

SKIN DEEP

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Purity and impurity are not very popular subjects in today's modern world. Because of this current mind-set, the subject matter of the two parshiyot that form this week's Torah reading is certainly strange, foreign, even completely alien to us. What is the Torah's view of tahara - purity - and tumaah - impurity, and how does it affect us? And what are we to understand from the complicated laws of negaaim - the dreaded dermatological diseases described in these two parshiyot? These questions are not only real in our world, but they have nagged at the souls of many generations of Jews. But perhaps in our times, more than at any other times in the recent centuries, we are able to identify with the benefits of purity and the damage done to our souls and psyches by impurity. Purity is a goal, a state of achievement and accomplishment. It represents the conscious effort to raise one's self from being a mere mortal, a higher species of animal. Therefore, in order to accomplish this process and to reach this exalted goal, the Torah describes for us the painstakingly difficult method of discovery, diagnosis, isolation, contemplation and sacrifice which alone leads to purity and can ward off and even transform for good the most dreaded of impurities.

Purity, in Jewish life, thought and tradition, is built upon correct and holy speech, rigorous observance of the Torah norms of sexual morality and behavior and upon honest and compassionate behavior towards one's fellow human beings. The violation of any of these three basic pillars of Judaism allows the cancer of impurity to take root in the heart and soul and mind of the person. Impurity of heart and mind is what allows one to mock the righteous and ridicule the pious. It seduces us to think that sin is not evil, wrong is somehow not harmful, that there can be such an action as "victimless crime." Impurity desensitizes us to the needs and problems of others. It allows us to speak maliciously and harmfully about others and not even realize the harm that we are perpetrating thereby. It makes us callous and empty, boorish and dangerous. It is not for naught that the Rabbis commented in the book of Avot that "a boor cannot be a God-fearing person." Impurity defeats us as no other state of being can. And therefore the Torah stresses constantly the requirement of striving for purity in our thought processes, in our life attitudes, in our behavior patterns and human relationships.

In biblical times, purity and impurity were more easily identifiable than they are today. One's skin, so to speak, told the person at what level of purity or impurity he stood. The kohen, the holy priest was present to diagnose and cure impurities, to provide the necessary moral and physical help to encourage the transformation into a holy person. Today we see no visual signs of impurity on our bodies. But we would have to be completely bereft of our senses not to be aware of the impurities

of the society that we live in. We literally wallow in a sea of impurity of thought and evil behavior and we are bombarded constantly by messages and examples of gross impurity and maliciously evil behavior. And we are alone in combating these evils, since the impurity of society ridicules any public attempt at raising the level of purity of that society. Thus we are left to pursue our own lonely, painful, but necessary struggle for self-improvement and the search for personal purity and immortality. We need to search within ourselves instead of on our external skin alone for the ravages of impurity. And we must commit ourselves to the struggle for purity that the Torah demands of us. In essence, we must become our own kohen and thereby raise ourselves to Torah standards of purity.

Shabat Shalom.

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