



Parashiyot Tazria-Metzora present the laws relevant to a number different instances of *tum'a*, the status of ritual impurity that results from various phenomena, including childbirth and bodily emissions. Maimonides devotes one of the fourteen books of *Mishneh Torah*, the book of *Tahara*, to the detailed exposition of these *halakhot*, and he concludes this book by pointing to the symbolic meaning of immersion as a means of ritual purification:

It is clear and evident that the various forms of impurity and purity are Scriptural decrees, rather than matters that can be determined by the human mind, and there are thus under the category of *chukim* [commandments with no obvious rationale]... Nevertheless, this matter contains an allusion: Just as somebody who intends in his heart to be purified becomes pure once he immerses, even though nothing new occurred in his body, similarly, one who intends in his heart to purify his soul from the spiritual impurities, which are the thoughts of corruption and negative qualities, once he resolves in his heart to separate from those ideas and brings his soul in the waters of wisdom – he is purified.
(Hilkhot Mikva'ot 11:12)

According to Maimonides, immersion in a *mikveh* for the purpose of purification is symbolic of the power of "the waters of wisdom" to transform a person's thoughts and character. Just as the waters of a *mikveh* change a person's status from "impure" to "pure" even though no physical transformation has taken place, so are we each granted the ability to "cleans" our characters by "immersing" ourselves in the study of Torah.

Maimonides' theory has basis in a number of Midrashic passages. For example, *Tanna De'Bei Eliyahu Rabba* (18) comments, "Just as these waters are a purifying *mikveh* for Israel...so are words of Torah a purifying *mikveh* for Israel in all their places of residence." The Midrash thus explicitly draws this analogy between the "purifying" powers of a *mikveh* and those of Torah learning.

Rav Michel Shurkin, in his work *Harerei Kedem* (p. 343), added that Maimonides' concept of Torah study as a means of "purification" underlies an otherwise peculiar comment in *Vayikra Rabba* (19:2). The Midrash there tells of an employer who hired a worker to fill a punctured bucket with water. The foolish employee, the Midrash comments, refuses to accept the job, noting the obvious futility in attempting to fill a cracked utensil. The wise employee, however, agrees to the job, realizing that he will be

paid for his efforts regardless of whether the bucket is ever filled. Similarly, the Midrash concludes, "Somebody who is foolish says, 'What purpose is there for me to study Torah and then forget it?' Somebody who is wise says, 'Doesn't the Almighty give reward for the effort?'"

The Vilna Gaon explained this analogy as a reference to the "cleansing" effect of Torah study. The employer in the Midrash's analogy summoned a worker to fill the bucket because he wanted the bucket cleaned. The repeated, unsuccessful efforts to fill the cracked bucket have the effect of washing away the dirt and sediment that had collected on its surface. Likewise, the Gaon explained, even if somebody cannot or does not retain his Torah knowledge, the efforts he exerted are nevertheless meaningful and valuable in the "cleansing" effect they have upon the individual. As Maimonides writes, the experience of "immersing" oneself in the "waters" of Torah knowledge has the effect of enhancing his character and helping him overcome his flaws and shortcomings.

As Maimonides emphasizes, however, learning has this effect only if the student "intends in his heart to purify his soul from the spiritual impurities." Immersion in a *mikveh* divests a person of his status of *tum'a* only if he immerses for the purpose of purification. Similarly, Maimonides stresses, "immersion" in the "waters of wisdom" has a purifying effect upon one's soul only if he truly seeks moral and spiritual purification, rather than studying merely for self-aggrandizement or out of intellectual curiosity. For those who seek spiritual growth, exposure to the ancient "waters of wisdom," the intensive and sincere efforts to study, understand and master Torah knowledge, will indeed have this effect – even if one finds it difficult to retain all that he learns.