

In this week's parashah, Tazria, the discourse in Leviticus turns from the rituals of the priests, to the lives and possible disruptions in the everyday life – of the regular Israelites. The name of the parashah, Tazria, refers to when a woman conceives and bears a child. The parashah opens by describing the prescribed amounts of time that a woman is considered to be *t'mei'ah* after childbirth – the word "*tamei*" most frequently being translated as "impure" or "unclean," and the timeframe that must elapse and the rituals that must occur in order for her to become "*tehora*" – pure, " or less accurately, "clean" again.

After dealing with the post-partum mother, the attention of the parashah turns to the person who may or may not be suffering from *tsara'at*, most commonly translated as leprosy. Like the post-partum mother, the *metzora*, the one who is afflicted with *tzara'at*, is considered *tamei*, and must step outside of the normal flow of communal activity until he or she is again *tahor*. Noah will be discussing tomorrow the specific case of *tsara'at*, and exploring how it might be analogous to contemporary issues of stigma and exclusion.

Since I know he will be covering that rather exhaustively, I want to take sometime this evening to consider the meaning of *tamei* and *tahor*, which, as I have said, tend to be translated as "impure and pure" or "unclean and clean" – categories that largely applied in the time when the priesthood was functional and one had to be in a state of ritual purity, but are more difficult to make sense of in a post-sacrificial framework.

The tendency is, of course, to knee-jerk, to put a moral weighting on these words, as if the category of *tumah* implies moral impurity where there is ritual impurity. This can lead to defensiveness: what do you mean, there's something

wrong with a woman who has given birth? What do you mean, there's something wrong with a sick person? Or, as the categories will continue in next week's parashah, and throughout Leviticus, how can there be something wrong with someone who has touched a dead body? How can there be something wrong with a menstruating woman?

It's important, then, as we think about these categories, not to conflate ritual purity, with moral purity. Nonetheless, contemporary Rabbi Ethan Tucker validates that discomfort, writing, ““if we are going to be honest, we must right off the bat acknowledge something and avoid unsustainable apologies on this topic. While it seems almost necessary to say that being tamei is not a sin, it is clearly not good to be tamei. The fact that critical and holy activities like having sex in order to conceive and giving birth have side-effects of tum'ah does not prove that tum'ah, at least in its rhetoric, is value neutral. It is clearly a dispreferred state that may nonetheless at times be necessary, and that need not carry a permanent stigma. But it is certainly theologically always better to be טהור/pure.”

So, if there is not a moral preference for purity, what is going on with *tumah* and *tahara*?

In the very opening verses on the parashah, about the woman giving birth, medieval commentator Rashi offers the suggestion that woman who have given birth are treated as if they are sick, “because whenever a woman experiences an issue of blood from herself, as a result of it, she becomes unwell and her head and limbs feel heavy.”

In more contemporary parlance, Rabbi Avi Weiss writes: "*Tumah* is one of those words that cannot be perfectly translated and requires a deeper analysis.

Rav Ahron Soloveichik suggested that the real meaning of *tumah* might be derived from the verse in Psalms, which says: "The fear of the Lord is *tehorah*, enduring forever." (Psalms 19:10). *Taharah* therefore means that which is everlasting and never deteriorates. *Tumah*, the antithesis of *taharah*, stands for mortality or finitude, that which withers away.

A dead body is considered a primary source of *tumah*, for it represents decay in the highest sense not only because the corpse itself is in the process of decaying, but also because the living individual who comes into contact with the corpse usually suffers emotionally and endures a form of spiritual fragmentation, a counterpart of the corpse's physical falling away."

In other words, *tumah* might be a state in which one is, simply put, unlikely to feel up to the normal tasks of day-to-day society, for both physical and psychological reasons. When a person is in such a state, whether because of illness, menstruation, childbirth, or encountering death, Torah not only allows, but mandates that their particular condition be recognized and labelled as *tumah*, with its attendant restrictions on full participation in communal life.

*Tumah*, is, in essence, a status that demands that those who hold it slow down, step back, and let some of the burdens of normal life drop. For that reason, I actually want to argue for the value of *tumah*, in our contemporary framework that too often doesn't allow any of us to act as if we are anything less than *tahor*, all the time.

I see it frequently, and often in the very categories to which *tumah* is biblically ascribed: with mourners who don't feel that they can afford to take even one day of *shiva*, let alone the traditional seven, to step out of the normal rhythms of work and responsibility and let the community take care of them. Or menstruating women who might in fact be suffering horrific cramps and lethargy, but who feel that the only response today is to take a painkiller and push through. And let's not even get started on the horrific state of family leave for new mothers in this country.

As I quoted Rabbi Ethan Tucker already, "It is clearly a dispreferred state that may nonetheless at times be necessary, and that need not carry a permanent stigma. But it is certainly theologically always better to be טהור/pure." The problem is that in our culture, we tend to not even recognize that this 'dispreferred state' is necessary, ever, and we tend to treat *tahora*, what we might define as "full of normal life force," as default, to even a greater extent than our Biblical ancestors did. We, perhaps more than our Biblical ancestors, tend to be impatient with the mourner who isn't getting back to normal life, with the sick person who isn't pushing through to get their work done, with the woman who is audacious enough to let us know that she is suffering from her cramps.

So, let's recognize that *tumah* is in fact 'dispreferred' because most of us would prefer, generally, to be fully healthy and functional. But given that we aren't always, the idea of *tumah*, naming a state in which we aren't at our optimal physical or psychological functionality, and allowing people to be in that state, and to return to the community as fully *tahor* after a prescribed period of time, sounds pretty sane to me.