

M'tzora

מצרע

“One afflicted with *tzara'at*”

Leviticus 14:1 – 15:33

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion continues the discussion of infectious skin diseases and other causes of ceremonial uncleanness, further reinforcing the emphasis God places on ritual purity. While the exact meaning of some of these commands may be unclear, the importance of spiritual purity is clear.

1. Cleansing from Infectious Skin Diseases - 14:1-32

a) Describe the process that the priest followed to cleanse a person who has been cured of an infectious skin disease. Where did this process take place? Did this process cure the person of the disease? Do you see any symbolism in any of these actions?

b) What responsibilities did the person being cured have in the cleansing process? How long did this process take? What did the person do after this period?

What does this strange ritual mean?

One possible meaning of this ritual is that the two birds represent the possible outcomes that the afflicted person faces. In one case, the person may die. In the other case, the person is freed from his curse and, after appropriate cleansing, can enjoy fellowship with God. This is similar to the scapegoat ritual described in **Leviticus 16:20-22**.

Who provided the cure?

It is important to note that the priest is not in any way involved in the cure of the person. That was clearly God's domain. The priest merely determined whether or not the person was in fact cured. After that, the priest then went through the steps to assure the person's ceremonial cleanness.

Mildew or Skin Disease

The Hebrew word (*tzara'at*) translated here as "mildew" is the same word that is translated as "infectious skin disease" earlier. In both cases, the affliction presented itself as an abnormality and deformation of the skin or surface that seemed to appear and grow on its own. We would probably call it **mold** today. In some sense, it was like leprosy for an object. And in both cases the object (or person) needed to be made clean before it (or they) could come near a holy God.

c) Describe the process that was to be followed when the person presented himself to the priest at the Tabernacle. What changes were allowed if the person was poor? Can you see any symbolism in this entire process? Why do you think God defined such a process for cleansing after an infectious skin disease?

2. Cleansing from Mildew or Fungus - 14:33-57

a) Where were the Israelites to look for mildew or fungus? Who was to decide if it was a spreading mildew? Describe the process that was followed.

b) What was done to a house that had a mildew to keep it from spreading? What was done if this didn't work? What about the people who worked or lived in the house?

c) Describe the process that the priest followed to purify a house cleansed of a spreading mildew. Is this process familiar? What symbolism do you see in this?

3. Discharges Causing Uncleanness - 15:1-33

a) What do you think is meant by “bodily discharges” in this passage? What kinds of things could cause these?

b) In what ways might a person with such a discharge bring about uncleanness? What does this suggest to you given your understanding of infectious diseases?

c) Verses 19 - 30 are the “Laws of Niddah”, the laws associated with women during their menstruation periods. What do you find interesting in these verses?

d) Describe the process that one went through to be purified after the uncleanness caused from a bodily discharge. Is it the same for a man and a woman?

e) In verse 31, God states his purpose for these regulations. What do you think God is trying to teach us with these laws?

Laws of Niddah

The Hebrew word *Niddah* comes from a root meaning “**separation**,” as being separated because of uncleanness. Today, these rules are sometimes called the “laws of family purity” and refer to the ritual uncleanness caused by menstruation. It is important to remember that there is nothing sinful about these natural bodily functions. It is a **ritual** uncleanness caused by the flow of blood (or other bodily fluids) that keeps one separated from intimacy with God for a short period of time. Many practicing Jews observe these laws today.

Verse 15:31 seems to capture the essence of all God’s instructions concerning ceremonial cleanness: God’s holiness **requires** that we be in a spiritually pure state if we are to come into His presence. (Could this have been the issue that caused the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10?) Note that while God is clearly very serious about our ceremonial cleanness, He has also prescribed straightforward procedures for us to follow to attain such a state.

“You must keep the Israelites separate from the things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them.”

Leviticus 15:31

Digging deeper

1. Read the Haftarah for this week, **2 Kings 7:3-20**. Does this story enhance your understanding of this week's Torah portion? What insights do you see?

Clean and Unclean

The concept of ritual or ceremonial cleanness is difficult for the modern mind to completely understand. One possible approach is to focus on God's holiness, his complete "sinlessness." It may be part of his nature that when his total and complete purity comes into contact with uncleanness of any kind, physical changes occur in the unclean object. (Think of Nadab & Abihu, **Leviticus 10:1-5**.) In this view then, it is not God's severe judgment but simply part of his nature that He cannot tolerate the presence of uncleanness.

2. In Hebrew, the word for unclean is *tamei* and the word for clean is *tahor*. God wants us to know the difference between the clean and the unclean. What spiritual significance do you see in this? What do you think God is really trying to tell us with these laws?

For further study, see

Haftarah : Jeremiah 46:13-28

Brit Hadashah : Luke 2:22-24; John 19:31-37; Acts 13:16-17;
Revelation 8:6 – 9:12; 16:1-21