

Note: These two weekly portions are either read separately or jointly, depending on the calendar year. As they actually belong together as a whole our commentary deals with them as a unit.

OVERVIEW

Purity and impurity are the fundamental concepts that link these two portions. Starting with the rules regarding a woman who has given birth and who must observe a certain period of purification before she may bring her thank offerings to the priests the text subsequently deals with cases of **צרעת**, a word commonly translated as "leprosy", a concept that is hardly identical with the disease by that name which is still extant. **צרעת** is a bane that may afflict humans as well as garments and buildings.

There are priests especially trained to examine this plague. They must attest to the unquestioned presence of the disease in order to pronounce the state of impurity over the person or object involved.

The immediate consequence for the man or woman thus afflicted are, temporary confinement followed by a precisely prescribed period of purification. Affected clothing must be burned after a period of observation. Similarly, a house that exhibits such blemishes must be thoroughly examined by the priestly expert. In the case of repeated evidence, the affected house must be demolished.

This body of law concludes with instructions regarding human impurities of a physical nature. They also require a prescribed period of isolation, at the end of which the priest determines whether the affected person may be re-admitted into the community by way of immersion in the ritual bath and the expiation-offering.

COMMENTARY

Rules of purification after giving birth

"When a woman is pregnant and bears a child". Here the Torah conveys to us with great clarity its concept of the role of the mother and its significance in the cycle of the human existence. Subject to the inflexible laws of nature, the mother must labor mightily in bringing a child into the world. No other event reminds us so poignantly of the coercive physical force to which all creatures are subject. Nothing is more challenging to the noble concept of human freedom than this animal-like phase in the human existence. The Torah requires the mother to present herself-before the priest after the conclusion of the birth process to impress upon her the obligation to leave the realm of physical dependence and to regain the free control over her life.

Significantly, the text interjects here the law of the male child's circumcision. This is based on the intimate bond between the child and the Jewish mother who alone is able to transmit the Jewish character to her newborn. Yet it is certainly more than a coincidence that the mother's initial period of impurity lasts seven days, with the eighth day representing the beginning of a new vista ennobling the lives of both mother and son.

A similar thought inspires the institution of **ברית מילה** which symbolizes the spiritualization of the physical. It is also expressed in the return of the new mother to a Jewish society that is supremely conscious of its character as a free servant of G-d.

Here we must stress the difference between the mother's periods of impurity following the birth of a boy or of a girl. In the case of a female child, the length of the period is doubled, one of the probable reasons being to impress upon the mother the particular importance the Torah attaches to the rearing of a girl.

The ברית מילה of the boy is incumbent on the father or his representative, while the training of the girls in preparation of her future tasks is almost exclusively the domain of the mother. Central to this educational process is the concept of purity. The doubled period of impurity is designed to prepare the young mother for the difficult and lengthy path towards the attainment of the ideal level of morality and physical purity.

There are diverging views regarding the motives underlying the measures of purification incumbent upon the young mother. One of the most interesting theories concerns our foremother הוה and the curse that was pronounced upon her. Accordingly, it would appear as if the degree of impurity must be tied to the implementation of this curse. The woman who has just given birth experienced the physical suffering described in the בראשית text. Her condition of impurity and the sacrifice that brings it to an end would thus be a quasi escape from הוה's curse. We hasten to state that such a view is incompatible with the Torah's attitude towards man's birth and death. The birth of a child is a source of great joy for all of Israel, a blessing in the true sense of the word.

There have been attempts to rationalize these measures of purification as a kind of "disinfection" necessitated by the circumstances of the birth. While this theory is certainly not a valid motive for the process of purification one cannot

reject it outright. טהרה has the special quality of effecting the physical as well as the moral purity of the Jew. It is surely no coincidence that certain diseases and plagues that are widespread among numerous nations, are virtually unknown among Jews. Despite severe living conditions and hardships during dark centuries our people generally have been able to maintain a degree of physical energy that already forced the grudging admiration of the ancient Egyptians. Unquestionably, the Torah (see Ex. 1, 10) laws of purification played a major role in this phenomenon.

"Leprosy"

To repeat: one must be careful not to confuse the disease described in our סדרה with the identical-named plague which is prevalent in certain tropical areas. One has only to scrutinize the text to establish the evidence. The "hygienic" steps to be taken by the priest regarding the affected person, have nothing in common with the usual precautionary measures taken in cases of infectious diseases. Thus the priest's investigation (which may require several days) does not result in the immediate isolation of the affected person. The prescribed measures only become operative after the final positive assessment. Similarly, the totally afflicted body (without a trace of healthy skin) is pronounced pure. A non-Jew may exhibit fully analogous symptoms, yet the law of isolation does not affect him. Thus the question arises as to what kind of illness it is that we are dealing with and what is its purpose and motive.

A reference to an episode found in Numb. 12 may help us to clarify this issue. Miriam, sister of Moses, incurred a heavy guilt by slandering her brother. She is struck by "leprosy" forcing her to leave the camp for seven days and be totally

isolated from the community. It is not difficult to understand the meaning of the punishment. Vile gossip, the evil tongue, poses mortal dangers for any society. It is impossible to maintain harmonious inter-relations when the individual cannot be protected from malicious libel.

Thus our Sages tell us that the destruction of the temple was the result of baseless hatred within the population. The Torah law enjoins the guilty person to leave the circle of society and to ponder the consequences of his conduct. Full of remorse, he may return to the community, morally and physically cured. Yet, even here the law proceeds in stages. It considers the extent and circumstances of the act and, after successive warnings, imposes the punishment, involving clothing, houses, or the human body.

The educational aspect of the laws of purity explains, for example, why a person whose whole body is afflicted with "leprosy" is not declared impure and not subject to confinement. Moral rehabilitation can take effect only if there remains a healthy spot on the body, however minute, serving as a symbol of man's moral ability to recuperate from the affliction. When the whole body is afflicted, a designation of impurity serves no purpose, as there is no way of achieving a moral recovery. Only the priest can perform the examination. For it is not the physician, but the priest, guardian of the nation's moral and spiritual integrity, who must take action. The danger of evil gossip not only threatens the physical body of the nation, but the moral ingredients that safeguard its continued existence.

The measures governing the mother who has delivered a child and the person who is afflicted with "leprosy" are based on the following basic idea: moral

or physical blemishes may result from natural causes, negligence or willful action. In all cases, it is important -- as a first step -- to become aware of the negative aspects of the condition. Mankind has the inner resources to overcome any obstacle. The concept of תשובה, man's ability to stop in his tracks, change his way of life and ascend the road towards the ideal of "Man-Yisroel" - that is the essential teaching of Judaism. No occasion is missed to implant this thought in the mind of the Jew. תשובה is the central theme of ראש השנה and יום כפור, the most sacred of holy days. תשובה runs like a red thread through Israel's history (e.g. קין's crime and remorse, the הטא העגל and the people's contrition, a. o.).

While the concept of תשובה is a mighty force in the human effort, Jewish thought most certainly does not equate it with a sense of resignation and despair. The Torah informs us of the necessity and possibility to overcome our human failings and to regain our purity. In the case of the woman who has given birth, the required offering symbolizes the return to the Sanctuary's inner core of an individual who had been temporarily excluded from it. It also stresses the importance of appearing before G-d in the highest possible perfection of body and soul (thus a priest who has a bodily disability is disqualified from service). The striving for the spiritual as represented by the sanctuary, is incompatible with a continuing state of impurity.

Thus the life of the Jew is an eloquent testimony to the human striving for perfection and man's desire to overcome all obstacles. These laws have but one aim: to encourage and support the individual in this noble quest and to guide him in every situation, be it joyous or painful. What other reason could there be

for these disciplinary regulations? G-d does not play games with His people.

"When you come into the land of Canaan, which I will give you for a possession, and I shall put a plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession:" (Lev. 14: 34). This law only applies to houses in ארץ ישראל and only after the land has been divided into individual holdings. According to tradition, the law became invalid with Israel's departure from its land. Why are these laws not applicable at the time of the exile? Several of the commentators deal with this question in the following manner: We have seen that the process of purification which must follow every case of impurity, is closely connected to the institutions of the sanctuary; each case requiring the offering of a sacrifice. Consequently, since the destruction of the temple the laws of impurity are temporarily suspended. However, this view does not really do justice to the essence of the problem. Why should there not be a mode of purification that can be practiced in every circumstance irrespective of the changing political situation? More to the point: would the transgression of evil gossip be less serious in our time when the law does not provide for appropriate measures?

Perhaps we find a solution in a different direction: Every individual act can be properly analyzed only by considering the persons psychological and ideological background which shapes his judgment and promotes his acceptance of moral values.

Lack of ethical training inevitably reduces a perpetrator's sense of responsibility regarding the gravity of their offense. In relating an extreme example, the Talmud cites the case of a kidnapped child who was reared in a

heathen society and thus cannot be held responsible for his transgressions. It is not difficult to recognize that limiting the law of leprosy to the Jewish land results from similar motives. Indeed, it is the Jews' social conduct and relationships that are most easily affected by negative influences in his surroundings. Perfection requires ideal conditions. For the Jewish people this would mean a total commitment to a moral and ethical way of life as charted and guided by the Torah law.

We may suggest yet another approach: we have noted that the leprosy must be considered as a divine punishment for a severe transgression. Men have become accustomed to view an illness or a deviation from a normal condition as a function of an inner process that is subject to its own law. By stressing the divine origin of this plague, our text wishes to make it clear that every outward manifestation, however commonplace, must be viewed as a revelation of the divine will. This is one of the primary lessons of our סדרה.

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