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"FOR THE LOVE OF LIFE"

One of the least understood portions of the entire Torah is that dealing with the laws of tumah and taharah, ritual impurity and the cleansing from that state of impurity. In most cases, these laws no longer apply today. An example might be that of which we read in today's Parshat Parah, concerning the purification of one who had been defiled by coming into contact with a corpse. These laws do not apply, because the principal effect of tumah is that the person who becomes tamei, unclean, may not enter the sanctuary or eat of the flesh of a Korban, a sacrifice, such as the Korban Pesach. Since today we no longer have a temple, nor do we have any sacrifices, hence most forms of tumah are in longer in effect, except for the one kind where the law deals with that sort of tumah which has consequences for domestic life as well.

These laws of tumah are sorely misunderstood. Some people who read the Bible only superficially have come to the conclusion that they are merely guides to hygiene, and that hence they have no deeper spiritual meaning and are totally irrelevant in this age of scientific prophylaxis. Others have imagined that they are a form of Jewish magical taboo.

What does our tradition teach us about the meaning of the laws of tumah and taharah? Generally, Judaism discourages probing too deeply into the meaning or reason for these commandments. Especially with regard to the laws of Parah Adumah which we read of in today's Parshat Parah, our tradition teaches us that this ritual must forever remain a mystery, and the secret of the red heifer mist for all eternity remain concealed from the inquisitive eyes of human reason. Nevertheless, while we shall not presume to discover Divine intention, I do want to share with you what I recently heard in the name of a great rabbi of our century, the Kov<sup>n</sup>er Rav, an explanation which makes the laws of tumah and taharah more meaningful and more relevant to us so that at the very least we might better appreciate the Divine wisdom which inheres in every word of Torah.

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Our Torah is a Torah of life. It teaches us to love life, to cherish it, to enhance it. It is called Torah chayyim, the law of life, and is referred to as Etz chayyim hi la-machazikim bah, a tree of life to those who support it. Its purpose is ve'chai ba-hem -- that we attain life through the commandments written therein. G-d's greatest gift to man above all is: life.

And in order to ensure this emphasis in life, in order to secure this affirmation of the principle of life, the Torah negatively bids us to keep away from death. Thus while the religions of the ancient world had their priests spend most of their time in ministrations to the dead, our Torah gave our priests, our Kohanim, instructions to do the exact reverse: le-nefesh lo yitama b'amav, he may not defile himself by contact with any dead, except for certain very close relatives. Thus too, G-d originally forbade man to destroy animal life even for the purposes of food. Few of us may realize that by Divine decree Adam was a vegetarian, for only later, to the children of Noah, did G-d grant the concession allowing them to partake of animal flesh. Thus too, the principle of pikuach nefesh takes precedence over all commandments save three, and whenever there is danger to life all commandments except these three are ignored.

In order to express powerfully this love of life, this abhorrence of death, we have the laws of tumah. Almost all these laws, in all their various forms and in all their ramifications, remind us of this principle of love of life. Our portion deals with the defilement that comes from direct contact with a dead body or a dead organ. Such a person is declared tamei -- unclean. There is the tumat tzaraat, the state of uncleanness of the leper. For the leper is one on whom patches of skin, a part of his body, have died. Hence -- tumah. There is tumat zav and tumat niddah: In certain cases, the one natural and the other pathological, when certain issues flow from the human body,

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then too, the Torah declares a state of tumah, for here there is a loss by the human body, in one case the female and in one case the male, of the potential for a life, of that physiological substance from which life, under other circumstances, could have been created. When this vital matter is lost, when the potential for life is wasted -- there is a state of tumah.

So that the major guiding principle of the laws of tumah is: the love for life, negatively expressed as an abhorrence and detestation of death. When the Jew has contact with death in any of the ways discussed, he is tamei, and as such he may neither enter the temple nor eat of the sacrificial flesh until the state of tumah has been replaced by taharah -- a state of purity and ritual cleanliness.

How does one achieve this taharah? There are different details for each case. Thus in the case of tumat met, defilement by direct contact with death as we read of it in today's Parshat Parah, there is required the ritual of the red heifer, the Parah Adumah. In the case of tumat tzaraat, the uncleanness that inheres in leprosy, there is another set of regulations. The other forms of tumah have additional requirements in order to achieve taharah. But common to every one of them, integral in the very heart of the process of taharah, is tevillah be'mayim -- the immersion of one's self in water. Any man and any woman who is tamei, achieves taharah through water.

Why water? Because water above all is the symbol of life. It is the most universal substance without which life is impossible. An ancient Greek pagan philosopher, Thales, was led by his observations to maintain that water is the primordial substance from which all else was created. Earlier than him, and with greater scientific accuracy, our Torah declared that in the beginning G-d created heaven and earth and the earth was filled with water. Contemporary



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astronomers gazing through their telescopes at some distant planet or other celestial body, when they want to know if on that planet or body life is possible, will first investigate the content of water in its atmosphere. The greatest part of our own bodies is made up of water. And when we pray for water in our Shemoneh Esrei, we do so in connection with life: the prayer Mashiv ha-ruach u-morid ha-geshem, asking G-d for water from the heavens, or rain, is recited in the middle of the blessing of tehiyat ha-metim, the blessing of life and the resurgence of life. And after the Jew drinks water he recites the blessing of Borei Nefashot, in which we praise G-d for creating many souls and for their needs providing a world, le'hachayot bahem nefesh kol chai, with which to keep alive the soul of every human being. Water, thus, is the symbol of life.

Tevillah be'mayim, therefore, represents the love of life. It is a rededication to life. The most appropriate way of ridding oneself of tumah, of the state of having been too close to death, is that of immersion in water. Taharah is the process that reverses tumah. We triumph over death by a greater dedication to life. Whether our brush with death came through tumat met or tumat tzaraat, or tamat niddah, or tumat zav, the way of taharah is by washing one's self with the very symbol of life itself, with water. Therefore, too, the Gentile who wishes to become a Jew, a Ger, is also required to perform tevillah be'mayim: this symbolizes his rebirth as a Jew, he begins life all over again as he emerges from the waters of proselytization.

It is interesting to point out that in prescribing water as a form of taharah, the Halakhah specifies that not all kinds of water are valid for this purpose. Only the waters of a well or naturally gathered pool, a m'ayan or mikvah, are sufficient for the purpose of the process of taharah. But water that is artificially gathered into one place, called mayim she'uvim, is not valid for taharah. What is the reason for this? When a person is tamei,

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he or she must achieve purification or taharah only in a natural stream or pool, because that water symbolizes life, and only G-d, the Creator of Nature, is the Author of life. Man, despite his conquest over nature, is not the author of life. When we eschew mayim she'uvim, and insist upon m'ayan or mikvah, we reaffirm not only our love for life, but our belief that only G-d is the master over life, and that man cannot be trusted with control over this most precious gift of G-d to man.

We do not need a Schweitzer, noble a person as he is, to teach us reverence for life. Our Torah taught the love for life 3000 years earlier. And where Jews have practiced these laws in the days of the temple, and those laws which remain which are applicable today, they have known and practiced this love for life.

What a pity that there are those of our fellow Jews whose only connection with the synagogue is: Yizkor or Kaddish, those mitzvot which are related to death and mourning. What a pity that they have such a distorted view of Judaism, that they probably are led to believe that Judaism's face is one of mourning and a somber mask that reminds one of death. How terrible that they never come to the understanding that Judaism is a religion of life, and that the observant Jew is one filled with the love of life.

For our Torah is based on life, not only in the physical sense as we have outlined above, but also in the ethical sense. For Our tradition has declared that the righteous even after they are dead, are called alive. And the wicked even whilst they walk -- or better stalk -- the earth, are called dead. For life or death is not so much a matter of biology, as a matter of how close or how distant one is from the Source of all life.

And tumah and taharah, purity and impurity are to be understood not only in a physical and ethical sense, but even in the moral and national sense. The prophet Ezekiel in our Haftorah of this morning is the one who sees exile as a

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state of being enclosed, metaphorically speaking, in a giant tomb. Exile is therefore impurity itself. And redemption is a process of purification. To be redeemed means to emerge from the tomb of impurity into the pure sunlight of G-d's favor. And even in this metaphorical sense, Ezekiel pictures the process of purification as one of cleansing by living waters (Ezekiel XXXVI:25-29):

"For I will take you from among the nations and gather you out of all the countries and will bring you into your own land. And will sprinkle clean water upon you and ye shall be clean; from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; And I will take away the stony heart of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

And what is to be the result of this rebirth in purity? -- The reappearance of that great historic drama of love between G-d and Israel: "And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be My people, and I will be your G-d."

For this, too, Ezekiel taught us: Only when there is love of life, can there be a life of love.