

# Magic or Mysticism

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

## Shabbat Chukat

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The idea of purity in the Torah is a very complex one. In Western society, we associate purity with physical purity. Impurity means dirty or unclean. But this is not how the Torah sees the idea. The Hebrew words are *Tahor* and *Tamey* are spiritual and mental states, not physical ones. *Appropriate* would be a better translation for the word *Tahor*, or even *elevation*. And *Inappropriate* or *mundane* would be better for *Tamey*. We are not talking rationally or scientifically. It is the symbolism that counts.

Initially, these terms applied only to priests who were expected to represent a higher level of spirituality in their private and ceremonial lives. Then, to ordinary people who wanted to go into the Temple. The process involved immersing in a *mikvah*, either natural or man-made, with water mixed with the ashes of a Red Heifer. It was referred to as a *Hok*, a Statute that had no rational or functional reason. Given that we no longer have a Temple what significance does such an ancient idea have for us today? Nowadays everyone is *Tamey*.

These laws were then expanded to deal with other situations and the ashes of the Red Heifer were dispensed with. So that the *mikvah* was used to differentiate states in human beings such as after giving birth, after a period, recovering from serious illnesses, or matters of life and death. It was also a way of differentiated vessels used for kosher food as opposed to non-kosher. The *mikvah* was used to welcome converts into their new spiritual status as Jews and the mystics of Safed and now Hassidism use the *mikvah* to start a new day.

What is the rationale? These ancient laws of spaces and transitions functioned to encourage us to be aware of other dimensions in time and space. To be sensitive to change in a person, the physical and the emotional, the rational and the spiritual. To remind us of the holistic nature of a human being that needs a non-rational dimension. To be healed physically and spiritually and that our lives can be richer precisely with a non-rational element as well.

This same idea is repeated in these chapters with the story of the plague of snakes. Moses was told to put a metal shape of a snake on a post. People bitten would look up at it and be cured. The Mishna asks how this was possible. And replies that people looking up were reminded of God and this helped them recover because they made use of what we call faith healing to give them the will to fight off the poison. Hundreds of years later King Hezekiah destroyed this ancient relic because people thought superstitiously

that it was magic.

The *Hok* reminds us that religion encompasses different elements. And we need to think and experience life with the full range and capacity of the human brain. Sometimes this means suspending our critical and rational minds.

Shabbat Shalom Rabbi Jeremy