

Shabbat Parashat M'tzora

*K'dushat/Tabarat HaMishpaha* – The Laws of Family Holiness/Ritual Purity  
What is Their Meaning in the Modern World?

DISCLOSURE WARNING: This week's D'var Torah is rated PG-13.

Ritual purity and impurity are complicated topics in the Jewish tradition. They are in no way related to personal hygiene or physical cleanliness; rather, they are descriptions of one's religious and spiritual status after having come into contact with situations or conditions that may cause a loss of faith in or spiritual connection to God (a corpse, menstruation, an illness...etc.). This week's *parasha* deals with two of the main causes for an individual becoming ritually impure: the skin affliction called "*tz'ura'at*" in Hebrew, often (though incorrectly) translated as "leprosy" and individuals who have emissions (either blood or otherwise) from their sexual organs. This second cause – resulting in the laws of *k'dushat/tabarat hamishpaha*: the Laws of Family Holiness/Ritual Purity – is the source for this week's learning.

In the *parasha* this week, we read that it is forbidden for a husband and wife to participate in marital relations during a woman's menstrual period. Again, this is not because this time is associated with physical uncleanness. Rather, menstrual blood is regarded as a contact with a "death" (the potential for a pregnancy in this monthly cycle just completed did not come to fruition), rendering a woman ritually impure and not in the proper state to engage in the *mitzvah*/commandment and sacred act of conjugal relations with her husband. Therefore, the Torah mandates that a husband and wife physically separate themselves one from the other for a minimum period of seven days (or until the menstruation is over). While this may all sound rather primitive, might we – living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – be able not only to rescue a kernel of meaning from this forced separation, but actually understand a way to embrace and incorporate it into our way of life? The answer is "Yes."

Whenever I think about family holiness/purity laws, I am reminded of a voice I once heard in a movie, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." Intimate relations between a husband and a wife are meant to be just that "intimate." They are a sharing of self with the one you love in a unique way that no one else can possibly know, understand, or feel. Our tradition regards this manifestation of the relationship between husband and wife as extremely holy. Not only does it engender the potential for creating, along with God, the miracle of a new life, but it creates a love connection between two people that goes deep beyond the surface of relationships we have with other people. It is a physical expression of the unique love that is shared by two people going through life as loving partners. However, this passion and potential for life are not possible and cannot be fully appreciated without time taken for reflection and expression of the relationship in ways other than the physical. This Torah imposed seven-day physical separation between husband and wife cause a couple to find other ways to express their love for one another, to appreciate what it is that they cannot have during those seven days, and to refocus on the purposes of what the physical intimate relationship is all about. After seven days of being physically apart, a wife (and a husband may choose to do so as well if he pleases) immerses in a *mikvah*/ritual bath, and becomes spiritually reborn into her sacred body. The husband and wife may then resume and renew their physical relationship in a way that would not have been possible without that forced separation.

Outside the Orthodox world, the observance of family holiness/purity laws has fallen much by the wayside. However, much of this is due to a lack of understanding of and appreciation for what these practices can and do represent. Our tradition was limited to discussions of husband-wife

relationships because they were its only reality. However, the principles that we learn from practices of family purity laws can also be applied to committed same-gender unions. So, we must find the understanding that these observances enhance the relationship between sacred spouses, framing the physical relationship as a holy one and providing an opportunity for love to be expressed in different ways. May we all consider the possibility of renewing all or aspects the practices of family holiness/purity laws in our modern community as a way of enhancing the loving relationship shared by loving partners.

Shabbat Shalom!