YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT DELIVERED BY THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

PARASHAT TAZRIA

SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN SHLIT"A

Sanctity and Impurity

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 "She [the mother of a newborn] shall not touch anything sacred nor enter the sanctuary, until her purification period is completed" (12:4). What does the "sacred" have to do with purity and impurity? From a strict halakhic perspective, this verse teaches that throughout the one or two-week period of impurity following childbirth, the mother assumes the status of a "nida" (menstruating woman), while during the subsequent days - the "days of purity" - her status is that of a "tevul yom" (a ritually impure individual on the final day of impurity, after immersion in the mikveh but before sunset). Like a "tevul yom," she may not eat teruma or sacrificial meat and may not enter the Mikdash, until the completion of the period of purification. This is the halakha that emerges from this verse. But conceptually, how are we to understand this apparent incompatibility of "sanctity" with "impurity"? Are these not two different orders?

 This connection appears once again towards the end of Parashat Metzora: "You shall put Benei Yisrael on guard against their impurity, lest they die through their impurity by defiling My Tabernacle which is among them" (15:31). Here impurity clashes with the Mishkan - the source of kedusha, sanctity. In fact, throughout Sefer Vayikra the Torah intermeshes both these worlds, that of sanctity (sacrifices and the like) and that of purity/impurity (the childbearing mother, those who experience bodily emissions, the leper, etc.).

 The Jewish approach in this regard differs from the two other prevalent attitudes to this issue. The magical approach claims that there are in fact forces of sanctity and impurity inherent in the world, but they are primordial, embedded within the natural order. There are demons, evil spirits and the like, but man does not and cannot bring them into existence; they emerged together with the rest of creation. The scientific approach, by contrast, maintains that no forces of sanctity or impurity exist in the world whatsoever. No object can be seen as more sacred then the next, no given place can be considered holier than the next, and no quality of impurity can be attributed to corpses or anything else. Simply put, science outright rejects all these concepts.

 Judaism disputes both positions. On the one hand, it rejects the scientific approach and insists upon the existence of sacred and profane, purity and impurity. Even further, it believes in a hierarchy of levels of sanctity and purity. On the other hand, it disputes the magical approach and sees all sanctity and impurity as emanating from man, not from nature. Man creates sanctity - he writes Torah scrolls and tefillin (and only with the proper intention in mind), he designates an animal as sacred for the purposes of sacrifices, and he even infuses specific periods of time with sanctity.

 Rav Soloveitchik writes that Mount Sinai, the site of the most sacred and exalted event of all time, stands today bereft of any sanctity whatsoever; we do not even know where it is. By contrast, the most sacred site in the world for Jews is perhaps the Temple Mount, which received its sanctity from specifically human endeavors: it is the place where man reaches out to the Almighty. Mount Sinai lost its sanctity, as its kedusha emanated from God alone, not man.

 The same principle holds true with regard to the Jewish concept of "tum'a," impurity. Natural objects which have not been touched by humans - such as live animals, plants, and raw materials - are not susceptible to halakhic impurity. Only people and objects designated for human use - utensils, foods, and liquids - can become impure. What more, gentiles cannot receive tum'a. Someone outside the realm of kedusha cannot experience tum'a, defilement. Additionally, the process of purification requires specifically a return to the natural order. An impure individual immerses in a natural water-source, either a fountain or another reservoir whose water has not been drawn by human beings, and an impure earthenware utensil must be broken into raw materials.

 The Rambam writes (Hilkhot Tum'at Okhlin 16:9) that there is no prohibition to intentionally make oneself or food items ritually impure. Even kohanim and nezirim may intentionally bring upon themselves all types of ritual impurity except contact with a dead body. "All that is written in the Torah and Scriptures regarding the laws of ritual impurity and purity are relevant only to the Mikdash and its sacred items, terumot, and tithes" (ibid., 8). Ritual impurity poses a problem only within the context of kedusha. "An individual must purify himself for the festivals" (Rosh Ha-shana 16b). The Rambam (ibid., 10) bases this law strictly on the fact that on the festivals people enter the Mikdash and partake of sacrificial meat, which require a state of ritual purity. Others, however, relate this halakha to the very identity of a Yom Tov as a period of kedusha. One may not go through a time of sanctity in a state of ritual impurity.

 The verse with which we opened - "She shall not touch anything sacred nor enter the sanctuary" - implies, at first glance, that introducing impurity into the Mikdash or onto sacred items adversely affects the Mikdash or those sacred items. The verse we cited from the end of Parashat Metzora, however, raises a different problem: "You shall put Benei Yisrael on guard against their impurity, lest they die through their impurity by defiling My Tabernacle which is among them." Here, Benei Yisrael are warned to avoid bringing tum'a into the Mikdash "lest they die." The intrusion of impurity into the world of sanctity harms us, directly. This concept emerges again in Parashat Korach: "Benei Yisrael said to Moshe, Lo, we perish! We are lost, all of us lost! Everyone who so much ventures near God's Mishkan must die. Alas, we are doomed to perish!" (Bemidbar 17:27-28). Although there the issue involves not impurity but the prohibition of non-kohanim to enter the Sanctuary, the idea is one and the same: the sanctity of the Mikdash demands a heavy burden of responsibility, from which Benei Yisrael fear.

 Gentiles can live their lives in the "gray area." They do not have a world of kedusha, they have far fewer mitzvot to observe, and no ritual impurity affects them. The Jews were granted the possibility of reaching high levels of sanctity, they have many mitzvot and must adhere to a higher standard of values. But this is not given to us gratis. The elevated status of Am Yisrael carries with it tremendous responsibility, and one must ensure that he not diminish in any way the sanctity afforded to him. Anything in which we infuse kedusha must be guarded against tum'a. Herein lies the relationship between impurity and sanctity, a relationship that emerges throughout Sefer Vayikra.

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