

To the Infinite and Beyond: Attaining Taharah

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The goal of the avodah of Yom Kippur is usually understood as the attainment of kaparah, the attainment of forgiveness from Hashem and from each other. However, the Torah itself tells us that the climactic goal of Yom Kippur is “tit’haru – you shall be purified.”

For on this day He shall effect atonement for you to purify you. Before the Lord, you shall be purified from all your sins.
Vayikra 16:30

כי ביום הזה יכפר עליכם לטהר אתכם
מכל חטאתיכם לפני ה' תטהרו:
ויקרא טז:ל

For now, we will translate taharah as purity. But what exactly *is* purity? What does the term “letaher” add that “yekhaper” (He will effect atonement) did not accomplish?

The first place we see a command to become tahor (pure) is with Yaakov, right before Hashem renames him Yisrael.

Thereupon Jacob said to his household and to all those who were with him, "Remove the deities of the foreign nations, which are in your midst, purify yourselves and change your clothes."
Bereishit 35:2

ויאמר יעקב אל ביתו ואל כל אשר
עמו הסרו את אלהי הנכר אשר
בתככם והטהרו והחליפו שמלתיכם:
בראשית לה:ב

Because they have foreign worship in their home, Yaakov informed his household that they require immersion. In fact, the Torah Temimah quotes the Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, who says that this is the source that one who has contact with idol worship requires ritual immersion. Why should someone who has worshipped idols require immersion?

This, in fact, gets to the root of the purpose of the laws of tumah and taharah. Perhaps, by now, our community has recovered from misunderstanding what Tumah means- it does *not* mean unclean. Rabbi Norman Lamm, in *A Hedge of Roses*, declares that misnomer a “semantic tragedy” which has discouraged many women from keeping hilkhot niddah, one of the only

remnants that we currently have of the entire tumah and taharah system.³ Really, we learn from Yaakov Avinu's command that avodah zarah means giving credence to inanimate objects as having power over us. The process of tumah and taharah is designed to make us recognize our mortality, in strong contrast to Hashem's immortality. Because Yaakov's household had entertained the notion of a mortal G-d, they required purification.

This is why, the Torah Temimah explains, a convert requires immersion for any contact he or she may have had with idol worship. He offers this as an explanation for the Ramban's opinion⁴ that an immersion for conversion that is performed before circumcision is considered valid for the conversion process.

A convert who immersed even before his circumcision fulfilled his obligation, since one can say that immersion comes only because of the separation from idol worship, and not in order to enter Judaism. If so, there's no practical difference between immersing before or after the circumcision.

Torah Temimah Bereishit 35 note 1

דגר אף שטבל קודם המילה יצא בדיעבד, משום די"ל דהטבילה באה רק על הפרישה מע"ז ולא על הכניסה ליהדות, וא"כ אין נ"מ אם טבל קודם או אחר המילה.
תורה תמימה בראשית פרק לה הערה א

Rav Aaron Soloveichik sees this definition of tumah and taharah reflected in a verse in Tehilim.

Fear of God is pure- it lasts forever; God's statutes are truth; they are all together righteous.

Tehilim 19:10

יראת ה' טהורה עומדת לעד משפטי ה'
 אמת צדקו יחדו:
תהלים יט:

In this verse, the phrase "it lasts forever" comes to define "pure". Taharah therefore means that which is everlasting and never deteriorates. Tumah, the antithesis of taharah, stands for mortality or finitude, that which withers away.⁵

A glimpse at the context of this verse strengthens this definition. Psukim 2-7 come to describe the majesty and grandeur of the heavens, and then specifically the sun. In pasuk 8, however, the topic switches dramatically. It begins talking about the supreme value of Torah, and its healing properties. This prompts commentators throughout the ages to question how the second topic relates to the first. On pasuk 8, where David HaMelech switches to glorifying Torah, Metzudat David explains:

A restoration of the soul: In other words, because the sun, with all of its benefits, sometimes damages with its immense heat, until the person falls ill, even deathly ill. But the Torah restores the soul of a man, for it protects and saves from death.

Metzudat David Tehilim 19:8

משיבת נפש: רצה לומר כי השמש עם כל תועלתו לפעמים יזיק בחומו הרב עד כי יחלה האיש חולי המות אבל התורה משיבת עוד נפש האדם כי היא מגינה ומצלת מן המות.
מצודת דוד תהלים יט:

³ Rabbi Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses*, Page 44

⁴ Quoted in Beit Yosef Yoreh Deah 268

⁵ Rabbi Aaron Soloveitchik, "Torah Tzniut versus New Morality and Drugs," *Tradition* 13:2, p 54

Rav Aaron Soloveitchik's definition of Tehorah becomes even more poignant: while nature, and the sun in particular, deserves praise, their source, Hashem, deserves more, for He is the ultimate Tahor. Fearing Him, through keeping the Torah, is the only path to endurance.

It follows from this definition that the primary source of tumah is a human corpse. A neveilah (carcass of a dead animal) possesses a lower level of tumah, but tumah nonetheless. The metzora (leper), whose body is slowly decomposing, has tumah as well. This is expressed in Aaron's plea to Moshe to intercede upon Miriam's behalf, when she was afflicted with tzaraat:

Let her not be like the dead, which comes out of his mother's womb with half his flesh consumed!
Bamidbar 12:12

אל נא תהי כמת אשר בצאתו מרחם אמו ויאכל חצי
בשרו:
במדבר יב:יב

The Tumah of a yoledet, a woman who has given birth, also fits into this pattern. Tumah is not only about death, but birth, as well. Rav Yehuda Herzl Henkin explains:

In the same way that HaKadosh Baruch Hu does not die, He is not born, either. Not only death stands in contradiction to the idea of an Eternal Creator, but the continuity of generations in its entirety, birth and death as one, stand contradicting His eternity, may He be blessed. This is why a post-partum woman is temeah.⁶

Therefore, even as a woman brings forth life, she experiences tumah. She and her husband must recognize our finitude.

This definition of tumah fits into every mention of tumah in the entire Torah. Let us apply it to one more topic, which we read about at Mincha on Yom Kippur afternoon. Perhaps it can deepen our understanding of why we read about the forbidden relationships at that time.

Most people instinctively find the thought of many of the forbidden relations entirely abhorrent. The question is: why do we feel that way? The Torah presents the opposite picture of human nature:

Do not become defiled with all these, for with all of these the nations which I am sending from before you became defiled.
Vayikra 18:24

אל תטמאו בכל אלה כי בכל אלה נטמאו
הגוים אשר אני משלח מפניכם:
ויקרא יח:כד

Such relationships were common practice amongst the nations. These relationships are forbidden in order to distance us from the idolatrous practices of those other nations, practices which contradict the concept of an Infinite G-d. But is there something fundamental that those idolatrous nations were missing, which allowed them to practice something that we find so innately vile?

In his explanation of Vayikra 18:6, Ramban expresses that the problem with the forbidden relations is not explicit in the Torah. He quotes the Rambam in Moreh Nevukhim who says that

⁶ Essay 22, Shu"t Bnei Banim, Volume 4.

they are forbidden in order to minimize sexual relations and to train ourselves to suffice with less. Women who are around a man more are forbidden, such as relatives. Ramban quotes Ibn Ezra, who explains similarly. Ramban rejects this reason. Why should someone incur Karet (spiritual excision) when having relations with someone who is simply around more, when a man can still marry multiple women? Ramban mentions the Kabbalistic concept of Sod haIbur (the Mystery of Impregnation), but he does not go into detail; he just states that these relationships are somehow not healthy for the soul. Ultimately, he declares these laws to be a decree of the King, which do have a reason but one that can only be understood by the wisest of His royal staff.

Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky, in *Amitah Shel Torah*, revives Rambam and Ibn Ezra's idea, even without direct reference to them. He discusses the inherent privacy that every individual must maintain, which parallels Hashem's own privacy, as it were; the aspect that makes Hashem "unreachable". He is shrouded in privacy. The medieval mystics were fond of Yeshayahu's declaration of God as the Kel Mistater.⁷ In the act of creation, He also hid Himself; He is not fully accessible. God is hidden and God is private. Intimate relations infiltrate our privacy, and such relations with relatives, or in the wrong context, would be over-entering an individual's private zone.⁸ Those who practice avodah zarah confuse animate and inanimate objects; they feel they have no limits. Thus, the very reason that we find the arayot instantly repugnant- our understanding of the need for privacy- is the very reason that an idol worshiper does not.

Rabbi Twersky establishes that man's need for privacy stems from the story of Adam and Chava. Whereas Adam and Chava were already not immortal, since they had been born, they still had no death sentence before their sin. The snake convinced Chava that if she ate from the Eitz Hadaat (Tree of Knowledge), she would not die as Hashem had warned, but rather she would become divine, immortal. The very first consequence of Adam and Chava's gastronomic catastrophe was that they realized they were naked; they craved privacy. This is a punishment, but herein also hides the cure. Hashem said to them, "you want to be immortal? You want to be like God? Realize that there is a certain privacy that God maintains; to be a Creator, you need limits. There is a tree that you just cannot eat from." It is the very Tzelem Elokim, our image of G-d, which requires us to maintain a level of privacy, just like Hashem.

We must have limits, just like Hashem artificially created for Himself, as it were. Part of being tahor, enduring forever, means recognizing limits; there is part of each of us which must be, like Hashem, untouchable. Reading about the forbidden relations on Yom Kippur reminds us of the limits and the privacy that are necessary for us to imitate Hashem.

Even the minutest sin, the tiniest breach of limits that we think will set us free, brings us to a dead end. It brings us into status of tumah; it compromises our mortal state. Meditating upon this fact could be depressing and debilitating, sending us further into a state of tumah. However, our Tzelem Elokim, which allows us to connect to the Infinite to begin with, allows us to imitate

⁷ Yeshayahu 45:15

⁸ Rabbi Yitzchak Twersky, *Amitah Shel Torah*, Volume II, p. 66-70.

Hashem in experiencing taharah- in recreating ourselves. This is, as we established above, the ultimate purpose of Yom Kippur.

Reish Lakish said: Great is Teshuvah, for intentional sins turn into mistakes. As it says: "Return, oh Israel, until Hashem your God, for you stumbled in your sins." Behold, an "avon" is accidental, and it calls it a "stumbling block." Is that so? Didn't Reish Lakish say, "Great is Teshuvah, for intentional sins turn into merits? As it says: "And when a wicked man repents of his wickedness and performs justice and righteousness, he shall live because of them!" This is not difficult; [if it] is from love, [then it turns into a merit], and [if it] is from fear, [then it turns into a mistake].

Yoma 86b

אמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה, שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות, שנאמר (הושע יד) שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך. הא עון מזיד הוא, וקא קרי ליה מכשול. איני? והאמר ריש לקיש: גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות, שנאמר (יחזקאל לג) ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם (חיה) [הוא] יחיה! - לא קשיא; כאן - מאהבה, כאן - מיראה.
יומא דף פו:

In light of our ability to attain taharah, to connect to the everlasting element within us, Reish Lakish's suggestion makes perfect sense: Rather than seeing past actions as dead and unfixable, as soon as we recognize our mandate to live within limits, our past actions become malleable. With fear, we can erase them, and receive kaparah. With love, we can go even farther. We can renew them and turn them into merits- into that which lasts forever.⁹

Rav Soloveitchik says that in the generation after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, people needed tremendous encouragement that even without the sacrificial service, Teshuva is possible:

Rabbi Akiva said, "Praiseworthy are you, Israel. Before whom do you purify yourselves, and who purifies you? Your father in Heaven. As it says, "And I will sprinkle upon you pure waters, and you will be purified." (Yehezkel 36) And it says, "Hashem is the 'mikveh' of Israel." Just as a mikveh purifies the impure, so too does Hakadosh Barukh Hu purify Israel.

Mishna Yoma 8:9

אמר רבי עקיבא, אשריכם ישראל. לפני מי אתם מיטהרין, מי מטהר אתכם? אביכם שבשמים. שנאמר (יחזקאל ל"ו) "וזרקתי עליכם מים טהורים וטהרתם." ואומר, (ירמיה י"ד) "מקוה ישראל ה'. מה מקוה מטהר את הטמאים, אף הקדוש ברוך הוא מטהר את ישראל":
משנה יומא ח:ט

If one comes before Hashem in the way one would be prepared to immerse in a mikveh (ritual bath), without any barriers, ready to submerge entirely all at once and undergo complete recreation, Hashem will allow his recreation to occur.¹⁰ Be'ezrat Hashem, may we all experience a complete kosher immersion this year.

⁹ See Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance*, pp. 49-52, 248-256.

¹⁰ Pinchas H. Peli, *On Repentance*, p. 57

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