

HE WHOSE TUMAH IS LAST...

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Speak to the Bnei Yisrael saying, "When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, she shall become tamei seven days.

Be'er Yosef: Rashi appears to question the order in which tumah is discussed here and in the previous parshah. Why is it that the tumah of animals takes pride of place, leaving consideration of Man to the very end. Rashi cites Rav Simla'i, who explains that this order parallels that of Creation. Just as Man was created after all the animals, so too are the halachos of Man's tumah deferred until after the animals are considered.

The parallel is beyond cavil. We don't really need R. Simla'i to see it. Observing parallel structure, however, does not itself constitute an argument. What does Man's chronological position in the Creation story have to do with the laws of tumah?

We will get to an answer only after we consider some more questions. Why is Man's tumah different from that of the animals? In regard to the latter, they either are tameh or they are not. None of them are assigned to the tumah column, only to switch sides after some event or other. Man is uniquely different. He becomes tamei, but can revert to a state of taharah after the passage of time and/or the performance of some ritual.

Moreover, Man's tumah is a good deal more pronounced than that of the animals. Infra-human species can only become tameh once they die; Man becomes tamei while still alive. Man's tumah contaminates others even over distance, like sharing space in the same ohel. Animals, however, only transmit their tumah through some sort of proximal contact.

We observe that Man's creation came at the end of the Creation process. We recall that the gemara² finds multiple for this, ranging from allowing Man to quickly enter into Shabbos, to teaching mankind a lesson. (Depending on how well he obeys the dictates of his Creator, Man can either see himself as the goal, the culmination of Creation, or must regard himself as a late arrival, taking a back seat to the gnat that preceded him.)

The Zohar has a different take. Man was created last so that he would subsume everything else in Creation. All other beings were assigned individual roles and capabilities. Hashem took a bit of each and every gift created he granted to the other creatures, and put them all together in the formation of Man. R Chaim Volozhin³ applies this not only to the visible attributes of all parts of Creation, but to

their roots in the various spiritual worlds. All of those worlds are united in Man, he tells us.

He cautions us, however, that this highly ambitious view of Man held true only until Man transgressed the first sin. Prior to that transgression, Man joined together only the positive elements of the universe. After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, he continued to meld together disparate forces - but they now included negative, evil forces as well. Moreover, the very nature of his sin meant that the division between good and evil would become murky. Man would be neither all good nor all bad, but move back and forth between them. Even within a single action, both would coexist. Within good, noble activities, admixtures of evil would intrude. The opposite would also occur. Some good intentions would find their way even within evil actions. Good and evil would coexist in a *mélange* of confusion.

We are ready to tackle the problems with which we began. Why is the tumah of animals static, while Man's is dynamic? Because that corresponds to their different natures. Animals are what they are; Man changes constantly. Additionally, he is a composite of all the forces in creation - the good and the bad - while other creatures and items are significant for a single contribution. Depending on the time and circumstances, Man will evidence different forces of those available to him.

All this is reflected in his moving between tumah and taharah, just as he moves between expressing different capabilities, and between evil and good. Man's tumah is more severe than that of the animals, because his impact is far weightier. The animals represent small, individual pieces of the larger system. Man, however, contains all of them. His actions therefore have both greater capacity for good, since they can impact all of creation. By the same reasoning, they have greater potential for evil. Man's tumah mirrors this potential for evil.

We also can now appreciate Rav Simla'i's point - which has little to do with chronology per se. He means that Man had to be created last because his was to be a composite being. His nature had to subsume the natures of all the lower animals; they, therefore, had to be created first. Similarly, the Torah deals with the tumah of the "simple" organisms before describing the parallel phenomena in Man, the complex organism.

We can also collect a rich dividend - understanding of part of our daily davening that seems puzzling. Why should the praises of Hashem expressed by the animals in Tehilim 148 come before those of people? Shouldn't we be much better at it? The point is that we are obligated to take their praise into account - to co-opt it and make it ours. Their praise is limited to some specific quality they possess that points to Hashem's greatness. Our job is to access all of it, understand it, make use of it, and turn all of it - resident as it is in all of us - into His praise.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Vayikra 12:2 2. Sanhedrin 38A 3. Nefesh haChaim 1:6

