

Parashat Tazria תזריע

Torah: Leviticus 12:1–13:59

Haftarah: 2 Kings 4:42–5:19

Tahor and Tam'ei

General Overview

The parasha this week is terse, but very difficult to understand. It is not that the words or procedures are vague, but that the concepts and the rationale are rather complex. The contents centre around two main teachings. First, chapter 12 discusses what to do after a woman gives birth. Then in chapter 13, we see a lengthy treatment on afflictions to the skin, clothing.

Exposition

Our approach to this week's sidra will look like this:

- I. The Common Thread
- II. The Joys of Childbirth
- III. Oh, Those Blotches!

In this excerpt from Parashat Tazria, we will focus on section I, The Common Thread.

I. The Common Thread

The common thread running through this parasha is that of the two Hebrew words *tahor* and *tam'ei*. So far we have only hinted at the meaning of these words, but now we must deal with them in more detail as understanding them is one of the keys to unlocking some of the meaning of this parasha (and the next one, as well).

A. Oh, The Language Problems!

Most of the readers of this commentary are born and raised in places separated by thousands of miles (kilometres), three millennia, and different languages from the origin of these teachings. Sadly, our attempt to understand the Scriptures often amount to Mork's musings (remember the television series called "Mork and Mindy?"), about how strange life for him is here on planet earth.

Most of the English translations of *tahor* and *tam'ei* reflect these huge differences. In fact, we are not too sure if we, the commentators, are going to be able to explain these terms as accurately as is necessary, either. However, try we must, with the understanding that as we grow, our comprehension of the Scriptures will also grow.

Tahor and tam'ei are most often rendered into English by the words "clean" and "unclean" respectively. Sometimes other translations are made, such as "pure" or "impure." The *ArtScroll Chumash* for example, uses the words "pure" and "contaminated." In our opinion, other translations come closer by translating these Hebrew words with the phrase "ritually clean" or "ritually unclean." These

renderings get more to the heart of the issue than just saying, “clean” or “unclean” (or “contaminated”).

One of the problems we face with these English words is that they seem to imply that there is something dirty or repulsive about a person who is tam’ei (“unclean”). That certainly is not true. We need to avoid the picture of a scenario where, upon declaring a person “unclean,” the priest covers his face with his arms and shouts with a loud voice “tam’ei! tam’ei”!, while mothers rush their children from the streets into their houses slamming and locking their doors behind them — as if the tam’ei person has been given the bubonic plague! Often, the rendering of these words as “clean” or “unclean” tends to leave us with that kind of picture in our minds.

B. Sin and Death

Let us begin our exploration of the meaning of these difficult Hebrew words with the word tam’ei. Since we have to have some kind of starting point in order to attempt to understand tam’ei, let us begin to work with the translation of “ritual uncleanness.” This would indicate to us that when a person was considered tam’ei, he was prohibited from participating in the sacrificial system, the primary purpose of which was to bring one near to God. Hence, when one was in a state of tam’ei, he was in a state that prohibited him from outwardly drawing as near to God as he wanted. Why? Was he physically dirty? Was he poisoned?

One scholar made this important observation of tam’ei. He said, “Ritual uncleanness is often linked with the sphere of death.”¹ It seems that this might be a key statement to understanding these complex Hebrew concepts. The vast majority of usages of these words occur when a person comes into contact with either sin or death. When a person came into contact with the realm of sin and death he is taught through Torah that this realm is tam’ei. For example, when a person touched a dead body, he was declared tam’ei for one day. When a person touched blood or had some kind of bodily fluid flowing from him/her, he was called tam’ei. Likewise, when a person had a certain kind of skin affliction, or lived in a house that had a particular kind of discoloration on the walls, he and it were rendered tam’ei.

What is the common denominator with all of these examples? It is sin and/or death. The dead body is clearly in that realm. Since the Bible declares that the life of a person is in the blood, then blood flowing from a body pictures the life flowing out of it. That is, therefore, also entering into the realm of death. Thus, a tam’ei person was one who either walked in sin or came into contact with something which had to do with the realm of sin and death.

With the information we have so far, we can now formulate a working definition of tam’ei. Tam’ei is not primarily a physical condition. It is a *state* declared upon a person who has come into contact with the realm of sin and death, thereby hindering his drawing near to God. Sometimes there was a physical manifestation of this state; sometimes there was none.

One aspect of this working definition must be clarified. When we read in the Torah of a person who was tam’ei, we need to keep in mind that it is not the essence of the person himself whom God is prohibiting from outwardly approaching Him. Instead, God is in the process of teaching His people a critical

spiritual reality. This reality is that life does not mix with death; sin does not mix with righteousness; sacred does not mix with profane; and idolatry does not mix with the Almighty! In other words, the declaration of tam'ei or tahir is the way the Holy One teaches us the issues of life and death. This is why, in most cases, the time period of being declared tam'ei is only one full day. Moreover, there is nothing prohibiting that person from inwardly coming as close to God as he/she wished. The declaration of tahir or tam'ei is designed by God to be a teaching tool, helping people to understand some deeper spiritual realities.

By declaring a person tam'ei, then, God was saying, in essence, "You are in a state where you have either sinned yourself or have come into contact with the realm of sin and death. Since I want people to know that My kingdom is totally different from the realm of sin and death, then I must prohibit you from coming into My House, the Mishkan, where you would be approaching My innermost chambers, the outward representation of My realm, the realm of life and righteousness."

Let us state it another way. What happened to a tam'ei person? The Torah teaches that when a person was rendered tam'ei, he was not able to come into the physical representation of the realm of life, that is, God's realm.

This is pictured for us by the regulations which required a person to wait for a tahir declaration or to be immersed in water before he went into the Mishkan. It was not that God was repulsed by the person. It was, rather, the Lord teaching us through an important picture — the picture of tahir and tam'ei, with their resultant physical consequences. The lesson was this: just as there were only two statuses, tahir and tam'ei, in regard to coming into the Mishkan, so are there only two states in the universe, life or death. Either a person is living or he is dead. Thus, something either has to do with life or with death! The two do not mix.

On a spiritual level then, we see that God is life and sin is death. That which is of the realm of sin and death works "death" results. Since sin is the ultimate cause of death, the two are very closely related. That is why tam'ei comes when a person is either not living Torah or has come into contact with death.

C. Two Kingdoms

Let us take these ideas to a deeper level. We would like to suggest that in the declaration of tahir or tam'ei, the Holy One was teaching Israel (and us), via a graphic object lesson, a basic teaching on the reality of life here on planet earth. He was teaching that there are only two realms, two kingdoms. The one kingdom can be called the kingdom of this world, the kingdom of sin and death, the kingdom of darkness, Satan's kingdom, or the kingdom of Adam. They can be called by several different names, but they are all synonymous.

The second kingdom can be called the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Messiah. No matter as to how they are referred, there are only two kingdoms. The two states, tahir and tam'ei picture these two kingdoms. In one kingdom, sin and death reign, and in the other, grace, righteousness, and life reign. It is important, however, to remember that there is no third kingdom, no middle ground. It is either black or white, although the kingdom of sin and death often tries to imitate God's kingdom. If we keep in mind that something is either tam'ei

or tavor, it will help us to remember that even though something may *look* like God's kingdom, it is not — if it consists of sin and death!

Please note that when we state that there are two kingdoms, we do not mean that these two kingdoms have equal power. Indeed, there is nothing equal about them! There is no theological (or philosophical) dualism in this universe. There is only one God in this universe and He is the absolute Sovereign. That other kingdom, Satan's kingdom (or whatever else we may call it), only *thinks* it is equal to God's kingdom. Moreover, that other kingdom would like to persuade us to believe the deception that it is equal to and even greater than God's kingdom. It is all a charade. However, that other kingdom does exist and possesses a large degree of power. God wants us to be aware that it exists and it is vying for our allegiance. That is why we need to learn about it.

D. The Rabbi's Teachings

What are the basic characteristics of Satan's kingdom? They are sin and death! Rabbi Paul explains this in more detail in two key passages in the Renewed Covenant Scriptures. The first passage is Romans 5:12–21. Here, Paul teaches, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man and death through sin...Nevertheless death reigned..." (verses 12–14). Note that he uses the word, "reigned," a word describing a kingdom. He does so again in verse 17 where he says "death reigned." This then, is one kingdom, the kingdom that is characterized by sin and death.

The second kingdom is also described in this passage. Verse 17 says,

For, if, by the trespass of the one man death reigned... how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Messiah Yeshua.

Here again Paul uses the word "reigned," showing that he is alluding to another kingdom. This second kingdom is the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is characterized by grace, righteousness, and life.

Paul summarizes his teaching on the two kingdoms by formulating a comparison between the two. He says,

so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Messiah Yeshua (5:21).

Thus, two realms or kingdoms are spelled out in Romans 5. There is no middle ground mentioned in this passage, nor alluded to. From where did Paul get his understanding of two kingdoms? Of course God revealed it to him, but was this a direct supernatural divine revelation, or did Paul have this understanding from his knowledge of the Torah? We are suggesting that the Lord in Torah first taught this whole concept when He introduced the concepts of tavor and tam'ei.

What a master teacher He is! God knows that we cannot handle all of His ideas all at once, so He patiently began to prepare us for the ideas of two kingdoms by first introducing the two states: tavor and tam'ei.

Just as one is either in one kingdom or the other, so too, one is either in the state of tavor or tam'ei. The way to become tam'ei is to have some kind of contact with either sin or death (the two being so closely associated). Hence, tavor means that a person has contact with, or is walking within, the reign of the

kingdom of God, and tam'ei means that a person has had contact with, or is himself, walking within the confines of the kingdom of sin and death.

E. The Prophetic Midrash

In this world the priest examines for leprosy [skin afflictions]; but in the World to Come, says the Holy One, blessed be He, "I will render you clean." Thus it is written, "And I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean (Ezekiel 36:25)."²

One of the implications of this Midrash is that, in the time of the Messiah, ("the World to Come"), there will be no declaration of tam'ei, only tahor. Why will this be so? It will be that way because Messiah will forgive all our sins, give us a new body, and there will only be God's kingdom present among us! Of course, this Midrash is just a commentary by some of the Jewish sages. However, we believe that they have touched on something that seems to agree with the thrust of the Scriptures.

This same idea is stated in different terms by Rabbi Paul in the second important Renewed Covenant passage dealing with the two kingdoms: 1 Corinthians 15. After concluding his defence of the doctrine of the resurrection of Yeshua and our resurrection with Him by faith in Him, Paul states, "I declare to you brothers that flesh and blood cannot inherit the *kingdom* of God" (15:50, italics ours). Then, Paul argues that the reason for the resurrection, in which the believer in Yeshua receives a new kind of body, is that we might live physically in God's kingdom. However, in order to do so, we need the right kind of outfit for it. Try to follow this helpful illustration. Just like a moon-walker needs a moon suit, so does an earth-walker need an earth-suit (our present bodies)! In like manner, a Kingdom-of-God-walker needs a Kingdom-of-God-suit! Indeed, God will provide one for us in the resurrection.

The reason that life in His kingdom will require a different outfit is that His kingdom lacks two earthly items: sin and death! Thus, Paul says

Death has been swallowed in victory...The sting of death is sin...But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Messiah Yeshua (15:54–57)!

In other words, it is through the complete and final atonement for sin accomplished by Messiah Yeshua, accompanied by His powerful resurrection, that a person can be declared tahor for all eternity. For, in Yeshua the two elements that render a person tam'ei, death and sin, are removed and done away with! Thus, when our earth-suits are exchanged for Kingdom-suits there will be no more declaration of "tam'ei," because we will no longer come in contact with, or walk within, the confines of sin and death.

With all of this explanation and clarification of the two concepts of tahor and tam'ei can we now understand why it is so difficult to translate tahor and tam'ei? It is much easier to give a lengthy explanation like we have just done and leave the words as they are in Hebrew (tahor and tam'ei) rather than translating them in the traditional fashions. That is what we will do in the rest of this commentary!

¹ R. Laird Harris, ed. *The Theological Dictionary of Old Testament*, vol. V, 331.

² Vayikra Rabbah 15.9