

## Lesson 7: Toharot

The final *Seider* of the Mishnah is *Tohorot*, and it is by far the longest (at 130 chapters). The title of it is interesting, and is difficult to translate into English. Some approximations would be “cleannesses” and “ritual purities.” If either of these sound strange to you, that is quite reasonable. Calling a book “purities” is perhaps a great deal less clear than orders such as *Nashim* (women) and *Mo’ed* (Times/Festivals). The title is a bit of a euphemism, because this order’s primary purpose is to discuss different forms of ritual *impurity* (*tum’ah*). Calling the book *tum’ot* (ritual impurities) would have been a bit of a buzz kill for those considering to engage with it, though, and thus a gentler title was chosen.

This text engages with the many different ways that people can become *tamei* (ritually impure) and with the mechanisms one utilizes to become *tahor* (ritually pure) afterwards. One Rabbi I deeply admire, uses the metaphor of “cooties” as children understand it to explain the system by which *tum’ah* (ritual impurity/the cooties) can get passed from one person to another (or to a vessel) through various forms of contact.

Importantly, *tahor* and *tamei* are not value judgements. Individuals that have become *tamei* are not “dirty,” and they are definitely not worse than anyone else. At the same time, individuals who are *tahor* are designated as such not because they are particularly “clean” in the physical or metaphorical sense. These are adjectives that mark certain people and objects as temporarily different – not worse. I mention this because many over time have mistranslated or misunderstood *tamei* to be a derogatory term when it is not. The best proof I can offer of this is that the parchment of a Torah scroll is *tamei* – touching it gives a person *tum’ah*. This is (*chas v’shalom*/God forbid) not because the Torah is “dirty” or “harmful” but because, on the contrary, it is expected to be treated with extreme care and only touched directly when absolutely necessary.

It may be strange for an entire order of the Mishnah to be devoted to the system of ritual purities and impurities, but in ancient Israelite society, it played a pivotal role. Individuals in a state of *tum’ah* could not take on certain ritual tasks, and *kohanim* (priests) were expected to do everything in their power to avoid *tum’ah* altogether.

This order is separated into twelve *masech’tot* (meaning tractates, as a reminder) which will be summarized below. They are: *Keilim* (on vessels/utensils), *Ohalot* (on “tents”), *Nega’im* (on skin *tum’ah*), *Parah* (on the red heifer), *Toharot* (on lesser *tum’ah*), *Mik’va’ot* (on ritual baths), *Niddah* (on menstruation), *Mach’shirin* (on fruit and seed *tum’ah*), *Zavim* (on discharges), *Tevul Yom* (on post-immersion *tum’ah*), *Yadayim* (on hand *tum’ah*), and *Uk’tzin* (on stem and peel *tum’ah* in fruits).

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**Keilim (Vessels):** At 30 chapters, *Keilim* is the longest chapter in the entire Mishnah. Literally meaning “vessels” or “utensils,” this tractate to *Seider Toharot* has a few main purposes. One is that it serves as a general introduction to the discussion of *tum’ah* (ritual impurity) that continues throughout the entire rest of the *Seider*. It achieves this purpose in its early chapters by discussing the *avot hatum’ot* (“fathers” of ritual impurity), which are the sources of ritual impurity, along with outlining the various levels of *tum’ah* that an individual, a vessel, or food can obtain. The primary sources of impurity are: a dead *sheretz* (animal that creeps on the ground), a person who has been in contact with a corpse, a *m’tzora* (person with a skin disease resembling leprosy), and “water” of the red heifer in small quantities (to be discussed later). This tractate also states which materials are susceptible to *tum’ah* and which are not, which becomes critical throughout the rest of the tractate. In chapter 5, it mentions the famed “Oven of Akhnai” which is discussed in depth by the Rabbis in a famous story of the Talmud. For a number of chapters we learn about various holes that can make an item no longer whole and therefore insusceptible to *tum’ah*. Next, it discusses items that can pass on *tum’ah* due to an individual sitting or lying down on them, and to close we learn a bit about clothing, bags and other assorted accessories and their susceptibility to *tum’ah*.

**Ohalot (“Tents”):** *Oholot* literally means “tents,” but you will notice I have placed it in quotation marks. The reason for this is because *Ohel* (tent) has two meanings in this tractate (and throughout the Mish’nah). It can refer to a literal “tent,” but it also can be used to represent any enclosed space that serves a similar purpose to a tent. In certain rare situations, this tractate even discusses how a human body can be an “ohel” (similar to the modern metaphor that “your body is a temple”). The reason this tractate exists is because of an interesting quote in the book of Numbers. It states that when there is a dead body in a “tent” everyone in the tent and everything in the tent is unclean for seven days. This is the most notable situation we see where *tum’ah* can travel between individuals and utensils without physical contact. The tractate begins by discussing the minimum quantity of flesh or bones in a “tent” that causes inhabitants of that space to become *tamei*. It then segues into a conversation about “overshadowers” which teaches that even passing directly above a body without touching it can cause an individual to be *tamei*. Next, we learn about various openings or walls that can prevent *tum’ah* from being passed to people. Then we delve into the concept of burial plots and cemeteries, and how a field containing a grave can be made *tahor*.

**Nega’im (Skin Tum’ah):** In two *par’shiyot* (Torah portions) of Leviticus that are read as a combined portion in most years, we learn about a variety of skin diseases in ancient Israel. Called *tzara’at*, this has been occasionally translated (wrongly) as “leprosy.” In Tractate *Nega’im* we learn all about various forms of *tzara’at* that can manifest themselves and how one can become *tahor* after having this skin ailment. It is very detailed and discusses all sorts of minor differences in color, size, and texture for various forms of skin imperfections – not exactly an appetizing read, but a fascinating one nonetheless! It discusses the various Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

procedures for inspecting if an individual's *tzara'at* has started to heal or not, along with various forms of quarantine that were applied while they became *tahor*. Interestingly, the tractate also discusses the idea that a house can become *tzara'at*. Various discolorations in a house could be grounds for inspection by a Rabbi and, if they did not disappear, they could even mean that a house may need to be destroyed entirely. Garments could obtain *tzara'at* as well, and the tractate discusses some rules and regulations about them.

**Parah (The Red Heifer):** The Rabbis draw a distinction between two kinds of rules in the Torah. They call one *mish'patim* and one *chukim*. *Mish'patim* are rules that we as human beings can understand. "Don't murder" is an example of a *mish'pat* because there is a clear reason (the maintenance of social order, and of life) to institute that rule. *Chukim*, on the other hand, are tougher to understand. These are rules that we simply don't have a rational reason for following. Jews follow them only "because it says so." The rule of the red heifer is always the first Torah law mentioned as a perfect example of a *chok*. Basically, the text states in the book of Numbers that in order to become *tahor* in certain situations, slaughtering a red cow (yes, you heard that right, a cow that is the color red, which even the rabbis admit is rare or nonexistent) was necessary. This tractate lays out many of the situations where the *parah adumah* (red heifer) was necessary for the purpose of becoming ritually pure. It discusses what age the red heifer must be when slaughtered, how many non-red hairs could be on it while still being counted as a valid *red* heifer, and how its ashes were mingled with water to create the "red heifer water."

**Tohorot (Lesser Tum'ah):** Much of this tractate focuses on the various ways in which *avot hatum'ah* (the "fathers" or sources of ritual impurity) pass on their *tum'ah*. This tractate primarily focuses on lower degrees of *tum'ah*. The lesser degrees of *tum'ah* are called *rishon l'tum'ah* (first-degree ritual impurity), *sheini l'tum'ah* (second-degree ritual impurity), *shlishi l'tumah* (third-degree ritual impurity), and *r'vi'i l'tum'ah* (fourth-degree ritual impurity). This tractate also discusses situations where it is doubtful whether a person or utensil is *tamei*, and questions of *tum'ah* in public domains and in places where people do their work.

**Mik'va'ot (Ritual Baths):** While much of *Seider Toharot* may be totally unfamiliar to Jews in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the section on *Mik'va'ot* might seem a bit less foreign. Though not all Jews today use a ritual bath regularly, many are aware of what they are, since they are present in many Jewish communities today. The *Mik'vah* is a mechanism whereby individuals and vessels can become clear after experiencing a period of *tum'ah*. In our contemporary world, many people have started to use *Mik'va'ot* for spiritual purposes marking new beginnings that may have nothing to do with ridding oneself of *tum'ah*. This tractate lays out the rules for what is and is not a kosher *Mik'vah*. Two rules are most prominent. One is that the *mik'vah* must contain a minimum of forty *s'ahs* of water, and the other is that all water in a *mik'vah* must flow directly into it from a spring or stream – not from any container whatsoever that has been used to draw water from the ground. If you're  
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wondering how much a *s'ah* is – so are thousands of Rabbis and scholars, who have estimated anywhere between 7 and 15 liters, meaning the minimum size of a *Mik'vah* would be anywhere between 280 (40 x 7) and 600 liters (15 x 40). This tractate discusses a wide variety of theoretical formations for a *mik'vah*, some of which would be kosher and some of which would not, due to “drawn water” being part of the bath.

**Niddah (Menstruation):** *Niddah* literally refers to separation or isolation, and it is used as the title for the tractate on menstruation because women who menstruated were separated from the community in a variety of ways when the Mishnah was written. In many communities, women still refrain from contact with their husbands while in the seven-day *niddah* period. This tractate outlines a wide variety of regulations related to the menstrual cycle, but it also discusses a number of other related questions. Are mothers *tamei* after giving birth (the answer is yes)? For how long (depends on the gender)? How do we determine when the menstrual period is over and sexual intercourse between husband and wife can resume? How does menstruation relate to other *mitz'vot* associated with women, especially the separation of *challah* (the dough tithe)? How are men affected if they accidentally (or purposefully) have intercourse with a woman in the midst of her *niddah* period? Some might be curious why this tractate is in *Seider Tohorot* and not in *Seider Nashim* (about women). It certainly could have been placed in either, but the extent to which it discusses *tum'ah* and methods to become *tahor* make it a logical fit in the order discussing ritual impurity.

**Mach'shirin (Fruit and Seed Tum'ah):** The Torah states, in Leviticus chapter eleven, that foods can become *tamei* when they are wet. This seems like a particularly technical detail, but an entire tractate (*Mach'shirin*) is devoted to the question of fruits and seeds that can become *tamei* under these circumstances. Towards the end of this tractate, the seven liquids that make fruits and seeds susceptible to becoming *tamei* are listed. They are: dew, water, wine, oil, blood, milk, and honey (bees' honey, but not hornets' honey). This tractate is a terrific example of a phenomenon that the Mish'nah embodies repeatedly. A very particular point of the Torah that many of us would skirt over is expanded and developed such that it informs a wide variety of laws that could have a real impact on people's lives.

**Zavim (Discharges):** A *zav* is a male who has experienced certain kinds of discharges, and a *zavah* is a woman who has experienced certain kinds of discharges. In this tractate, the two categories are discussed at great length. First, the requirements for being designated a *zav* or *zavah* are outlined (discharges three times or more within three days). Afterwards, a seven-day period of ritual purity must be occurred (without any intermittent discharges). Once that has occurred, the *zav* or *zavah* immerses in a *mik'vah* (ritual bath, see above). The last step towards full ritual purity is to bring two *korbanot* (offerings) the day after immersing. The tractate discusses each step of the *zav* cycle, how to determine if a *zav* or *zavah* has experienced another discharge, and how *tum'ah* can spread when a *zav/zavah* has. Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

physical contact with someone or something while *tamei*.

**Tevul Yom (Post-Immersion Tum'ah):** When a person immerses in a *Mik'vah* they are not immediately deemed fully *tahor*. While many elements of their *tum'ah* are gone, it is not until the sun goes down on the day of immersion that full ritual purity is obtained for the person who immersed. Tractate *Tevul Yom* discusses the regulations related to this liminal period of time where a person is not quite *tamei* but also not yet fully *tahor*. In some situations, a person with the status of a *tevil yom* conveys *tum'ah* in the same way that a fully *tamei* person would, while in other situations they can be in contact with an object and not cause *tum'ah* even though a fully *tamei* person contacting that object would pass on their *tum'ah*. The Mishnah in general likes to take on individuals and scenarios that break down dichotomies (between *tahor* and *tamei*, between man and woman, between adult and child, etc.). By doing that, it is able to clarify rules related to the two broader categories while simultaneously creating a blurry line in the middle that ensures the law won't be treated as overly simplistic.

**Yadayim (Hand Tum'ah):** To this day, many Jews ritually wash their hands before every meal, saying the blessing "*Baruch Atah, Adonai, Eloheinu Melech Ha'olam, Asher Kid'shanu B'mitzvotav V'tzivanu Al N'tilat Yadayim*" (Blessed are You, Adonai, Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who makes us holy with *Mitz'vot* and commands us to wash our hands). Some might think that this is just for reasons of cleanliness. Though it does have that added positive effect, the initial reason for this ritual is actually related to this tractate of the Mish'nah. Basically, one's hands could cause food to become *tamei* if not cleansed properly before eating, and therefore a form of ritual cleansing before touching food was instituted. This tractate discusses the mechanisms whereby one's hands can be made *tahor* (most importantly through pouring water on them). It also discusses the fact (alluded to in the above introduction) that holy scrolls pass on ritual impurity to those who touch them. In a particularly interesting passage, the Rabbis discuss whether or not the book of Ecclesiastes causes *tum'ah* to those who touch it. While it appears they are primarily concerned with issues of ritual purity in that conversation, they are really delving into the deeper question of whether the book of Ecclesiastes is on the same level as the rest of the Tanach or if it is a slightly lower status.

**Uk'tzin (Stem and Peel Tum'ah):** This final tractate of the entire Mish'nah at first seems like a strange choice. It discusses fruits and vegetables, and under what circumstances their seeds, stalks, or stems are susceptible to becoming *tum'ah*. It draws a distinction between parts of a fruit that are a *yad* (meaning "handle" in this case, and connoting a part of a fruit that is an extension of the fruit itself) and a *shomer* (meaning "protector" because it protects from *tum'ah*), which is not seen as part of the fruit itself but as a "cover" for the fruit (or vegetable) that prevents *tum'ah* from affecting that fruit. I would propose, however, that it is a fitting conclusion. The Mish'nah is not a philosophical treatise. It delves into rigorously specific cases and creates hundreds (maybe thousands) of rules for Jews to Please note: this text may not be shared or reproduced without the written permission of the Darshan Yeshiva.

live by. But within all the specificity there is true beauty. Directly after a discussion of honey-combs in the second-to-last Mish'nah, tractate *Uk'tzin* closes with a beautiful sentiment from Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta. He says "The Blessed Holy One (God) found no vessel that could [properly] hold the blessings [due to the people of] Israel, except for *Shalom* (peace). As it is said [in the Book of Proverbs] "God will give strength unto [the Jewish] people; God will bless [them] with peace." Thus ends the Mishnah. The rules and regulations exist not for their own sake. They exist, and we learn them, in order to spread messages of truth, of justice, and (of course) of peace.

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