

Shabbat Parashat Sh'mini – Shabbat Parah Ritual Purity and Impurity

This week, we celebrate another of the four special Shabbatot that come before Pesah, “Shabbat Parah.” We will read a special maftir from the Torah which details the purpose, sacrifice and ceremonies of the red heifer (*parah adumah*, in Hebrew). This ceremony served to purify an individual from the impurity caused by coming into contact with or being in the same enclosed area as a human corpse. We read this portion from the Torah this week because in Temple times, before one brought a sacrifice to the Temple, he had to become ritually cleansed by going to the mikvah (ritual bath). This reading reminded pilgrims about to leave for Jerusalem to offer their Passover sacrifices that it was time to begin preparations for this journey and ritual.

In the modern world, the concept of ritual purity and impurity sounds archaic. It has been several generations since there has been the known existence of a *parah adumah*/red heifer. So, even if we had a Temple, these rituals would be impossible to complete. Furthermore, because so many of the customs related to purity and impurity have fallen into disuse, they are now mostly misunderstood and, in many cases, considered prejudiced against women as a result of the relationship between ritual impurity and blood or bleeding. Nevertheless, the concepts of *tum'ah*/ritual impurity and *tabarah*/ritual purity can carry a tremendous amount of meaning for us, while the ritual of mikvah/immersing in the ritual bath can be very powerful and spiritual, for both men and women.

Purity and impurity are in no way connected to being “dirty” or “clean.” Associating the religious category of impurity with somehow being dirty is false and even derogatory. This misunderstanding has led to many of the rejectionist and prejudicial descriptions of these laws and customs. Being either ritually pure or impure is a statement of religious/spiritual status. One who is *tamei*/*t'mei'ah* (impure) has had a “boundary” placed between themselves, God, and their ability to fulfill *mitzvot* as a result of his or her coming into contact with or being in the presence of things that can cloud one's spirituality or cause a person to doubt his or her faith. The Torah considers any contact with death or the dead, along with a variety of illnesses or other causes, to create such a boundary. Thus, for example, when a woman is not pregnant, each month is marked by the ending of the potential for a life. Coming into direct or proximal contact with a corpse also puts an individual in the face of death. Therefore, in order to be “spiritually rehabilitated” and to recover from the emotional and/or psychological effects of the experience, the Torah prescribes a variety of rituals, each of which including the rebirth symbol of water, to facilitate a person's return to ritual purity and spiritual wholeness.

While we may not feel the same way as the Torah does about contact with death, there are many ways for us to become spiritually disconnected from our faith in our everyday lives and the mikvah remains an available outlet for Jews in this generation to find a way to replenish ourselves spiritually. Both men and women have the opportunity to use the mikvah, which involves physical and spiritual preparation before the immersion, immersion in the bath (which can then also be used to soak and relax for a time), and the recitation of blessings upon completion of the immersion. If approached with the proper intention and spiritual focus, the entire process has the potential to be deeply meaningful, healing, and transformational. We should all be encouraged to at least seriously consider what mikvah and the concepts of purity and impurity really do mean, while striving to incorporate the use of the mikvah into our Jewish practice. It is not meant only for the most observant segments of the Jewish community, as has become the case around the Jewish world.

With the passing of Purim and the beginnings of our preparations, both physically and spiritually, for Pesah, may we all open our minds to the concept of ritual purity and impurity, and embrace our traditional ritual of mikvah that can return us to spiritual wholeness, if we give it the opportunity to do so.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Matthew Bellas

For more information about mikvah, its history and associated laws and rituals, consult the following website: http://www.mikvah.org/what_is_mikvah, using the navigation bar on the left to find answers to different questions.