Life Lessons from Tumah and Tahara: Understanding the Struggle Between our Body and Soul

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In honor of the launch of the OU’s Women’s Department

Delta 3rd Base
Walking on the Martgasse, one sees a wondrous sight. The cherries in the fruit stalls sit aligned in rows, the hats in the millinery shop are neatly stacked, the flowers in the balconies are arranged in perfect symmetries, no crumbs lie on the bakery floor, no milk is spilled on the cobblestones of the buttery. No thing is out of place.

When a gay party leaves a restaurant, the tables are more tidy than before. When a wind blows gently through the street, the street is swept clean, the dirt and dust transported to the edge of town. When waves of water splash against the shore, the shore rebuilds itself. When leaves fall from the trees, the leaves line up like birds in V-formation. When clouds form faces, the faces stay. When a pipe lets smoke into a room, the soot drifts towards a corner of the room, leaving clear air. Painted balconies exposed to wind and rain become brighter over time. The sound of thunder makes a broken vase reform itself, makes the fractured shards leap up into the precise positions where they fit and bind. The fragrant odor of a passing cinnamon cart intensifies, not dissipates, with time.

Do these happenings seem strange?

In this world, the passage of time brings increasing order. Order is the law of nature, the universal trend, the cosmic direction. If time is an arrow, that arrow points towards order. The future is pattern, organization, union, intensification; the past, randomness, confusion, disintegration, dissipation.

Philosophers have argued that without a trend toward order, time would lack meaning. The future would be indistinguishable from the past. Sequences of events would be just so many random scenes from a thousand novels. History would be indistinct like the mist slowly gathered
by treetops in evening.

If one visits a city in spring, one sees another wondrous sight. For in springtime the populace become sick of the order in their lives. In spring, people furiously lay waste to their houses. They sweep in dirt, smash chairs, break windows. On any residential avenue in spring, one hears the sounds of broken glass, shouting, howling, laughter. In spring, people meet at unarranged times, burn their appointment books, throw away their watches, drink through the night. This hysterical abandonment continues until summer, when people regain their senses and return to order.

**Leviticus 11:43**

(43) You shall not draw abomination upon yourselves through anything that swarms; you shall not make yourselves unclean therewith and thus become unclean.

**Numbers 19:13**

(13) Whoever touches a corpse, the body of a person who has died, and does not cleanse himself, defiles the L-rd’s Tabernacle; that person shall be cut off from Israel. Since the water of purification was not dashed on him, he remains unclean; his uncleanness is still upon him.
Shabbat 31a

Reish Lakish said: What that which is written: “And the faith of your times shall be a strength of salvation, wisdom, and knowledge, Faith; that is the order of Zera’im, Seeds, Your times; that is the order of Moed, Festival, Strength; that is the order of Nashim, Women. Salvations; that is the order of Neziken, Damages, Wisdom; that is the order of Kodashim, Consecrated Items. And knowledge; that is the order of Teharot, Purity

Genesis 1:26

(26) And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.”

Ramban on Genesis 1:26:1

(1) And God said, "Let us make man:" Let us make: the earth will bring forth the body form the
elements as it did with the beasts and the animals, as it is written (Genesis 2:7), "And the Lord, God, formed man, dust from the earth;" and He, may He be blessed, gave him the spirit from the mouth of the Highest, as it is written (Ibid.) and He blew into his nostrils, a living soul." And it stated, "in our image, in our likeness," since he would be similar to both of them: in the configuration of his body, to the earth from which he was taken; and he would resemble the higher ones in his soul, which is not a body and does not die. And the second verse (27) states, "in the image of God did He create him," to tell of the wonder which separates him from all the creatures. And this simple explanation of the verse I found from Rabbi Yosef Kimchi and it is the most plausible of all that have been thought. ...And behold man is similar to the lower beings and the upper beings in [his] appearance and his glory. As it is written (Psalms 8:6), "and with honor and glory have you crowned him" [concerning his resemblance to the upper beings], and this refers to the direction of his countenance towards wisdom and knowledge and skilled action. And in his likeness, his
...A dead body represents the highest degree of malignancy, and a leprous limb is as if dead. It is the same with lost seed because it had been endowed with living power, capable of engendering a human being. Its loss, therefore, forms a contrast to the living and breathing, and on account of its ideal potentiality only affects noble minds and highly strung souls which incline towards the divine, prophetic, visionary, and towards genuine imagination.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch
Commentary on the Torah

Moral freedom is man's ability to subordinate himself with the whole of his being to G-d's Torah, and the
awareness of this freedom must be the basis for all aspects of man: for the organic and physical aspect no less than for the Divine and spiritual aspect of life. The gratification of one's physical urges, hunger and drives, which is part of the organic life, must be subjected of one's own free will to the guidance of G-d's Law, no less than the thoughts, aspirations and accomplishments in which the spiritual and Divine aspect of man unfolds. Both require free-willed devotion to the directives of G-d's Torah and His commandments.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:
Commentary on the Torah

The main realm of טומאה, then is אדמה, land, the dwelling place of man. When a man immerses his entire body in such water (water that has not lost is elemental character), and sinks completely - בקע התפשית - then, he is considered as residing in the realm of the troubled, מוצียม, שטח המטרון, של נמצאת, שטח טומאה - דובשת, השוכנים מעון של אדמה (ראה פ' שמnothrow כט, ד). שעה שטח טומאה אדמה כל גוף ב으면 אלוה, הוזר שוקה.
into this element, all connection between him and the realm of טומאה is severed. He leaves the ground of man, and returns for a moment to the world of the elements, in order to begin a new life of purity. Symbolically, he is reborn.

And when afterwards the sun has set, and with the day that saw him impure has passed, then - as the Gemara says in Berachos 2b - מזרת יומא, the day too, has become פורח for him and he has entered a fresh pure day. At this point the connection between him and his state of טומאה has been severed in time as well, and his טהרה is complete.

Sefer HaChinukh 173:2

(2) And about the reason that water purifies everything impure, I would think on the side of the simple understanding that it is in order that a man see himself with the immersion as if he is created at that time, [just] like the whole world was water before man was upon it - as it is written (Genesis 1:2), "and the
Guide to the Perplexed 3:47

The object of the Sanctuary was to create in the hearts of those who enter it certain feelings of awe and reverence, in accordance with the command, "You shall reverence my sanctuary" (Lev. xix. 30). But when we continually see an object, however sublime it may be, our regard for that object will be lessened, and the impression we have received of it will be weakened. Our Sages, considering
this fact, said that we should not enter the Temple whenever we liked, and pointed to the words: "Make thy foot rare in the house of thy friend" (Prov. xxv. 17). **For this reason the unclean were not allowed to enter the Sanctuary, although there are so many kinds of uncleanliness, that [at a time] only a few people are clean.** For even if a person does not touch a beast that died of its own accord (Lev. xi. 27), he can scarcely avoid touching one of the eight kinds of creeping animals (ibid. 29, seq.), [etc.]... **By such acts the reverence for the Sanctuary will continue, the right impression will be produced which leads man, as is intended, to humility.**

Yalkut Shimoni Torah Parshat
Tzav 479

RavAsi said, "Why do we start to
teach young children from Toras Kohanim (Sefer Vayikra)? They should start to teach them from Bereishis? Said the Holy One Blessed be He, "Since the young children are pure...let the pure ones engage in purity."

Leviticus 11:44

(44) For I the L-rd am your God: you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean through any swarming thing that moves upon the earth.

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