

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT METZORA**

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**Of Death and Defilement  
By Rav Chanoch Waxman**

I

Immediately after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Moshe received an important communication from God regarding the appropriate conditions for entering the holiest part of the Mishkan.

And the Lord spoke to Moshe after the death of the two sons of Aharon, who died when they drew too close to the presence of the Lord.

And the Lord said to Moshe: Tell Aharon your brother that he should not come at will into the holy place within the curtain in front of the covering upon the ark, lest he die, for I appear in the cloud over the cover. Thus only shall he enter the holy place... (16:1-4)

This passage is, of course, the opening of Parashat Acharei Mot.

Strangely enough, the Torah does not place this passage in textual sequence with the death of Nadav and Avihu. Despite the apparent chronological sequence implied by the subject matter, the issue of entering into holy space and the possibility of death, the Torah only presents the parasha of Acharei Mot a full five chapters after the death of Nadav and Avihu. Despite the near synchronicity with the death of Nadav Avihu implied by the term "after" (see Ramban 16:1), the Torah chooses to delay the parasha of Acharei Mot, literally "after the death," until after the corpus of Chapters Eleven through Fifteen.

This intervening bulk, primarily consisting of the parashiyot of Tazria and Metzora and the laws of "tzara'at," can be categorized as the laws of tum'a and tahara. All of its component parts relate to the concepts of "clean" and "unclean," or perhaps more accurately, "pristine" and "defiled." A quick sketch of the structure of this intervening segment should demonstrate the point. The overall segment breaks down as follows.

Topic	Verses
Section 1- Permissible and Forbidden Animals	11:1-47
Section 2- The laws of the postpartum women	12:1-8
Section 3.1- Tzara'at (lesions) of the body and tzara'at upon garments	13:1-59
Section 3.2- Purification from tzara'at- the post tzara'at procedure	14:1-32
Section 3.3- Tzara'at of the house-home	14:33-57
Section 4- The laws of male and female discharges and menstruation	15:1-33

If so, we face an obvious problem. Why does the Torah choose to "interrupt" the natural flow of the narrative from the death of Nadav and Avihu (10:1-20) to the laws for Aharon's entrance into the holy area (16:1-34) with the laws of tum'a and tahara (11:1-15:33)? Alternatively, we may prefer a reverse formulation of the problem, one that focuses more on the central topic of the "code of tum'a and tahara," the strange phenomenon of tzara'at. In other words, why does the Torah place the laws of tzara'at, and the overall code, in close juxtaposition to the death of Nadav and Avihu?

Quite possibly we may have already done much of the conceptual work necessary to answer these questions. The answer may well lie in connecting the two concepts, "tum'a and tahara" and "entrance into a holy place," discussed until this point.

In describing the purification period of the postpartum women, the Torah states the following.

She shall remain in a state of purification from her blood for thirty-three days, she shall not touch any consecrated thing (kodesh), nor enter the sanctuary (mikdash) until her period of purification is completed. (12:4)

Given that she is "tamei" and has not yet reentered the pristine, pure and holy state of "tahara," the postpartum women is banned from contact with sanctified objects and sanctified space. Or to phrase this a little bit differently, the sanctified personal state of "tahara" constitutes a necessary condition for contact with the holy.

This mutual exclusivity of holiness and tum'a is also present as a theme in the other segments of the overall section outlined above. The sufferer of tzara'at lesions is banned from the camp, whose center consists of the abode of God. This is not only alluded to by the text of Vayikra (see 13:46), but stated explicitly in Bemidbar, during the arrangement of the camp.

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Instruct the Israelites to remove from the camp anyone with tzara'at lesions... put them outside the camp so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell. (Bemidbar 5:2-3)

Likewise, in summing up the laws of discharges, section four of the overall code of tum'a and tahara, the Torah reiterates the

tension between a state of tum'a and the sanctuary, and mandates the death penalty for the improper mixing of the two.

And you shall warn the Children of Israel regarding uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Mishkan which is among them. (15:31)

Moreover, the verse of Bemidbar partially quoted above also mandates the expulsion of the zav and the zava, those suffering from emissions, from the camp.

Finally, this connection, or perhaps need to disconnect, between tum'a and sanctity can be located not just in sections, two, three, and four of the code, but even in section one, the laws of permitted and forbidden animals. In closing out the segment, God informs Israel that he has high expectations:

For I the Lord am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through (eating) any swarming thing... For I am the Lord... you shall be holy for I am holy. (11:44-45)

Sacredness does not end at the borders of the sanctuary nor even at the borders of the camp. The category of the holy extends to the very person of each and every individual member of Israel. As members of the holy nation, another type of mobile sanctuary, another method of encapsulating the Lord's presence in the world, the Israelites are enjoined from improper mixing of the sacred and profane, of contacting or ingesting certain kinds of animals.

To put this all together, the common denominator of Chapters Eleven through Fifteen, the laws of tum'a and tahara, consists not just of the categories of tum'a and tahara but also of the need to separate between the tamei and the holy. Whether in the context of the sanctuary itself, the camp within which it

resides, or the people within whose camp God resides, holiness demands special care, and particular conditions for encountering and preserving it.

This brings us back to the sin and death of Nadav and Avihu. They died because of lack of care for the details of "hilkhot kodashim," the laws for the proper treatment of sanctity and approach to sanctified space. They entered the sanctuary and God's space when not commanded. It is no wonder, then, that in between the story of their death (10:1-20) and the story of the proper conditions for entering the holiest space (16:1-34), the Torah teaches the full corpus of "hilkhot kodashim," the laws of sanctity and relation to holiness (11:1-15:33).

### III

Alternatively, we may wish to link the "laws of tum'a and tahara" (11:1-15:33) to the death of Nadav and Avihu in a slightly different, albeit related fashion. At the close of the laws of permitted and forbidden animals, section one above, the Torah teaches the following:

This is the Torah of the beasts, and of the birds, and of every living creature... to distinguish between the unclean (tamei) and clean (tahor), between the living things that may be eaten and the living things that may not be eaten. (11:46-47)

The phrase "to distinguish between the unclean and clean" should bring to mind the immediate aftermath of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. As mentioned, the Torah follows the story of the deaths with a code of priestly conduct. The latter part of the code consists of two imperatives:

And you must distinguish between holy and unholy and between unclean and clean. And you must teach (lehorot) the Children of Israel

all the laws whthe Lord has imparted to them through Moshe. (10:10-11)

While these two imperatives are linguistically and conceptually distinct, they are nevertheless practically intertwined. The priests carry a special responsibility both for differentiating between the sacred and non-sacred, between the tamei and the tahor, and for the teaching of those very laws to the Children of Israel. However the obligation to teach and enforce the laws stems from more than just their general Torah-teaching role. The custodians of the sanctuary and the laws of "differentiation" cannot guarantee the integrity of the sanctuary and the sanctified status of the sanctuary, camp and people unless the laws of sanctity are observed by all.

All of this should explain the juxtaposing of at least section one of the larger "laws of tum'a and tahara" with the death of Nadav and Avihu. The death serves as the occasion for defining the role of the priests. This definition is followed by the actual laws of "differentiation" entrusted to the priests, and for which they bear special responsibility.

In fact, this theme easily can be expanded to cover the remaining segments of the laws of tum'a and tahara. Like section one, section three, the corpus of the laws of tzara'at, ends with an echo of the priest's code of Chapter Ten. After a summary of the various types of tzara'at (14:44-46), the Torah states the following:

To teach (lehorot) when it is unclean and when it is clean, this is the Torah of tzara'at. (14:57)

While this verse may refer to the Torah's purpose in expounding upon the laws of tzara'at at length, it most probably refers to the role of the priests in making the determination as to whether a particular lesion is clean or unclean. After all, the Torah elaborates upon this role extensively throughout the one hundred and sixteen verses of the laws of tzara'at (13:1-14:57).

Moreover, the linguistic parallel to the terms "teaching," "unclean" and "clean" found in the code of priestly conduct (10:10-11), and the apparent fusing of the concepts into a montage of teaching, ruling and governing the arena of tum'a and tahara, further strengthens the connections outlined above. If so, like section one, section three provides a corpus of "differentiation laws" that the priests are charged with guarding and teaching.

In a similar vein, it is Aharon the priest, along with Moshe, who is charged with "warning" the children of Israel regarding their uncleanness and the possibility of death in section four, the laws of emissions (see 15:1, 31). Finally, regarding section one, the laws of the postpartum women, it is the priest who plays the key role in restoring her state of "tahara" (see 12:6-7), guides her in her passage from tamei to tahor and facilitates her approach to the sanctuary.

In sum, the placement of the "laws of tum'a and tahara" in the middle of the narrative of Nadav and Avihu's death stems from more than just the concern of both of these parts of the Torah with "hilkhot kodshim," the rules for the treatment of sanctity. The juxtaposition also stems from the definition of the role of priests in the aftermath of the death of Nadav and Avihu. It stems from the overarching concern of both segments with the role of priests, their job description and their special responsibility for the "laws of differentiation."

#### IV

While the dual theory outlined above more than handles the problem of the structure of the middle part of Sefer Vayikra, I would nevertheless like to try to elaborate on some additional literary and philosophical connections between the "laws of tum'a and tahara" and the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Let us begin by taking a look at the treatment given to one who manifests tzara'at upon his body.

And the leprous man whom the lesion is upon, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare and he shall cover his upper lip, and shall cry, "Unclean, unclean." (13:45)

The four actions required of the "metzora," the sufferer of tzara'at, can all be thought of as connected to disgrace and shame. The rending of the garments and baring of his head constitute symbols of dishevelment and disgrace, similar to the baring of the head of the women suspected of adultery (see [Bemidbar 5:18](#)). Similarly, the covering of the upper lip, probably done by the garment worn upon the upper body (see [Ibn Ezra 13:45](#)), involves the covering of the metzora's mouth and his silencing. Having been visited by an affliction from God, the metzora stands speechless in front of divine retribution. He possesses no explanation and no rationale for his behavior and affliction. He is like the false prophets of [Mikha 3:7](#) who "shall be put to shame" and "cover their lips." Having been afflicted by a divine plague, the metzora can do no more than proclaim his own disgrace and utter, "Unclean, unclean."

However, some of these actions symbolize not just shame, disgrace and self-negation, but also the related phenomenon of mourning. This brings us back to the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. Right after the deaths, Moshe tells Aharon, Elazar and Itamar:

Do not bare your heads and do not rend your clothes, lest you die... But your brothers, all the house of Israel shall bewail the burning that God has wrought. (10:6)

Aharon and his sons are forbidden from mourning. They cannot express their pain and anguish nor demonstrate physically the impossibility of continuing normal existence as if nothing has occurred. Consequently, they cannot bare their heads nor rend their clothes.

If so, the acts of the metzora resemble acts of mourning; they resemble the response of one visited by death.

In fact, tzara'at itself is connected with death numerous times throughout the Torah. The term "nega," translated as "lesion" above, constitutes the Torah's standard term for tzara'at affliction and appears innumerable times throughout the laws of tzara'at. Interestingly enough, the term literally means "touch" and is used in the contexts of Bereishit and Shemot to connote a plague from God, the concrete manifestation of the metaphorical "finger" or "hand" of God (see [Bereishit 12:17](#), [Shemot 11:1](#)). [Shemot 11:1](#) uses the phrase "od nega echad," one more touch/plague, to herald the plague of the firstborn, the visitation of death upon the Egyptians. In other words, visitation by a "nega," the touch or hand of God, logically results in death.

This connection between nega-tzara'at and death is further strengthened by both the story of tzara'at found in Sefer Bemidbar and the phenomenology of tzara'at.

Upon speaking ill of Moshe and being chastised by God, Miriam is stricken with tzara'at ([Bemidbar 12:1-10](#)). At this point, Aharon, who had been party to the slander, beseeches Moshe not to hold a grudge against them and to pray for Miriam's welfare.

And Aharon said to Moshe: Please my master, account not to us the sin which we committed in our folly. Let her not be as one DEAD, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh eaten away. (12:11-12)

Apparently, tzara'at symbolizes death. The appearance of tzara'at resembles the appearance of a grisly miscarriage or stillborn baby. The death of the flesh in tzara'at comprises a harbinger and portent of the ultimate punishment soon to be visited upon the sinner. No wonder the metzora responds to his tzara'at as one responds to death. In a last-ditch effort to stave off his fate, he proactively mourns his soul and his impending doom.

This connection between death and tzara'at should help shed some light on the topics contained within the latter parts of the "laws of tum'a and tahara," the subject matter of Parashat Tazria and Parashat Metzora.

As has often been pointed out, death defiles. The corpse constitutes the "father of all tumot." Similarly, the shadow of death, the affliction of tzara'at, defiles. But the metzora is not the only one in these sections of the Torah who has encountered death and had its shadow cast upon him. The people mentioned at the end of Parashat Metzora, those suffering from emissions, have also encountered the shadow of death. The menstruating women faces the loss of potential life implicit in her bleeding, and zav and zava the "loss of life" implicit in their diseases and consequent inability to procreate.

Similarly, the postpartum woman, mentioned at the beginning of Parashat Tazria, has passed through the harrowing and life-threatening experience of childbirth. Within her experience of birthing life, she has encountered the shadow of death. If so, the topics of Tazria and Metzora are united by their connection to death and the consequence of defilement.

But this is not all that unites the postpartum women, the metzora and the sufferer from emissions. In general, the texts focus not just on the cause of the defilement, but also on the process of return, the means of restoring a state of tahara. Each parasha depicts the process of "passing through," not so much the encounter with death, but the return from its touch, the approach to the sanctuary and the bringing of offerings (see 12:6-8, 14:1-20, 15:13-15, 28-30).

Putting this all together and linking up with the story of the deaths of Nadav and Avihu yields something rather interesting. The dynamic implicit in the legal material of Tazria and Metzora parallels the dynamic implicit in the narrative frame of the text, the story of the death of Nadav and Avihu. From the perspective

of narrative, the text is about Aharon, a father who at his very moment of triumph has suffered a devastating loss. In his own words: "Such things have befallen me" (10:19). Due to his sacred status he is even forbidden from explicit mourning (10:6-7). Yet somehow he must pass through, he must continue through death, return to the sanctuary and perform the divine service. Likewise and in keeping with the implicit theme, the legal material is about "passing through death" and approaching the sanctuary.

But this is not all. In a striking parallel to the story of Nadav and Avihu, a story of the "eighth day" (see 9:1, 9:23-10:2), each of these "passing through" or "purification" passages contains a reference to a period of seven days and a climactic eighth day. The postpartum woman who bears a male is tamei for seven days. On the eighth day her son is circumcised (12:2-3). After a seven day waiting period outside his own tent upon his return to the camp, the metzora brings his climactic offering, approaches the sanctuary and achieves "tahara" on the eighth day (14:8-11). Likewise the zav and the zava count seven days and only then, on the eighth day, bring their offerings, approach the sanctuary and reenter a pristine and undefiled state (15:13-15, 28-30).

Is the eighth day some sort of magic number in Sefer Vayikra? Maybe. But perhaps there is something more here. The eighth day of the miluim ceremony was intended to be the day of God's descent to the Mishkan, the day when the very source of all being, of life itself, came and dwelt amongst the people. The death of Nadav and Avihu on the eighth day not only constituted a tragedy in its own right, but a staining of the essence of the eighth day, an undercutting of the status of the Mishkan and God's presence. The day of God's arrival and His very presence are now associated with death and mourning in the consciousness of Israel.

Upon the death of Korach and his cohorts, the Children of Israel gave vent to this exact sentiment:

And the Children of Israel said to Moshe:  
Behold we die, we perish, we all perish!  
Everyone who so much ventures near the  
Lord's Mishkan dies. Alas, we are doomed to  
perish! (Bemidbar 17:27-28)

If so, we may formulate yet one more reason for the juxtaposing of Tazria and Metzora with the story of the death of Nadav and Avihu. The "passing through" stories of the postpartum woman, the metzora, the zav and the zava serve as a counterweight to the death of Nadav and Avihu. The dynamic of passing through death and returning upon the eighth day to the sanctuary and God's presence, to full and pure life, reverses the linkage between the eighth day and death in the story of Nadav and Avihu.

The legal material reminds the Children of Israel of the ideal relation between God's presence in the sanctuary and the categories of life and death. Rather than holiness causing death, death causes distance from the presence of God. The transcendence of death and affirming of life finds its concrete expression in approaching the sanctuary and entering into God's presence.

May it be the will of the Almighty that we merit to pass through the shadow of death that hovers over us these days and return to full and holy life in the presence of God.

[Note: For those who think the latter two points in the shiur fail to fully answer the questions discussed in the shiur, please see the methodological note below.]

For Further Study

1. Reread 16:1. See Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and Ramban 16:1. Try to note at least two distinct interpretations of the phrase "after the death" presented by the

commentaries. Does the interpretation of Rashi and Rashbam dissolve the central problem the shiur attempts to resolve? Does their interpretation necessarily contradict a strict chronological interpretation of "after"?

2. Tzara'at and Slandorous Speech - i) Read 13:46. Based upon this verse, Torat Kohanim and [Arakhin 16b](#) correlate tzara'at with the specific sin of slandorous speech (lahson ha-ra). See Rashi 13:46 for their reasoning. Does this constitute the simple interpretation of the text? ii) See [Bamidbar 12:1-12](#). Reread [Vayikra 13:45](#) in light of [Mikha 3:7](#) and see Ibn Ezra 13:45. Can these sources be utilized to make the one-to-one connection maintained by the rabbinic sources above? iii) See [Shemot 4:1](#) and Rashi 4:1. Take a look at [Bereishit 3:4-5](#). What new light does Rashi shed on these stories?
3. Read [Shemot 4:6](#). Does this text disprove the death symbol theory argued for in the shiur above? See the larger context of 4:1-9. What do the three signs have in common? See [Bereishit 2:17](#), 3:1-3 & 3:22-24 for a deeper understanding of the Biblical symbolism of the serpent.
4. Methodological Note - The shiur above can be thought of as presenting four distinct reasons for the placement of Tazria and Metzora in between the death of Nadav and Avihu and the parasha of Acharei Mot - "after the death." While the first two build the connection upon legal considerations, such as the laws of sanctity and the responsibilities of priests, the latter two build upon more abstract literary and philosophical considerations and hinge upon accepting a linkage between death and defilement. As such, in the shiur, the first two explanations refer to the entire corpus of the laws of tum'a and tahara, including section one, the laws of permitted and forbidden animals, while the latter two refer only to sections two-four, Parashat Tazria-Metzora. This stems from the lack of any apparent connection between the tum'a of forbidden animals and death. This raises a crucial consideration. Can we in fact utilize the latter two explanations if they explain only part of the data? I believe the answer is yes for two different reasons.

First, the various motifs developed need not be thought of as mutually exclusive. The partial explanations can be thought of as additional elements, literary and philosophical bonuses gained by the Torah's structuring of the legal and narrative material, rather than the sole explanation for the original arrangement.

Secondly, the partiality of the "death" explanations doesn't mitigate against their correctness. Quite simply, we may face two distinct parashiyot, the laws of permitted and forbidden animals on the one hand, and the corpus of Tazria and Metzora on the other. While the latter death oriented explanations explain the placement of Tazria and Metzora, admittedly something else altogether different explains the placement of the latter part of Shemini.

Finally, although not mentioned in the shiur, it might be possible to link the laws of permitted and forbidden animals with the death motif, if not the "eighth day" motif. My wife Michelle Waxman has recently pointed out that the latter part of these laws refers to the "shemoneh sheratzim," the eight animals, rodents or insects that defile. Although we cannot identify these entities, they may well be carriers of conand deadly diseases associated with plague and death.

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