

Jewish Texts on Purity

There are [at least] two different notions in Judaism of what 'purity' might mean. The first is in a ritual context, and had to do with the state one needed to be in to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. That is why the bulk of the texts on this subject come from the book of Leviticus (the laws concerning the Levites, the Biblical priestly caste). One who served in the Temple had to be 'perfect', just as the sacrificial animals had to be: whole with no blemishes or wounds and in a state of ritual purity. The whole of the people were expected to follow similar laws because of the idea that we were to be 'A kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Exodus 19:6).

Leviticus 15:1-5

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: ב דַּבְּרוּ אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתֶּם
אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ אִישׁ כִּי יִהְיֶה זָב מִבְּשָׁרוֹ זָבוֹ טִמָּא הוּא: ג וְזֹאת תִּהְיֶה טִמְאַתּוֹ
בְּזָבוֹ רָר בְּשָׁרוֹ אֶת־זָבוֹ אוֹ־הַחֲתִים בְּשָׁרוֹ מִזָּבוֹ טִמְאַתּוֹ הוּא: ד כָּל־הַמְּשָׁכָב
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁכַּב עָלָיו הֵזָב יִטְמָא וְכָל־הַכְּלִי אֲשֶׁר־יִשָּׁב עָלָיו יִטְמָא: ה וְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר
יִגַע בַּמְּשָׁכָבוֹ יִכְבֵּס בְּגָדָיו וְרַחַץ בַּמַּיִם וְטִמָּא עַד־הָעֶרֶב:

1. And the Eternal One spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
2. Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man has a discharge out of his flesh, because of his discharge he is unclean.
3. And this shall be his uncleanness in his discharge; whether his flesh runs with his discharge, or his flesh is stopped from his discharge, it is his uncleanness.
4. Every bed, on which he, who has the discharge, lies, is unclean; and everything, on which he sits, shall be unclean.
5. And whoever touches his bed shall wash his clothes, and bathe himself in water, and be unclean until the evening.

This text concerns a man who has a weeping sore or wound. The word translated as 'unclean' is טִמָּא, which has nothing at all to do with being dirty, or impure in any moral sense - it is simply a ritual category, for which the opposite term is טָהוֹר.

This notion of ritual purity also extended to women, who have a discharge from their bodies during their menstrual cycles and also after giving birth. Their husbands were forbidden to have sex with them until all discharge had ceased and a certain number of 'clean' days had passed. Sex being seen in Jewish tradition as something holy, one was expected to enter into it in a state of purity. Although there was undoubtedly some notion of blood taboo behind these laws of family purity, it connects with the idea that 'the life is in the blood' (Leviticus 17:11).

We can see that being טִמָּא or טָהוֹר in a ritual sense should be understood as fairly morally neutral, as the same word is applied to buildings with wet or dry rot, as in the following passage from Leviticus 14 (see next page).

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from Leviticus 14

33. And the Eternal One spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying,
34. When you come to the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I put the disease of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession;
35. And he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, It seems to me there is a disease in the house;
36. Then the priest shall command that they empty the house, before the priest goes into it to see the disease, that all that is in the house be not made unclean; and afterwards the priest shall go in to see the house;
37. And he shall look on the disease, and, behold, if the disease is in the walls of the house with depressions, greenish or reddish, which in look lower than the wall;
38. Then the priest shall go out of the house to the door of the house, and shut up the house seven days;
39. And the priest shall come again the seventh day, and shall look; and, behold, if the disease has spread over the walls of the house;
40. Then the priest shall command that they take away the stones in which the disease is, and they shall throw them into an unclean place outside the city;
41. And he shall cause the house to be scraped inside around, and they shall pour out the dust that they scraped outside the city into an unclean place;
42. And they shall take other stones, and put them in the place of those stones; and he shall take other mortar, and shall plaster the house.
43. And if the disease comes again, and break out in the house, after he has taken away the stones, and after he has scraped the house, and after it is plastered;
44. Then the priest shall come and look, and, behold, if the disease has spread in the house, it is a malignant leprosy in the house; it is unclean.

A totally different idea of purity has to do with our hearts / minds:

Psalm 51:8-12

ח הַן אֶמֶת חִפְצָתָּ בְּטָחוֹת וּבְסִתִּים חֲכָמָה תּוֹדִיעֵנִי: ט תַּחֲטְאֵנִי בְּאֵזוֹב וְאֶטְהַר
תִּכְבֹּסֵנִי וּמִשָּׁלֵג אֶלְבֵּינִי: י תִּשְׁמִיעֵנִי שְׁשׁוֹן וְשִׁמְחָה תִּגְלָנָה עֲצָמוֹת דְּכִיֹּת:
יא הִסִּיתָר פָּנֶיךָ מִחֲטָאֵי וְכָל־עֲוֹנוֹתַי מַחֶה: יב לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא־לִי אֱלֹהִים וְרוּחַ
נְכוֹן חִדָּשׁ בְּקִרְבִּי:

8. Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts; therefore teach me wisdom in the inmost heart.
9. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
10. Let me hear joy and gladness; that the bones which you have broken may rejoice.
11. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.
12. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a constant spirit within me.

Based on this text, a central part of our liturgy asks of God to "Purify our hearts that we may serve you in truth. The cleansing here is meant to be metaphysical.