

machine, then some weights. My guess is that before you go to Buckingham Palace, you're going to take a shower, and you're going to put on clean clothes, too. There is nothing wrong with sweat. In fact, health-wise, there's a lot that's good about sweating. But we don't wear sweaty gym clothes to dinner with the queen.

Similarly, we treat God and God's Temple with a certain respect. In the thinking of the Books of Exodus and Leviticus, the creator of the universe deigned to leave heaven to come to dwell among human beings; these books regard the Tabernacle not simply as a place of worship but literally as God's home. God decided to be (as the prophet Isaiah put it) *immanu'el*, with us. And yet there is still a gulf that separates God and humanity. When the Tabernacle or Temple still stood, we were allowed the privilege of visiting God's house. We even had the privilege of dining with God when we presented the *zevah hashelamim* offering described in the first two parshiyot of Leviticus. (This offering is not a sacrifice but a meal shared by God and the humans who presented it.) But Leviticus insists that rules govern when and how we may come into God's house.

These rules—the rules of ritual purity—tell us that even when God becomes immanent, God remains transcendent. The central idea of Leviticus, I would contend, is divine grace: God graciously explains to us how to bring God into the world so that we have the privilege of being God's neighbor. But Leviticus also tells us that this gracious God remains in charge, and thus if we want to come close to God, we have to do so on God's own mysterious terms. We are permitted to come close to God, but as we do so, we have to remember that God remains infinitely different from us. In the Torah, God is nearby, but impossible to embrace. The detailed laws of purity in Leviticus, then, are a very concrete form of theology that convey essential ideas about biblical monotheism.

Today, there is no more Temple, and thus most Levitical laws of purity are not relevant on a practical level. In fact, most of these laws are no longer in effect in rabbinic law. But studying the laws of purity remains incumbent on us, so that we can see what they teach about God's closeness, God's distance, God's grace, and God's will.

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How to Approach God

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There are probably no Torah readings as widely misunderstood as the Torah readings for this week and next week, Parashat Tazria and Parashat Metzora. These parshiyot are devoted entirely to the subject of ritual purity. They discuss what causes people to become ritually impure, how they can become ritually pure again, and what the effects of this state are. For many modern readers, this topic is off-putting. It seems primitive and far removed from the real concerns of an ethical and monotheistic religion.

And yet to the authors of the Bible, these laws were of paramount importance. They were seamlessly intertwined with the idea of monotheism.

Before addressing how the laws of ritual impurity express the essence of biblical monotheism, though, I'll need to clear up some widespread misconceptions about the purity laws in Leviticus. These misconceptions are not based on the Bible at all. I'm thinking, for instance, of the idea that women who are menstruating are banished somewhere, outside society, in order to remove them from the general population. This notion appears in a popular modern novel about biblical times, *The Red Tent*, but it has no basis whatsoever in the Bible.

Another misconception: many readers assume that the Book of Leviticus frowns on ritual impurity, that it regards ritual impurity as objectionable or forbidden. But this is not the case. Many of the causes of ritual impurity are perfectly natural—for example, menstruation. Some are even praiseworthy: close proximity to a human corpse causes impurity, and thus burying a dead person renders one impure. But doing so is morally admirable: as the Rabbis point out, by attending to a person's burial, one does a favor for someone who will never pay that favor back. Some causes of ritual impurity were simply inevitable in the ancient world. Contact with the dead body of a non-kosher

animal causes ritual impurity, but if, say, a farmer's donkey died, of course the farmer had to get rid of the carcass. Leviticus doesn't forbid farmers from getting rid of a dead donkey, or family members and neighbors from preparing a loved one's body for burial, or women from normal bodily functions! Ritual impurity is a normal state that is perfectly permissible in biblical law.

What the Torah does forbid, however, was entering the Tabernacle or *Mishkan* (or later, the Temple) when one is in a state of ritual impurity. Further, because the Torah regards ritual impurity as contagious, it was always possible that one would accidentally share one's ritual impurity with a fellow Israelite who might be going to the Tabernacle or Temple soon. So in order to minimize the extent to which people might unknowingly bring their ritual impurity into the Temple, Leviticus requires people who are ritually impure to cleanse themselves of that impurity once they can, in most cases simply by washing in a pool of water. (Depending on what caused the impurity, one typically has to wait a day, a few days, or a week or so before washing the impurity away.)

But, one should ask: if there is nothing morally wrong with being ritually impure, and in fact there are situations in which it is morally praiseworthy to become ritually impure, why is going to the Temple while impure forbidden? Why is something that is morally neutral and sometimes morally positive incompatible with God's presence?

To answer this question, we need to know something about the nature of biblical monotheism. Surprisingly enough, the basic idea of monotheism in the Bible is not that there is only one God. After all, the Hebrew Bible refers to many heavenly creatures, calling them "gods" (Gen. 6.2, Psalms 29.1, 82.6, 86.8, 89.7, Job 1.6), "angels" (Num. 20.16, 2 Sam. 24.16, 1 Kings 13.18, Zech. 1.11–12, Psalm 78.49, Job 33.23), and "the council of holy ones" (Psalm 89.6, 8). It is God's uniqueness rather than God's oneness that is the essential content of monotheism. What distinguishes the Bible from every other religious text known from the ancient Near East or the ancient Mediterranean world is not that the Bible denies that gods like Marduk and Baal and Zeus exist (it doesn't) but that it insists that the God of Israel is qualitatively different from all other deities—and infinitely more powerful. Monotheism, then, is the belief that one supreme being exists, whose will is sovereign over all other beings, whether heavenly or earthly.

The other gods of the ancient world were in crucial respects similar to human beings, and even to animals. They were born to a mother and a father; they could be sexually active; they often had children of their own; and they could even die (as did deities like Ouranos and Kronos in Greek mythology, Tammuz and Tiamat in Mesopotamian myth, and Baal and Yamm in Canaanite). But the Bible proclaims the God of Israel, the creator of the world, to be different from all other gods (and from humans and animals) in precisely these respects. This God:

- was never born,
- never has sex,
- never gives birth, and
- never dies.

As the great Israel scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann put it (in *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. and abridged by Moshe Greenberg [1960], 121), "The biblical religious idea . . . is of a supernal God, above every cosmic law, fate, and compulsion; unborn, unbecoming, knowing no desire, independent of matter and its forces . . . an unfettered divine will transcending all being."

What does all this have to do with the arcane details of Parashat Tazria and Parashat Metzora? All the situations that bring about ritual impurity relate to the four bullet points above. Childbirth causes a high level of ritual impurity (as the opening of this week's parashah explains). Sexual activity causes ritual impurity. Proximity to a human corpse produces the highest level of ritual impurity. Contact with the corpse of a non-kosher animal causes a small degree of impurity. The skin disease (sometimes mistranslated as leprosy) discussed in the latter part of this week's parashah causes one's skin to be scaly and white, and thus to look similar to the skin of a corpse several weeks after death. In the mind of the ancient authors, this disease was thought of as a kind of living death on a person's body. So it, too, brought about ritual impurity.

Ritual impurity, in short, is not in any way bad; but it is essentially un-Godly. And so one did not walk into God's home when one is ritually impure. We can better understand impurity in Leviticus by thinking about the following situation: imagine that while visiting London, you are for some reason invited to have dinner with the queen. Earlier in the day, you visit the exercise room in your hotel and use the Stairmaster for thirty minutes, then the rowing