

Purity, Life, and Light

In the Daf we've been studying *Meschata Yoma* that features detailed descriptions of the *Yom Kippur* services in the *Bet Hamikdash* (the Temple). Most of us are aware that the service included the slaughter and offering of a bull and a goat and the collecting, sprinkling, and pouring the blood on the altar based upon the verses in Leviticus.

Leviticus 16:19 that states

וְטָהַר וְקִדְּשׁוּ מִטְּמֵאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וְהִזָּה עָלָיו מִן־הַדָּם בְּאֶצְבָּעוֹ שֶׁבַע פְּעָמִים
(...*v'tiharo vkadesho mi'tumaos* ...) and the rest of the blood he shall sprinkle on it [the altar] with his finger seven times. Thus, he shall **purify** it of the impurity of the Israelites and consecrate it.¹

Amid this discussion of the sprinkling and pouring of the blood the Mishnah on Daf 58b begins a *sugya* (passage), that centers around three main points: 1) What does the word *taharo* come to mean?; 2) What exactly was being sprinkled where?; and, 3) What becomes of the blood that was used for the *mitzvot* upon the *mizbeyach* (altar)? For the purpose of this *d'var Torah* let's focus on points one and three.

The *Mishnah* states

...הָזָה עַל טָהָרוֹ שֶׁל מִזְבֵּחַ. (He [the *Kohen Gadol*] **sprinkled blood on pure [tahoro] of the altar**...). Thus begins the discussion of point one about *taharo* (purity). So, what is the "purity" of which the *Tanna* of the *Mishnah* speaks? We, like the Gemara, will come back to this question shortly.

The *Mishnah* goes on to discuss that the blood that was sprinkled and poured would then collect in the canal that ran through the courtyard of the temple and the blood-laden water flowed from the Temple's canal into the valley where it was sold as fertilizer. It goes on to note if one were to misuse that laden water without first purchasing it, that individual is guilty of *me'ilah* (trespass/theft/misappropriation of consecrated property). While it might be thought of a simply wastewater, it was not because it contained the blood from the *karbanos* it contained elements of *kodshim* (holiness).

Commenting on their guilt, Rashi notes that the reason they were considered guilty of trespass because it was still consecrated property of the Temple. But once someone paid for it [they acquired it] and as Rashi explains this effectively de-consecrates the property such that it may be used for private purposes.

The Talmud on Daf 59b goes on to restate the verse from the *Mishnah*, albeit with slightly different language,

הִזָּה מִמְנוֹ עַל טָהָרוֹ שֶׁל מִזְבֵּחַ (he **sprinkled blood on pure [tohoro] of the altar**)².

This references back to Lev 16:19, discussing that it was necessary to **purify** the Altar with the blood. So how does blood **purify**? The answer can be found in the next chapter of Lev (17:11)

כִּי נַפְשׁ הַבָּשָׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נֹתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל־נַפְשׁוֹתֵיכֶם כִּי־הַדָּם הוּא בְּנַפְשׁוֹ: כִּכְפָּר:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation³.

¹ Translation adapted from Sefaria <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.16.19?lang=bi&aliyot=0>

² Translation adapted from Sefaria <https://www.sefaria.org/Yoma.58b.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

³ Translation from Sefaria <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.17.11?lang=bi&aliyot=0>

From this we learn that the blood, the life essence of the animal that was being offered would be the purifying agent for the Altar upon which that very animal would be offered. Thereby transforming the altar into a state of purity for the purpose of the sacrifice. The discussion now moves on to try to understand what part of the Altar the Mishnah is to be purified. Rabbah bar Rav Shila said, purity is the midpoint of the Altar, which might be understood as him saying the mid-part of the altar is what would need to be purified.

Rashi notes R. Shila's statement is based on a linguistic analogy with the brightest portion of the day, i.e., mid-day.

“כְּדֹאמְרֵי אֵינְשֵׁי: ”טָהֵר טִיהָרָא וְהָנִי פִלְגִיָּה דְיוֹמָא. (As people commonly say: **brightness [tehar] has brightened [tihara]**⁴, the light of noon shines and it is the middle of the day.

As amplified in *Shas*⁵ and *Torah*, *tahara* (purity) is not absolute, but rather refers to purity for a specific purpose – e.g., pure enough to offer a sacrifice or other service. Adding this all-up results in a tautology between purification coming from blood, blood being the life essence (*nefesh*), and life essence being like bright light. When he was challenged with this understanding, Rav Shila responded by saying that purification was an act of “pushing aside” through a reference of the clarity of the heavens at *Matan Torah* at *Har Sinai*. וְכַעֲצֵם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהֵר ([the sapphire stones underfoot were] **and like the heavens for purity**). If we then go to Jastrow we find that *tehar* can also mean “to be cleared away, be gone.” In that vein, purity can be understood as the removal of obfuscations or interpositions.

Aligning this with *Yom Kippur*, the subject of the *meshechta Yoma*, perhaps we can learn from this that our ability to remove other obfuscations in our lives can help us to find and bring light. As Leonard Cohen wrote – “There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.” Well, that same crack allows the light to shine out. This is true for each of us as well. May we each be able to recognize and amplify the light in this world.

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10-June-2021

⁴ Translation based upon Artscroll

⁵ **Shas** is an acronym for *shisha sedarim*, "six orders" based upon the six order of the Mishnah that is the overarching structure for Talmud