idea of living in a way that is “pleasing to the Lord” should be understood as creating a community (made up of individuals seeking to be holy) in which He is pleased to dwell—to be the invited King in our midst. Paul emphasizes this in his epistles when he writes about *halachah* (“walking”):

for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. (Eph 5:8–10)

Paul admonishes us to “walk as children of Light ... trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.” He gives exactly the same emphasis as Moses: *halachah* (walking) has its focus on pleasing the Lord.

Now if we have this perspective well in mind, our striving to “get it right” when it comes to *halachah* will be done in a spirit of patience and forbearance, not with the goal of “winning” the argument. If my ultimate purpose in walking right is to be pleasing to the Lord, then it is clear that I will be careful how I treat my brother in the pursuit of proper *halachah*. Please do not misunderstand what I am saying here. I do not mean to imply that loving my brother means I must compromise my convictions of what is right or wrong in order to please him. But it does mean that in my striving to do what is right, I do all in my power to bring my brother along with me, not leave him “in the dust” or abandon him because he does not agree with my understanding of this matter or that. Once again, if my focus is on pleasing the Lord, then I will strive to have the same perspective Yeshua had in *halachic* issues. He did not abandon a compassion for His neighbor in the midst of His separated and holy life. If anything, He demonstrated a deep compassion for those who were erring, and sought ways to call them to repentance and to holy living. In His walk He showed forth true humility and meekness—a willingness to be diminished in the eyes of the prominent in order to show patience and love to the lowly who were seeking the truth. What is more, He had all His *halachah* right!

So this is the goal as we seek to understand the lessons HaShem expects us to learn from His teaching, the Torah. In a section like our *parashah*, if we do not keep this overarching perspective in mind, we could fall prey to “missing the forest for the trees.”

Our section shows a remarkable structure, and the structure (once perceived) helps us interpret it correctly. It is in the form of a chiasm, in which subsequent sections parallel former ones. It could be mapped out like this:

- A. Introduction (1-2)
- B. Abnormal male discharge (2b-15)
- C. Normal male discharge (16-17)
- X. Marital relations (18)
- C'. Normal female discharges (19-24)
- B'. Abnormal female discharges (25-30)
- A'. Summary (31-33)

A number of important things may be gleaned from this structure which will aid us in its proper interpretation. First, the discharges spoken of are of two types: abnormal and normal. While these may be clearly delineated in one section, the parallel section may presume upon the structure to identify the type. Secondly, the primary issue is that of life versus death, emphasized by the fact that marital relations (the means by which life is initiated) is at the center of the structure, and thus holds the prominent position in the passage. Bodily discharges may signal disease—the presence of death. And even marital relations, sanctioned and commanded by God (“be fruitful and multiply”), passes to the next generation the death promised to Adam because of his sin (Romans 5:12ff). Even in the initiation of life, death continues to be passed on. Yet God is the God of life, not of death. In this apparent antimony, as creatures who carry the fallenness of our race, we mingle death with life, and this puts us in a category opposite of God Who is all life and no death.

Furthermore, the Torah always connects sin and death, since death is the result of sin. This is not to say that each time a person sins that the immediate result is death, but that the principle of death—its very existence, is the result of sin and thus is connected in each instance with sin. Thus, wherever death is seen (or even that which might result in death) there is the reminder of sin: sin and death go together. Therefore, where death is encountered, a sin-offering is prescribed. In the same way, “uncleanness” and death are bound together in the purity laws. In our daily living, we are constantly reminded that we are mortal and therefore have no hope unless the Giver of Life comes to our rescue. Once again, our *halachah* turns us to God and causes us to seek His salvation as our only hope.

The Laws of Personal Purities

The previous section of Leviticus that dealt with scale disease is not addressed to the Israelites generally, but to the priest (Aaron) because only the priest is able to make a determination as to the severity of the affliction. In our *parashah*, however, we read (v. 2) “speak to the children of Israel.” The diagnosis of the condition with regard to bodily discharges is something private and must therefore be diagnosed by the individual, not the priest. Each individual was responsible for his or her own determination of the condition evidenced by the emission.

As I mentioned above, the first category is an abnormal emission of the male. That it is abnor-

mal is understood from its parallel to the abnormal emission of the female (in the structure of the passage) as well as by the words used. The Hebrew זָב, *zav* (which means “one with a discharge”) apparently does not refer to a seminal emission since this is taken up later, and since the Hebrew זֶרַע, *zera*, “seed,” is never used with זָב, *zav*. The rabbis note this distinction carefully (cf. t.*Zabim* 2:4; b.*Nid.* 35b; Siphra, *Zab.* §1:12-13; b.*Nazir* 66a). The complete identification of the *zav* in our passage is not certain, but what is clear is that it is connected with disease. Most have concluded it is some form of gonorrhoea (note the Lxx has γονορροΐς, *gonorrhues*; cf. Josephus *Ant.* 3.261; *Wars* 5.273; 6.426), not that which was later identified (in the 15th Century) as *Gonorrhoea virulenta* but that which is a urinary infection, *Gonorrhoea benigna*, urinary *Bilharzia* (note the detailed remarks of Milgrom in the *Anchor Bible Comm.*). The fact that the imperfect form is used (זָבִיחַ, *yihyeh zav*) alerts us to the on-going nature of the ailment: he “becomes discharging,” that is, a condition that continues. Verse four should not be understood (as the NASB) that the emission is obstructed (something that would mean it is not an impurity, since the emission itself is the sign of the uncleanness) but that the emission changes consistency (see Milgrom). Here we have clear indication that the Torah is dealing with medical issues on a very careful and fully informed basis. Modern medicine has shown that the words and descriptions used here are consistent with our understanding of various conditions of infection, differentiated by the emissions themselves. Indeed, the subsequent verses which show the spread of uncleanness by contact indicate that long before modern medicine understood how infections spread, the Torah was guarding Israel and giving her clear measures for stopping the spread of disease.

The fact that any who comes in contact with the *zav* or with articles he has touched must wash themselves and their clothes not only is symbolic of the need for cleansing (a spiritual reality) but also was a safeguard from the spread of disease. And that the *zav* himself must wait seven days after the disease is gone, and become clean on the eighth day symbolizes the story of redemption (the cycle of seven followed by the eighth) and also gives a practical period of inspection to make sure that he was cured. The two sacrifices of birds (turtledoves or pigeons), one for sin and the other as a burnt offering, couple the notice of death connected with sin, and the praise (burnt offering) offered to God as the One Who brings life.

The next section deals with normal emission and specifically within marital relations. This uncleanness is not severe, but only requires a *mikveh* (bathing) and waiting until evening. Thus, we may conclude that this level of uncleanness was common within the Israelite community. This explains the many *mikvaot* unearthed near the Temple mount, for it was most likely presumed that everyone coming into the Temple would need to undergo a ritual immersion.

The next section deals with the menstruate, and the following with an abnormal flow of blood beyond that of the normal period. The issue of blood is a sign of a small death (for conception causes the flow to cease) and is dealt with accordingly. It should be noted, however, that in the history of the rabbinic *halachah* the *nida* (woman separated as unclean by a flow of blood) receives far more consideration than the *zav*, yet the section begins with the *zav*. The fact that the rabbis put more emphasis upon the uncleanness of the woman can only be explained as the result of a general devaluation of women in the rabbinic literature (though the woman is highly praised in certain categories of the community).

The transmission of impurity by the menstruate is, once again, through contact. This is a repeated theme throughout the laws of purity, that impurity comes through contact with the impure. It is this general principle that informs Paul’s spiritual application: “bad company corrupts good

morals” (1Cor 15:33). Verse 24 speaks of a man who lies with his wife during her period. In this case, we must presume that he does so unaware of her condition, or that her flow begins after they come together. If they were engaging in marital relations knowing the woman was *nida*, both would be subject to *karat*, being cut off from their people (Lev 20:18).

The means of returning to a state of purity for the menstruate is more involved than for the normal emission by the male, since the flow from the *nida* is blood, the fluid that contains the life. Always in the Torah, the emission of blood attracts a more severe method of purification. A question is raised by the rabbinic authorities as to when the seven days prescribed for cleansing actually begin. Some take the text to mean that the *nida* is impure during her period which lasts seven days. When the flow stops, she bathes and returns to the state of ritual purity. Others ruled that the seven days begin after her period is over, and this became the prevailing *halachah*. Still, some sects followed the practice of observing only seven days, the Karaites being one example.

The text does not explicitly state that she must bathe, but the structure of the section strongly suggests this, and this was the wide consensus of the Sages. In every other example where impurity is prescribed for a seven day period, the return to purity comes only after immersion in water. It must be the same for the *nida*. But note that there are no sacrifices prescribed. This is very practical: if every woman was required to bring sacrifices every month, this would be a heavy burden. What is more, menstruation is the normal, created pattern for women, and is vitally connected with conception, since if a woman conceives, her periods stop. Yet while a woman is still in the period of life where she experiences her monthly cycle, she retains the ability to conceive and bring forth life. Thus the flow of blood is at once a small death (lack of conceiving) while at the same time proof that she is yet able to conceive life.

The final section deals with the woman whose flow of blood exceeds the normal period of time, or is a flow of blood other than her monthly period. Since this signals a greater affinity to death, the measures for returning to the state of purity are more severe. The seven day period is specifically stated to begin after the flow of blood has ceased, and, like the *zav*, she must bring two birds, one for a sin offering and the other for a whole burnt offering.

Our *haftarah* passage emphasizes *teshuvah*, “returning to the Lord.” It therefore parallels our Torah portion, for the whole motivation in moving from unclean to clean is so that one might again enter the Tabernacle/Temple court, and reside in the place of God’s dwelling, fellowshiping with the community in worship. But our Apostolic section also emphasizes an important reality: all of these laws of purity, like all of the Torah, must begin in the heart—with a renewed purity of soul. It is of no value to have the outward parts pure, but have a soul corrupted with spiritual impurities. Such a perspective misses the whole point of the *halachic* laws in the first place, which is the acceptance of God’s presence among His people.

To many this *parashah* may seem cast in ancient times and culture, and with little or no relevance to our times and lives. But as we noted at the beginning, the whole point of these laws was the heightened reality that HaShem dwells with His people, and therefore requires them to live their lives always cognizant of the marked distinction between life and death. While as fallen creatures living in a fallen universe we have no recourse but to be connected with death, yet our Creator is entirely given over to life, and we strive to be like Him. In the midst of our fallenness, we seek for life from the Life-Giver. Thus, our lives are focused toward Him.

Indeed, this chapter, which focuses on the most personal of issues, teaches us that all of our lives, even the most private aspects of it, must be lived out with the recognition that the Almighty

dwells with us. What is more, no matter how private or personal the event or occurrence, it must conform to God’s prescriptions and His timetable. Even the joy of marital relations falls within the divinely ordained parameters. Events which require us to be ceremonially clean must be given priority, even over the good and righteous relations between a husband and wife. Thus, our deepest desires and pleasures must conform to God’s pattern for our lives.

While this chapter may seem too “earthy” for our Western sensitivities, it does teach us the all important lesson that God intends His people to live their lives—in every detail—with Him in mind. He dwells with us and we with Him, and this becomes the driving perspective in all that we do.