

*The Spiritual Essence of Purifying Waters*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parshiot* focus on various aspects of the area of Jewish law known as *Tumah* and *Taharah* (Laws of the Ritually Impure and Ritually Pure). An entire section of the Mishnah is entitled “*Taharot*” (“Purities”), and page after page of the Talmud discusses the complexities of this essential area of Halacha. Nevertheless, very few people today, regardless of their level of scholarly achievement, have mastered this intricate area of study. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204), in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, noted this fundamental lack of knowledge in his time, as well:

And you know that today, because of the multiplication of our sins, that if you were to encounter the leaders of the *yeshivot* throughout the Jewish people, and all the more so, those of the various synagogues, you would find that this entire subject remains difficult for them. This is the case [even though] there are many explicit Torah verses and Mishnaic passages [that discuss this area of Halacha] and sources that are even clearer and simpler than these works. (*Introduction to Mishnah Kalim*, ed. Rabbi Yosef David Kapach, p. 22, translation my own)

Given the continued obscurity of these laws, I believe we must try to understand the “big-picture” view of *Tumah* and *Taharah*, so that we may comprehend its underlying conceptual basis. In order to achieve this goal, we must ask, “What is the rationale inherent in this area of Halacha?”

We are fortunate that Maimonides addressed our question in at least two instances in his *Mishneh Torah*. In *Hilchot Tuma'at Ochlin* 16:12, Maimonides clearly indicates that, during the time of the *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple), the scrupulous observance of the laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* when not mandated to do so served as a purposeful social barrier that allowed one to achieve higher heights of *kedushah* (holiness):

Even though it is permitted to eat impure foods and drink impure beverages, the pious men of the early generations would partake of their ordinary food in a state of ritual purity and would avoid all of the sources of impurity throughout their lives. They are called *perushim*. This is an extra measure of holiness and a path to piety: to be separate from people at large, to hold oneself apart from them, not to touch them, nor eat and drink with them. For setting oneself apart leads to the purification of the body from wicked actions. Purifying one's body leads to sanctifying one's soul from wicked character traits. And the holiness of the soul causes one to resemble the Divine presence, as Leviticus 11:44 states: "And you shall make yourselves holy; and you shall be holy, because I, G-d, Who makes you holy, am holy." (This and the following *Mishneh Torah* translations, Rabbi Eliahu Touger, underlining my own)

In sum, Maimonides suggests that pursuing a life of volitional and exclusionary *taharah* leads to the following spiritually positive outcomes:

1. "The purification of the body from wicked actions."
2. "Purifying one's body leads to sanctifying one's soul from wicked character traits."
3. "The holiness of the soul causes one to resemble the Divine presence (*goremet l'hedamot b'Shechinah*, i.e. *imitatio Dei*)."

The lifestyle choice of the *Perushim* (those who sought to segregate themselves from others), however, was only for a chosen few who took upon themselves "an extra measure of holiness and a path to piety." Their example does relatively little to shed light upon the fundamental basis of the laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* as they related to the entire people. In this context, we must turn to the second passage in the *Mishneh Torah* in order to discover their meaning. The Rambam stresses the Divine origin of these laws in

part one of this section, and notes that they are *chukim* – laws whose explanation currently elude us:

It is a clear and apparent matter that the concepts of purity and impurity are Scriptural decrees and they are not matters determined by a person's understanding and they are included in the category of *chukim*. Similarly, immersion in a *mikveh* to ascend from impurity is included in the category of *chukim*, because impurity is not mud or filth that can be washed away with water. Instead, the immersion is a Scriptural decree and is contingent upon the degree of one's *kavanat halev* (intentionality). Therefore our Sages said: "If one immersed, but did not intend to purify himself [for the purpose of *Terumah* and *Ma'aser*]," it is as if he did not immerse. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Mikvaot* 11:12, clarifying emendations, parentheses and brackets my own)

At this juncture, Maimonides provides us with an interpretation of the laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* that sheds a brilliant light upon their ultimate spiritual significance:

Although it is a Scriptural decree, there is an allusion involved: One who focuses his mind on purifying himself [i.e. his body] becomes purified once he immerses, even though there was no [physical] change in his body. Similarly, one who focuses his mind on purifying his soul from the impurities of the soul, which are wicked thoughts and bad character traits, becomes purified when he resolves within his heart to distance himself from such counsel and bring his soul into the pure waters of [Torah] knowledge. As the text states: "I will pour over you pure water and you will be purified from all your impurities and from all your false deities, I will purify you." (*Sefer Yechezkel* 36:25, emendations, brackets and passage underlining my own)

Based upon the sheer beauty of the Rambam's language, one might be tempted to view his words as a literary flourish to provide readers with a metaphoric approach to the laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah*. Yet, as the recently departed Israeli Sage, HaRav Shmuel HaLevi Wosner *zatzal* notes, nothing could be further from the truth:

And based upon what he [the Rambam] has written, one must be careful to recognize and understand that this is no mere comparison between immersing in a *mikveh* and purifying one's soul in the pure waters of [Torah] knowledge. Instead, this is a statement of absolute existential reality (*metziut shalame*). This is the case, since thoughts and knowledge become purified and sanctified through [the act of] separating from that which is impure in precisely the same manner that is effectuated by the spiritual purification of immersion.... (*Responsa Shavet HaLevi*, volume VI, section 119, translation, italics, brackets and parentheses my own)

In conclusion, one must note that the Rambam's quote from *Sefer Yechezkel* is strikingly reminiscent of Rabbi Akiva's famous homily found at the end of *Mishnah Yoma*, wherein the same verse is found:

Happy are you O' Jewish nation – before whom are you purified and who purifies you? [None other] than your Father in Heaven! As the text states: “I will pour over you pure water and you will be purified...” (*Sefer Yechezkel* 36:25) and “Hashem is the hope (*mikvey*) of the Jewish people...” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu* 17:13) Just like a *mikveh* purifies one from his sins (i.e. his ritual impurity), so, too, the Holy One blessed be He purifies the Jewish people. (Translation and parentheses my own)

With Hashem's help, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to bring our hearts, minds and souls into the waters of Torah knowledge, and thereby fulfill Isaiah's prophecy in complete purity: “You are My witnesses,” says the L-rd, “and My servant whom I chose...” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 43:10, translation, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

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