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TAZRIA: WHAT DO TUMAH AND TAHARA MEAN TODAY? – PART I

- I. This week, we want to explore the challenging topic of tumah and tahara
 - a. There are many different situations in which one can acquire a status of being “tamei”
 - i. Like contact with a corpse, giving birth, or contracting spiritual leprosy.
 - ii. Each kind of tumah has an accompanying ritual that changes status to tahor.
 - b. But here’s the problem: It’s extremely difficult to define tumah and tahara.
 - i. Cleanliness and uncleanliness doesn’t really capture it
 - ii. If I roll around in dirt, I’m unclean, not tamei. If I take a shower, I’m not tahor.
 - c. A common translation is that tahara means ritual purity, tumah means ritual impurity.
 - i. That might be closer, but what does it mean to be pure or impure?
 - ii. English also struggles with pinpointing the meaning of those terms.
 1. Dictionaries usually define them by negation - what they’re not.
 2. So we know what they’re not, but we we’re not any closer to understanding what tumah and tahara - ritual purity and impurity - are.
 - d. And even if we did understand them, there’s a second challenge as well: tumah and tahara are difficult to relate to now, when many of these laws are no longer in place.
 - e. This is the first of a two part series as we tackle both of these issues - what are tumah and tahara and why, if at all, they still matter to us today
- II. So what are tumah and tahara?
 - a. So let’s start off with tumah and work from there.
 - b. Let’s look at people who become tamei, most are in this week’s and next week’s parsha
 - i. In Shemini, we see that non-kosher animals are tamei, and their carcasses transfer that tumah to those who come in contact with them.
 - ii. In Tetzaveh we have a yoledet, a woman who becomes t’meah after giving birth
 1. Then there’s a metzora, one who contracts spiritual leprosy
 2. A baal keri, a male who has a seminal emission
 3. A nidda, a menstruating women
 4. A zav and zava - who experience abnormal bodily discharge
 - iii. And in Numbers, we learn that a corpse also transmits tumah
 - c. The problem is, it’s hard to find a common denominator that connects all of them.
- III. The most common interpretation – tamei means impure/unclean, and tahor means pure/clean.
 - a. If you plug that translation into the above cases, this definition doesn’t totally work.
 - b. Sure, we could make sense of certain animals being considered spiritually impure or unclean, but what about a woman who gives birth or is menstruating?



- i. It's seems outrageous to even suggest that these people are impure, as if they've done something wrong and have become contaminated.
 - ii. Having children is a mitzvah, and menstruation is part of natural biology
 - c. So it looks like we have to rethink the way we've always thought about tumah.
 - i. If it doesn't mean impure like we thought, what does it mean?
 - ii. What is the thread that ties them all together?
 - d. If we look at all the cases together, it can get dizzying.
 - i. The best starting point would be finding a paradigmatic case of tumah, and that case might teach us something about all the other cases.
 - e. The Sages give us a clue by calling one case the: "Father of fathers of all tumah" - meaning, the highest and most potent form of tumah.
 - i. This language is used to describe tumaht meit: tumah contracted either through contact with - or being in the same room as- a corpse.
 - ii. It seems that the sages are conveying something important about the definition of tumah through that phraseology: by calling death the father of fathers of tumah, it sounds like all other tumahs stem from it, somehow leading to death.
 - 1. While you can see traces of death in some cases, hard to see in others.
 - 2. For example, a yoledet, a woman who has just given birth, does not experience death. On the contrary, she has just created life.
- IV. Want to suggest that it's not death exclusively that brings on tumah, because as we saw, that isn't universally true, rather, tumah is about experiencing a brush with mortality, being reminded of just how fragile life is.
- a. At first glance, a child is the opposite of a brush with mortality - a new life is born!
 - i. But the actual experience of childbirth is quite dangerous.
 - ii. The paradoxical risk of death due to the creation of life is a brush with mortality.
 - b. And beyond the physical danger, a yoledet may experience a metaphysical brush with mortality as well.
 - i. The new baby is not tamei --- strangely, only the mother is.
 - ii. Why? Despite the overwhelming joy of bringing new life into the world, the mother, in a sense, experiences a loss.
 - iii. For nine months, she nurtures a life growing inside her.
 - iv. When she gives birth, the baby becomes independent, detached from its source
 - v. It's a wonderful thing but it can be extremely difficult for the mother; she experiences detachment -- a loss -- of the life that was once a part of her.
- V. After the Yoledet, we get the metzora, one who contracts spiritual leprosy.
- a. On the surface, it seems like our paradigm is broken: the metzora, a spiritual leper, experiences no brush with mortality. But maybe that's not actually true.
 - b. The metzora has two important rules that link it directly to death.
 - i. First, if a metzora is in a room, everything inside that room becomes tamei. This is true of tumah concerning a dead body as well!
 - ii. And second, a metzora is required to rip his clothes and grow out his hair.
 - 1. The only other person in Jewish law required to do this is an avel, someone mourning a loss, who is also required to rip their clothes and grow out their hair.
 - 2. Indeed, the Talmud constantly compares the metzora to the mourner.

- iii. Another powerful connection between the metzora and mortality is when Aaron describes his sister Miriam during her tzara'at affliction, he says: "Let her not, I pray be as a dead person" (Numbers 12:12)
 - c. In one of our teachings "Lashon Hara" we speak about these connections and many more, but for now, it seems that the metzora also experiences some sort of brush with mortality.
- VI. Then we have the baal keri - a man who has a seminal emission.
 - a. What sort of brush with mortality does he experience?
 - b. Even when an emission leads to conception, even if one does implant, millions of other potential lives escape, which causes man to become tamei.
 - i. Well, there's no death involved, but there is an escape of a potential life force.
 - ii. This may also explain why a niddah becomes t'mei'ah, as well.
 - 1. She also doesn't experience death, but when an egg is not fertilized, the escape of potential creation creates a status of tumah.
 - 2. To be clear, the tumah in both cases of a baal keri and of a niddah is not a condemnation – they are natural and valuable
 - a. We'll explore this more in Part 2, but for now, we want to highlight that both people, with the escape of potential life, experience a sort of brush with mortality.
- VII. Then, we have a zav and zava - a man or woman who experiences a bodily discharge.
 - a. Maimonides and Ibn Ezra believe that a man becomes a zav when he has a discharge that results from declining reproductive health.
 - b. A woman becomes a zava when she experiences non-menstrual bleeding or discharge
 - c. So the zav/zava may experience brushes with mortality in two ways.
 - i. First, physically, the abnormal and unknown nature of the discharge was likely perceived to be a sign of a mortal illness.
 - ii. Alternatively, if the discharge is associated with a reproductive ailment, as many suggest, then the zav and zava, too, experience an escape of potential life.
- VIII. Finally, we have the tumah of animals.
 - a. The brush with mortality here is a bit harder to pinpoint; the first thing we have to take into account is that tumah only applies to certain animals, others are tahor and kosher.
 - i. For example, animals that chew their cud and have split hooves are kosher
 - ii. Animals that don't have split hooves and don't chew their cud are Tamei.
 - b. In Shemini we looked at what about cud and split hooves that makes an animal kosher.
 - i. We said that split-hooved, cud chewing animals are grass-eating herbivores.
 - c. And if that's what makes animals permitted, what is it that makes animals tamei? Many of them are carnivorous predators that have frequent brushes with mortality.
- IX. So it seems like we have a working definition of tumah: The Torah seems to be teaching us that the onset of tumah results from of having faced mortality in one way or another.
 - a. The laws of tumah are not about some definition of an arbitrary and intangible spiritual impurity, and they aren't meant to classify normal life cycle events as dirty or impure.
 - b. Instead, tumah is meant to sensitize us to life, events that remind us that we are mortal.
 - c. But the question is, why should a brush with mortality create a ritual state of tumah?
 - i. What does it mean to reverse this status with a tahara ritual?
 - ii. And, finally, why does any of this matter to us nowadays without a temple?