

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XXVII: Tazria (Lev. 12:1–13:59)

Essay 3. Producing something clean from something unclean

פָּרָק קמא דגדה אָמר ר' אלעאי מאי טעמא דרבי מאיר דאָמר דם גע[כ]ר¹ ונעשה חלב, דכתיב "מי־ימן טהור מטמא לא אָחד". ורבנן אָמר ר' יוחנן זו שְׁכַבַת זָרַע שֶׁהוּא טָמֵא וְאֵדָם הַנוֹצֵר מִמֶּנּוּ טָהוֹר. ור' אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר אֵלּוּ מִי הַנִּידָה שֶׁהַמָּוֶה וּמִזֵּין עָלָיו טָהוֹר וְהַנוֹגֵעַ טָמֵא עַכ"ל.

It is written in **the first chapter of tractate Niddah:**

Rabbi Ilai said, what is the reason that Rabbi Meir said that [menstrual] blood decomposes and turns into milk [when a woman is lactating and not menstruating]? As it is written, “Who can produce a clean thing out of an unclean one? Is it not the One?” (Job 14:4).” [I.e., G-d can do that.]

And the [other] rabbis [i.e., Rabbi Yossi, Rabbi Yehuda, and Rabbi Shimon, how do they interpret this verse from Job?] Rabbi Yochanan says [they interpret] this [verse as referring to] semen [literally, “spilled seed”], which is impure, and [yet] a person that is formed from it is pure.

And Rabbi Elazar says [that those Sages interpret this verse as referring to] the water of sprinkling [i.e., the purification water mixed with the ashes of the red heifer]. As [the individual who] sprinkles [the purification water] and the one [being treated by the procedure,] upon whom [the water is] sprinkled [are both] pure, and [yet one who] touches [the purification water is rendered] impure.

- Niddah 9a

צָרִיד עֵינַי לְרַבְּנָן מַה תְּמִיּהָא הִיא זֹו לֹוּמַר שְׁאֵדָם הַנוֹצֵר מִשְׁכַּבַת זָרַע יִהְיֶה טָהוֹר וְהָא אֵי לָאו אָתוּ רַבְּנָן בְּשִׁמוּנָה עֲשָׂר דְּבָר וְגִזְרֵי טוּמְאַה עַל תְּרוּמָה טָמֵאָה שְׁנוּזְרָעָה מִדְּאוּרְיִיתָא הִיא טָהוֹרָה.

This requires investigation of the statement of the rabbis: Why is it surprising to say that a person formed from semen is pure? I.e., why did they learn that from this verse from Job, as opposed to learning that by analogy to another law?

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¹ The first edition read “נעקר” [“uprooted”], and has been corrected to “נעקר” [“decomposed”] to match the text of the Talmud.

For didn't the rabbis bring 18 matters and, for one of those matters, decree as ritually impure *teruma* plants that a priest has grown from ritually impure *teruma* that he has sown, even though according to Biblical law they are ritually pure?² I.e., if the original *teruma* cannot be eaten by the priest because it is impure, he may think to replant it and obtain new plants. As long as the seeds decompose before sprouting, the new plants are not *teruma*, and would be Biblically pure.³ However, the rabbis were concerned that if the priest kept such impure *teruma* in his house with the intent to plant it, he may become confused and eat it by accident. To protect against this, the rabbis decreed that the new plants would themselves have the same status as the original impure *teruma*, even if the seeds had decomposed before sprouting the new plants. But according to Biblical law, if impure *teruma* were sown, the emerging seedling would be clean.

וכן כל הטומאות שזנרעו הפרי היוצא מהם טהור, ומה תמיהא היא זו לומר מי יתן טהור מטמא על האדם אם כל הטומאות כן הם, דהא השכבת זרע אף היא זרועה במעי האשה.

Similarly, with all impure items, when “sown,” the “seedling” emerging from them is pure according to Biblical law. So why is it surprising to say that water that renders one clean makes impure the man who sprinkles it, if all of impurities are like this? Even the semen is “sown,” i.e., is deposited in the innards of the woman, so why shouldn't the “seedling” of the semen, i.e., the person formed from it and the egg it fertilizes, be pure by analogy to Biblical law?

ויש לומר שפירש רש"י בפרק כל שעה הטעם שכל הטומאות כיון שזנרעו נטהרו מטומאתן מפני שקודם שיוציאו הפרי כבר בטלו מתורת אוכל ונרקבו ואחר כך מתחילין לצמות.

It can be said that in the second chapter of tractate Pesachim, which is entitled “Every Hour,” Rashi explains the reason that all ritually impure plants become cleansed of their impurity as soon as they are sown, even before the seedling emerges. The reason is because even before the seedling emerges, [the seed] is no longer considered as food, and it starts to decompose, and afterwards it begins to sprout.⁴

אבל באשה אינו כן שזרע כל עוד שאינו בכחו אינו קולט. דהא לאחר שלשה ימים שוב אינו קולט מפני שכבר הוסרח ואינו ראוי לקליטה, ורוב פעמים הוא קולט מיד ונמצא שהולך נוצר מהשכבת זרע בזמן שהיא טמאה דהיינו תוך שלשה ימים, דלאחר שלשה ימים שאינו יכול עוד לקלוט אז היא טהורה, ואם כן הנה לו לאדם להיות טמא, ולכן אמרו "מי-יתן טהור מטמא" וכו' מה שאין כן בזרעים שהם נפסדים קודם שיקלוטו.

But with a woman it is not so, for when the sperm lacks vitality, it won't fertilize an egg. For after three days, it'll no longer fertilize, as it's already degraded and unfit to fertilize. Most times, it fertilizes immediately and it's found that the embryo is formed from the semen

² Shabbat 17b.

³ For “seeds” that sprout before decomposing, such as onions, the “offspring” is considered the same plant, and remains *teruma*.

⁴ Rashi on Pesachim 34a.

in the time that [the woman] is impure, which is within three days of intercourse. I.e., after intercourse, a woman is typically impure for three days, and unable to partake of *teruma*, because she may have semen leaking from her.⁵ It is only **after three days that it is no longer able to fertilize and thus is pure. If so, the person** formed from the semen **can be impure**, if one makes an analogy to the Biblical law, because his creation occurs while his mother is still impure and unable to eat *teruma*, and his creation is thus analogous to a seedling that emerges before the decomposition of an impure seed of *teruma*.

Therefore, they said, “Who can produce a clean thing out of an unclean one? Is it not the one?’ This refers to semen, which is impure, and [yet] a person that is formed from it is pure.” In other words, a person created from fresh semen should be impure, by analogy to impure seeds, which have to decompose before their seedling is considered to be pure. But semen **does not act in accord with seeds, which begin to deteriorate before they take root.** Rather, a newborn is considered pure, according to Rabbi Yochanan, the rabbis considered this a novelty, which they learned from the verse of Job.

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⁵ Niddah 42a.