

April 2014 - Metzora - By Georgia Kaufmann

Metzora could be misread as some kind of ancient cleaning manual. Misread because when "cleaning" involves splashing blood or ash about it has little to do with contemporary notions of hygiene. The biblical tum'ah טמאה) translates better as impurity or polluted. Much of Metzora concerns what must be done when people and things have come polluted. In religious terms contact with death, bodily fluids (semen, blood and discharges) and everything associated with childbirth are all highly polluting.

Whilst odd discharges might well be dubious and signs of ill health, the regular, normal production of semen, menstrual blood, babies and afterbirth are not. In fact, they are very much signs of good health and life which are related to the process of reproduction. The customs and observances that are associated with purifying after exposure to such pollutants began to be called collectively, in the nineteenth century, Taharat Hamishpachah , Family Purity. According to Chabad maintaining family purity is as imperative as not eating chametz during Pesach, keeping the fast on Yom Kippur and performing ritual circumcision, brit milah.

Reading Metzora it is clear that both men and women are equally involved. Men must purify themselves after orgasm, both men and woman after sex, and women after menstruation. Without doing much maths biblical men must have been very clean. Yet in contemporary practice whilst the laws of family purity amongst observant Jews are maintained as far as they concern women (niddah is the polluted state during and after menstruation when a woman abstains from intercourse), they are not so rigorously applied to men. Apparently in (ultra) orthodox circles men go to the mikveh every morning before prayer, some every week before Shabbat and more before yom kippur but none it seems are popping off after every orgasm.

This is a strange situation. Women are permitted not to perform positive time bound commandments, such as prayer, donning tefillin and tallitot (which does not mean that they cannot chose to perform these mitzvot). Men are generally expected to perform mitzvot, outside of those relating to temple worship, the only exemption I know of is for blind men performing the Birkat HaLevanah. These are positive time commandments which applying equally, specifically and separately to men and women and yet it is the men who have slackened off. Could it be something as simple as men demanding purity of their wives, exercising patriarchal control of women's bodies, whilst themselves being subject to their own bodies' sexual urges.

In Jewish religious practice, there is the notion of kiddushin – setting aside and sanctifying the most holy. It is an irony that women are set aside, when they prepare to marry and are sanctified by this separation, and also when they have proved infertile (i.e. by menstruating). If life is hallowed, then procreation is a holy act. Every drop of blood lost, semen spilt (like Onan) is a desecration of life. Tum'ah is also caused by death – the negation of life. Freud's two great forces of Eros and Thanatos play out in our religious symbolism.

I can see little sense in the commonplace understanding that these observances are for women. If what we are sanctifying and worshipping is creation and life then it is through women's bodies that this extraordinary power plays out in our lives. A woman's body is the vessel for the dangerous powers of creation (imagine the Ark at the finale of Raiders of the Lost Ark). Metzora is the 28th parashah. The focus on niddah and women's polluted state and not the men's might be a collective subconscious acceptance of women's creative power. The menstrual cycle is commonly 28 days. In Gematriya, 28 corresponds to koakh, power or energy.



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