**M’TZORA**

Va-Yikra (*Leviticus*) 14:33 - 15:33

(3rd part of triennial cycle)

*Eitz Hayim* 663; Plaut 845 and 828-830; Hertz 269

Originally presented on 16 April 2016; partly revised for presentation on 09 April 2022

M’tzora is a short parashah that is mainly about purity and impurity. Those two--purity and impurity--have to be treated as if they were one subject because they are largely of priestly concern, something that has almost–not completely, but almost–lost its relevance to us. What is true for the whole parashah is equally true for the final third of the parashah, the section that we read today. Our sedra can be easily divided into two parts: the first half, which is found in Chapter 14, is about impurity that gets into the structure of a house; the second half, which is found in Chapter 15, is about impurity that arises because of an emission from the sexual organs of a man or a woman.

We can dispense with the issue of impurity in a house quickly because the subject has fallen totally away from use, even for the most observant Jews. The problem is variously described as an eruption, as a rash, as a discolouration, as a scale that appears on the walls of a house or on anything in the house. The general term is Tzara-at (תערצ), and its source was a mystery even to the ancients. According to *Eitz Hayim* (664; note to 34), some sages doubted that it ever happened, but if it did, it was considered “a moral warning rather than a natural occurrence” and likely “antisocial behaviour that brought the plague to the house”--their selfishness and failure to recognize the needs of others.”

Evidence of Tzara-at required confirmation by a priest, and then a set of remedial measures. If those measures did not work after two trial periods of purification, the house would be declared impure. It was totally torn down, and the pieces dumped “in an impure place outside the city” (14:45). If the remedial measures did work, the house was declared pure, and the purification rite that followed included “two birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop (14:49-53).

Surprisingly, R. Plaut has more to say on the subject of Tzara’at. Perhaps to emphasize its ludicrous nature, he states that a house is not impure until the priests say it is. Therefore, if owners remove furniture before the priest has spoken, it remains pure, but if furniture is in the house at the time the priest speaks, it is impure along with the house itself. For the same reason, people are urged to get out of the house when the priest arrives. Plaut concludes his text about Tzara’at with a judgmental comment (839-40). “Customs often survive after their original motives are forgotten.”

Nothing like that can be said about Chapter 15 in *Eitz Hayim*. This is a more difficult issue, and we run into a problem immediately and from our own Chumash. The intro-duction to the Chapter (666) says:

Most of this chapter deals with discharges from the sexual organs as a result of illness or infection, not the normal menstruation of females or seminal emissions of males.

That restriction of scope would certainly make interpretation easier, but I suggest that it may be too broad to be accepted. For one thing, the role of priests is very limited--only to help with purification rites--not to identify when someone becomes pure or impure. Surely if the problem stems from “illness or infection,” a priest would be needed to declare pure or impure. For another, verses 15:16-18 seem to talk about ordinary seminal emissions in the case of a man with a woman; and verses 15:19-24 about normal menstruation in the case of a woman. Only verses 15:25-27 are careful to distinguish abnormal blood flows from a woman’s period.

On the other hand, unless one accepts the restrictive interpretation in *Eitz Hayim*, I see most Israelites spending much of their time running around to bathe, to wash their clothes, and to do whatever was required to purify any sofa or chair they happened to sit on during the days when they were impure. Turning serious again, think of a couple that feels romantic some evening. Do they refrain from sex because one of them has an important meeting the next day, which would not be possible if they are impure, or do they agree to ignore the rule? Indeed, I see many of the rules in Chapter 15 as likely to promote evasion of the rule.

I admit that the first 14 verses in Chapter 15 are written as if they apply to something uncommon rather than to everyday life. Notably, purification for whatever is being described in those verses requires a purification period of seven days, whereas what normal seminal emissions in verses 16-17 only requires separation until evening.

Most importantly for us today, only those portions on normal menstruation are preserved as part of Jewish Law. The situation is well described in *Eitz Hayim* (668; *Halakhah L’Ma’aseh* with reference to 15:19):

This and the following verses are the basis for taharat ha-mishpachah, the “family purity” laws that prohibit sexual contact during a woman’s menstrual period until after her subsequent immersion in a mikveh .. . .The biblical requirement for a man to immerse after a seminal emission (Lev. 15:16-17) fell into disuse by Talmudic times (BT:Ber. 21b-22a).

I end up with two conclusions: First, Chapter 15 has a Part A and a Part B, with the statement in *Eitz Hayim* applying only to Part A. Second, and more important, a long-standing body of non-egalitarian thinking permitted men, but not women, to ignore a Biblical commandment, and get away with it. Indeed, that sexist distinction gets worse. Women were later required to double their time of impurity from the Biblical seven days to a Talmudic fourteen, but men continued to be free of any Halakhic expectation that they would ever go to a mikveh.

Post Talmudic commentaries do provide rationales for the burdens imposed on women for family purity, and Rabbi Plaut concludes that, “In comparison with the taboos found in some societies, biblical laws on this subject . . . appear mild and rational.” (850) He can certainly justify his use of the word “mild,” but one wonders why he adds “rational.” He has previously cited the Roman philosopher Pliny who argued that menstrual blood could cause problems ranging from causing animals to miscarry to blunting knives (849). And he cites that the usually sensible Nachmanides (Ramban) who reports that “if a menstruating woman stares at a mirror of polished iron, drops of blood will appear on it” (850).

Similar notions persist to the present time. In the 1960s, before we immigrated to Canada, I spent a lot of time working on coal mining issues in rural Appalachia. It is one of the last truly isolated regions in eastern United States—mountainous with limited road connections. I was told by several people that it was widely accepted that a drop of a woman’s menstrual fluid slipped into a man’s glass of beer was an effective love potion.

Shabbat shalom,