

Purity

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Nowadays many people are put off when the Torah talks about 'purity' and 'impurity' because they think it has something to do with cleanliness or dirt. But that's simply not so. You can be the cleanest, purest person in the world, bathe in a tub of disinfectant and still be 'impure.' The Hebrew word *Tahor* or *Tamey* often translated misleadingly as *Pure* and *Impure*. But they are not at all the same as the Hebrew words for *Clean* which is *Naki*, or *Meluchlach* which is *Dirty*. Probably the most suitable translation would be *Special* and *Ordinary*. Another version might be *religious* versus *secular*. But for what purpose?

Really, they are states, and quite arbitrary ones too. Why should I be declared *Tamey* for touching a dead person when it is one of the most important laws in the Torah to help bury the dead? Or letting a gecko crawl over one's hand? Whereas being really dirty, by itself does not make one *Tamey*?

In ancient times there were states, the holy and the profane. In most cultures people were holy in their temples and profane outside. In Judaism, everywhere was holy. Everyone was expected to bring some holiness into whatever they did by living according to Jewish rituals which made everything special, from washing when one woke up, to praying, to eating. Even working was regulated by holy laws. And the home was as holy as anywhere else. In many ways, more so because it was the center of religious life, day in and day out.

Most people nowadays are only 'religious' when they go to Church or Temple. In earlier times Jews went up to the Temple only occasionally. Apart from priests, being *impure* made absolutely no difference to one's daily life until one wanted to go to the Temple. The laws of Purity and Impurity were only intended to differentiate between the holy at home and the holiness of the Temple. The only difference between being pure and not, was that you couldn't go into the Temple or perform in the Temple, until you had been purified. But apart from that you would carry on living life as normal.

Certain places, the Tabernacle, the Temple, required holiness. This special state created an aura of specialness in the holy spaces. The idea of different spaces is present in our society. We differentiate between the work place as opposed to home, as opposed to the night clubs and restaurants we go to for entertainment. Each space has its own ethos. The trouble is we rarely think we need to bring God, morality or spirituality into these daily spaces. That was why the Torah keeps on reminding us of the need to be prepared, to think, before we move from one space to another and to be prepared to recognize the difference between one space and one state and another. And that is why these seemingly obscure passages still have an important message.

We need to have our public and own private spaces. But instead of these

spaces being opposed to each other and in conflict, we should bring the best of one into the other and make all our spaces holy ones. Everything in life can be trivialized through selfishness and degradation. But equally, everything in human life can be elevated, good and holy. It is not the objects or the people that are pure or impure so much as the way we use or treat them.