



# Light of Torah

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## Purity and impurity

This week's Torah reflection brings us into the realm of ancient purification laws. Without attention to the bible's nuanced usage of the Hebrew terms *tamei* ('impure') and *tahor* ('pure') these laws can be misunderstood. A simplistic contrast of 'dirty/clean' or 'immoral/holy' does not suffice for what is a complex and detailed system. For instance, although at times *tamei* ('impure') can apply to unethical behavior and idolatry, it is not always the case as we shall see in our chosen passage from Leviticus 15:

*"Such is the ritual concerning one who has a discharge: concerning him who has an emission of semen and becomes impure thereby; and concerning her whose condition is that of menstrual separation; and concerning anyone, male or female, who has a discharge; and concerning a man who lies with an impure woman"*  
(Lev. 15:32-33).

Read this passage in the context of Lev. 15:1-33. What do you notice? First, the impurity referred to here, in both men and women, relates to natural, unavoidable bodily discharges (some normal, some pathological). These purity laws are not accusing anyone of

unethical behavior or judging anyone as sinful. The rituals which involve separation, washing, sacrifice, etc are part of the normal course of life.

But why the need for such rituals? Plaut, a contemporary Torah commentator, makes the following point from an historical perspective. A sense of ritual purity versus defilement was common in ancient cultures, stemming from an association of certain places and objects with either divine or demonic powers. However, in Leviticus any association of ritual impurity with demonic forces has all but disappeared. Generally, in the Torah the purity laws are set forth simply as God's commands. They are not 'explained' as such, but viewed as part of the obedience requirements that set Israel apart as God's chosen people.

But considering that such laws have evolved into contemporary expressions observed by many Jews today, and that some laws in particular require women to undergo monthly ritual purification rituals, isn't this unnecessary, burdensome and ultimately sexist?

This question finds a variety of responses among Jewish feminists. Some prefer to focus upon (and reinterpret where necessary) the positive meaning of such rituals: e.g., ritual recognition of the sacred and lifegiving

powers specific to women; the positive effect that periods of abstinence can have on a marital sexual relationship; etc.

Yet rituals with a long history do not always translate easily into 21st century cultures where gender relations have undergone radical transformation in recent decades. Thus where one feminist sees empowerment, another sees oppression! Not all expressions of Judaism adhere to the traditions of purity laws and there are some Jewish voices which call for their radical reappraisal or abandonment. Judaism faces (as does the Church) the ongoing challenge of how to preserve and articulate its beliefs and practices in ways lifegiving for people today.

Many Catholics are not accustomed to reading a passage like Leviticus 15, even though it is right there in their own bible. Share something of your experience of doing that today. What questions/insights arose for you? •

Sources: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.