

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?

The priest went to the person (outside the camp) and if he or she was determined to be healed, then the priest ordered 2 live clean birds, cedar wood, scarlet yarn & hyssop. One bird was killed over fresh water in a clay pot. The other bird, the wood, yarn, & hyssop were dipped in the blood (/water?) and sprinkled 7 times over the one cured. The live bird was then released. This process did nothing to cure the person, only to provide ceremonial cleansing. A possible symbolism is that one bird represented what might have happened to the person (death) and other represented the removal of the affliction.

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?

Once pronounced clean, the person washed his clothes, shaved the hair on his body, and bathed. He was then allowed to return to the camp but he had to stay outside his tent for 7 days. On the 7th day, he again washed his clothes, shaved, & bathed. On the 8th day, he presented himself at the Tabernacle entrance with 2 male lambs, 1 ewe lamb, a grain offering, and a log (~2/3 pint) of oil.

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?

One of the male lambs and the oil was offered as a guilt offering. Some of the blood of this offering was put on the right earlobe, right thumb, & right big toe of the one cleansed. A similar thing was done with some of the oil. (Some oil was also sprinkled on the altar and put on the head of the one cleansed.) The remaining 2 lambs were sacrificed, 1 as a sin offering & 1 as a burnt offering. If the one being cleansed was poor, he could substitute 2 doves or pigeons for the sin & burnt offering, but still had to provide the lamb as a guilt offering. The entire process seems rather mysterious. However, it was the process that God commanded for one to be declared clean after such a 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.

The mildew or fungus was to be found in the houses in the land being given to them by God (Eretz Israel). A priest was to examine it. All the items in the house were to be removed and the house shut up for 7 days. If after that time the mildew had spread, the priest declared the house contaminated.

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?

The contaminated stones were to be removed and the inside walls were to be scraped. New stones & plaster were to be installed. If the mildew reappeared, the priest examined the house and declared in unclean and it was torn down. People who went into the house were unclean until evening. People who slept or ate in the house had to also wash their clothes.

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?

The process that was followed was the same as that for cleansing from an infectious skin disease: 2 clean birds, cedar wood, hyssop and scarlet yarn handled in the same way.

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?

Although usually taken to mean discharges from the sexual organs, it could also mean any discharge (runny nose, puss from a sore, etc.) Usually this is caused by an illness or infection.

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?

The bed, chairs, and clothes of such an infected person are unclean. Also if one touches such a person or comes in contact with their spit, they are unclean.

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?

It is interesting that the woman is considered unclean for 7 days and if any one touches her, he or she is also unclean.

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?

Two doves or pigeons are offered (burnt & sin offerings) for either a man or 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?

This verse captures God’s intent with all of the regulations given in the previous 2 Torah portions: The Israelites must learn the difference between clean & unclean so that they won’t inadvertently defile the tabernacle and thereby die. This may seem mysterious to us, but God has definite requirements for cleanliness in order to live among his people.

“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

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.

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?

The story of Elisha and the Aramean siege of Samaria. The obvious connection is the lepers at the city gate.

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?

God is trying to get us to understand the wall that separates us from Him: uncleanness. While it may not be obvious to us, it is vitally important to our having fellowship with God. We must be "clean" to enjoy fellowship with God. He has graciously provided ways for us to be cleansed and to remain clean. If nothing else, we should learn how important ceremonial cleanness is to God.

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