

# ***Tahor And Tamei:*** **A New Understanding of Ritual Purity and Impurity**

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## **1. Redefining Our Terms**

*Tahor*, traditionally understood as ‘ritually pure,’ and *tamei*, traditionally understood as ‘ritually impure,’ in the *Torah* have to do with whether a person is eligible to participate in the rituals of the Holy Temple in biblical times.<sup>1</sup> The terms linger in modern Judaism primarily in reference to a woman’s monthly cycle.

Unfortunately, these terms have long been interpreted as ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ in a moral sense, leading to a lot of misunderstanding and resentment. If we understand *tahor* and *tamei*, instead, as ‘spiritually whole’ and ‘spiritually vulnerable,’ the resentment goes away, and we begin to understand that they speak to times in our lives when we may need spiritual protection, or time to recover from our spiritual vulnerability. And beyond religious ritual, they also teach something important about how we live our lives.

When we look at how the word *tahor* is used in the Torah, many of the uses of the word *tahor* have to do with things, mostly gold, being pure in their content.<sup>2</sup> When the Torah speaks about ‘clean’ gold, ‘pure’ salt<sup>3</sup> and ‘pure’ incense<sup>4</sup> as *tahor*, this is gold, or salt, or incense that is not mixed with anything else; it is complete, whole and essential in its nature.

So if we look at *tahor* as describing a state of boundaried wholeness, and “purity” only in the sense that *zahav tahor* – pure gold – is 100% gold and nothing else, then when *tahor* is applied to people, it takes on a completely different meaning! *Tahor* becomes fully integrated, fully present, being our whole and entire boundaried self. *Tamei* becomes openness, making us less, or more, than our boundaried self, and, as a result, spiritually vulnerable.

### ***Tahor and Tamei Are Not Binary States***

The way these terms are used in the Torah makes them seem binary – you are either one or the other at any given moment. But even the Torah recognizes that there are different degrees of these states. Different states of *tamei* affected participation in rituals in different ways; they required different lengths of time, and different transitional rituals, before we could return toward *tahor*. Those transitional rituals and recovery times still can make sense today.

Instead of a binary, it makes more sense to look at the range of *tamei* to *tahor* as a continuum. At one end of the scale, a person is *tahor*: boundaried and complete, fully present, possessing an entire sense of self; at the other end, a person who is *tamei* has had their boundaries breached by experiences such as intimacy or trauma; they feel incomplete or not fully themselves, or blended with others. Being *tamei* is being spiritually vulnerable at those times in our lives when we have intimate contact with other people, or with God, or allow ourselves to go outside the religious boundaries that help us to define our whole self. We necessarily spend our lives traveling along that continuum, between boundedness and vulnerability.

By recognizing where we are on that continuum, we are able to be mindful of our boundaries, able to open ourselves to new spiritual experiences if we are toward the *tahor* end of the scale, and able to protect ourselves from our spiritual vulnerabilities if we are more toward *tamei*. It's that awareness of the continuum, where we are on it, and where we want, or need, to be on it, that allows us to be fully human, fully our whole selves, fully alive.

The Jewish tradition has labeled *tahor* as the desirable state, and *tamei* as undesirable. But the things that make us *tamei* are often connected with individual intimacy: sex, giving birth, assisting others, loss. Anytime you are intimately involved, you have the possibility of being spiritually vulnerable. *Tamei* is not a negative state, because it is actually a goal for many people to open their hearts, which can lead to intimate and spiritual experiences. But intimate encounters leave us in a vulnerable state and so, as the tradition recognizes, we can't stay there for long periods of time. We sometimes need to move toward a state of *tahor* as a preparation for more of life's intimacies; but intimacy diminishes when boundaried, so we wouldn't want to stay there, either.

One student of ours related to this idea of a continuum from his perspective as an artist. From that perspective, the point where you are approaching something is the point at which you understand it the best. You aren't in a hurry to arrive at a state or at a place, because once you arrive, things stop. We always want to feel that we are on our way. Our idea of a continuum could be thought of as a third state, a state of moving between *tahor* and *tamei*; we're never totally in one place or the other, we're always on the way, growing in our understanding of the continuum, and of ourselves. It is a biological fact that we are either growing or rotting!

In the morning prayers, we say *Elohai, haneshama shenatata bi tehora hi*, "My God, the soul You have given me is whole." At the end of the *taharah* ritual of preparing a body for burial, we say *Tehora hi*, "She is whole." At birth we come in with a soul that's complete; and at our death we have a soul that's complete. In between those two times of absolute *taharah* is life, and we spend a lot of time being vulnerable, somewhere on that continuum between *tahor* and *tamei*. We engage in intimacies that make us *tamei* - more or less than ourselves, and therefore

emotionally and spiritually open; and we engage in rituals that move us toward *tahor* – more fully and only ourselves – to prepare for more of the intimacies that make life worth living.

All of this calls on us to live more mindful lives, being aware at any given moment of the state of our boundaries: are we spiritually whole in ourselves – *tahor* – or unboundaried, and therefore vulnerable. We need to be able to acknowledge that it's part of what makes being alive worthwhile. Being permeable is part of being alive when it's done well. Being closed up, having boundaries, is also part of living well, but if it goes too far, if that is held onto too tightly, life can become insufferable. It all has a lot to do with how we take care of ourselves.

We have relationships that can contribute to our *tamei*. If we go back to the original birth, in the Garden of Eden, when God separated the two halves of the Earth creature into the man and the woman, in fact what God created for each of them was an *ezer k'negdo*<sup>5</sup>. In many English translations, that's rendered as 'helpmate,' but that is not correct; a more accurate translation is 'a helper as if against us,' someone who helps you be your best self, not because they agree with everything you say, but because they help us see ourselves as we truly are, and move us towards our true self.

We also have relationships that can contribute to our *tahor*. For some of us, our families of origin take things away from us, or leave stuff on us, making us *tamei*; we may then go searching as adults for a relationship with an *ezer k'negdo* that can help us be more fully ourselves.

Another student talked about studying *Musar*,<sup>6</sup> a traditional Jewish discipline based on ethics. In *Musar*, there are polarities, and we are constantly moving between those polarities to find the sweet spot that is applicable to any given moment. The states of *tahor* and *tamei* are like that: the state in the middle between *tamei* and *tahor* is the amazing state of being aware of both of those extremes and leaning this way or that way, depending on what any given moment requires of us.

We need to be able to recognize when we have just had an amazing, peak, overwhelming experience; but then we need to come back to life and live in the present. We were not created to sit on mountains and have peak moments all the time. Caring for the world and for each other is what we are here for. "You are not expected to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>7</sup>

### **Many ways to be *tamei***

There is an infinite number of ways for each person to be *tamei*; it is anything that makes you more, or less, than you are. Often, it comes from experiencing individual intimacy: any time we are intimately involved, there is a sharing of self that can lead to leaving part of ourselves attached to the other person, or aspects of the other person on us. With our boundaries breached, we can become spiritually vulnerable.

They can also include not conforming to dietary laws, Shabbat observance, or other boundaries that help define a Jew. We know that these laws are the traditional norms of Jewish life, and that we can choose to not maintain them; but one possible result of such a conscious or unconscious nonconforming can be a blurring of our personal boundaries, unless we make such changes mindfully, and firm them up in other ways. If we move away from one definition of identity, we need to replace it with another; undefined boundaries can make us *tamei*, spiritually vulnerable.

There are also people with whom you have interactions who leave pieces of themselves on you, making you, in a sense, more than you are, but still not you, leaving you spiritually vulnerable.

### **Only one way for each of us to be *tahor***

On the other hand, the Torah seems to define *tahor* as one-size-fits-all, suggesting that each person's completeness should look exactly like the next person's. But, of course, people differ in their skills, talents and abilities; it would make sense, then, that each person's *tahor* is different, unique. My *tahor* is not your *tahor*.

We are instructed in the Bible that people with disabilities can never be fully *tahor*, can't serve as priests in the Temple.<sup>8</sup> But in our experience, that's not about that person, it's about the limited vision of those who are looking at us.

Each of us is created as a unique soul with our unique gifts. My own *tahor* is related to my challenges. I was born with hearing and learning disabilities. These particular "gifts" left me with a unique way of interacting with the world, not receiving clear information through either auditory or written information gave me an opportunity to experience the world in a more intuitive way. It also left me with an almost photographic ability to experience and remember stories and experiences. If I were to compare my *tahor* to that of those around me. I would never have been able to live my fullest life.

A story is told of the Hassidic Rabbi Zusya. As he lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his students, he was weeping bitterly. His students told that he should not be afraid of facing God in judgment after he dies, after all he was such a pious and holy man. Zusya replied, "I am not afraid that God might ask me why I was not more like Moses, more like King David, or more like Rabbi Akiva. If God asks me that, I will know what to say. What I am afraid of is if God asks me why I was not more like Zusya!" Instead of judging anyone by another's standards, we only have to be the best ourselves that we can be.

That idea that each of us has our own *tahor* that is unique to us, that is made up of all our own pieces, is to us the most important message. When people who are not sure of themselves

try to be like other people, it is important that they recognize exactly who they are. When we come into this world, we come in alone and as ourselves; and when we leave this world, we leave alone and as ourselves. Between those moments, the struggle is to be fully, and only, ourselves! Those who are insecure in their sense of self may try to be like someone else. The pressure to conform leads us away from our true self.

### ***Tahor* in Temple times**

There are special times when we need to gird ourselves, and make sure we have all our pieces together. In biblical times, *tahor* mattered if you were doing holy work, if you were participating in holy service in the Temple. It was very important for the priests to have all their pieces together, because they were serving the entire community, in a liminal place.

In Temple times, we were moving away from the pagan idea that gods were in high places, but we were not yet ready for what we teach today, that God is anywhere we let God in. In theory, the Temple was the space where God dwelled, but perhaps we did not have to be in a protected state of *tahor* in order for God to be there; rather, the people needed to be *tahor* because of the intensity of the Temple experience.

Just south of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, in the area through which people had to pass at the end of their journey, and before ascending to the Temple, archeologists have uncovered many *mikva'ot* (ritual baths). Before we approached the Temple, we had to become aware of our spiritual state, let the dust of your journey go – both physically and spiritually – and be fully present for the Temple service. We knew that we were about to have a life-changing experience that was going to make us *tamei*, because the Torah commands that often, when we did a religious ritual at that level, we had to leave the camp for a day, and then wash and start over.

Being grounded in who we are, and in the real world, is how we are able to move back toward spiritual wholeness after becoming *tamei*. The cautionary Talmudic tale of Rabbi Akiva's orchard demonstrates that. The story is that four of the greatest rabbis of the Talmud "entered the *pardes* (orchard)," a euphemism for studying mystical lore. One died, one went insane, one become apostate, and only one – Akiva – came out whole. One explanation is that Akiva was more firmly grounded than the others in both Jewish tradition and in the real world. He was therefore able to remain whole – *tahor* – while the others, being less fully grounded, were rendered *tamei* – so spiritually vulnerable that they were in different ways destroyed by what they experienced.

## **2. Becoming Tamei**

As we noted earlier, there are different ways to become *tamei*. They can each leave us at a greater or lesser state of spiritual vulnerability, and what they all have in common is this is our time in a protected state. Depending on what makes us *tamei*, we can be spiritually vulnerable to a greater or lesser extent. The tradition takes this into account by varying the length of time we remain *tamei*.

### **Daily Tamei:**

Our daily lives can scatter our pieces; we traditionally wash and pray when we wake. This is a recognition of the scattered sense of sleep and dreaming. We want to collect our pieces before we face the day.

Since the destruction of the Temple, the home, and specifically the dining table, is seen as our altar, our "Temple in miniature."<sup>9</sup> So when we sit down to bless a meal and to eat, the Jewish tradition has us perform a ritual to move us from *tamei* to *tahor*, by saying a blessing, a short prayer acknowledging our gratitude.

### **In the Torah:**

The *Torah* describes acquiring *tamei* when coming into contact with the dead<sup>10</sup>, or performing rituals to serving others. Throughout the Torah, people such as the priests serving in the Temple, the person who took the goat to Azazel on Yom Kippur, the person who handles the ashes of the Red Heifer<sup>11</sup>, all these people, who are doing amazing work to facilitate other people's transitions, become *tamei* themselves until sundown; then they must wash; and only then can they return to the camp.

When we are performing sacred rituals, whether for someone else or for ourselves, we need to boundary ourselves before doing it, because we know that performing the ritual has the potential to move us toward *tamei*. *Tahor* is not the goal; *tahor* is the place where you have to be when you are attending to the spiritual needs of someone else, to protect both of you.

### **Seven-day Tamei:**

#### ***Nidah***

The very first *mitzvah* (commandment) in the Torah is *pru urvu*, be fruitful and multiply.<sup>12</sup> But those acts – engaging in sex and then actually giving birth – make us *tamei*,<sup>13</sup> spiritually vulnerable.

One broad category of being *tamei* is coming into contact with blood. This includes the understanding that blood represents life, the true nature of which is considered a mystery. Coming into contact with such an ultimate mystery can make us spiritually vulnerable.<sup>14</sup>

The primary enforcement of rules of *tamei* in our times is related to *Nidah*, the laws of menstruation, because of the menstruating woman's contact with blood. A menstruating woman is deemed *tamei* during her period, and for seven 'clean' days thereafter, a time known as *nidah*. While she is *nidah*, she and her husband must refrain from marital relations, or he, too, becomes *tamei*.<sup>15</sup> The mystery related to blood and life is so strong that it makes him spiritually vulnerable, too.

Many women have perceived these laws as oppressive, and the laws have been used as justification for restricting women's participation in such activities as synagogue leadership roles and reading from the Torah. Menstruation taboos appear in many cultures: in India, riots broke out after two women entered a Hindu temple to pray; and in Nepal, where women continue to die in unsafe menstrual huts - which are often just livestock sheds - despite a law banning their use.

It's not that a woman is 'unclean' during *nidah*, but that, in a sense, she is in touch with a higher mystery, a higher-than-usual level of sanctity, that of life and death. Being in that liminal space can make us spiritually vulnerable; so she is *tamei*, that is, in a protected state, for seven days after the flow of blood that put her there. There should be no hurry to return her to the usual level of boundaried self.

Much has been written about hormonal changes throughout the cycle. During menstruation it has been found that women have a profound creative spike, often accompanied by introspection. Christiane Northrup has suggested that this time is spiritually charged, as the 'veil' between the worlds of the seen and unseen/conscious and unconscious is much thinner.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever one's response to menstruation, it is a time of vulnerability, and *nidah* becomes a kind of protection. In the Gemara, Rabbi Zeira states that it was the women who increased the number of clean days prior to immersion and return to their 'regular' life. This suggests that the time away was perceived by women as a positive, productive time, not a punitive time.

Other women have reported experiencing "hormonal storms" at this time, which also create a sense of vulnerability.

Many women have noted that the greatest point of experienced vulnerability are the days just prior to the onset of bleeding. Since it is up to the individual woman to define when she becomes *tamei*, it is possible that the additional "clean days," added by the women noted in the Talmud, were to account for the prior days of separation.

Regardless of the cause of the vulnerability, the time in *tamei* provides sacred time to complete the work of restoring spiritual wholeness.

## Birth

Birth *tamei* is the ultimate experience of liminal space, of one becoming two. The need to sort out between one person now becoming two people is a time of spiritual vulnerability for the mother. Like coming into contact with blood, this seems to us to be coming into contact with one of life's ultimate mysteries.

Rather than the traditional thinking that mothers are being isolated because of uncleanness, we should look at it as her being put into protective care for an initial period of *nidah* that lasts seven days after the birth of a boy,<sup>17</sup> two weeks after the birth of a girl.<sup>18</sup> During this time she is spiritual vulnerable, and needs this time to reintegrate who she is and who this baby is.

### Additional Birth *Tamei* Time after the Birth of a Girl

In addition to the seven-day period of *nidah* after giving birth, there is an additional 33 days added after the birth of a boy; and 66 days after the birth of a girl.<sup>19</sup>

This has, of course, led to many ideas about why the time is doubled after birthing a girl than after birthing a boy. Some people who see *tamei* as meaning 'unclean' suggest that, in time, the baby girl will also menstruate, so the doubling of time is for the *tamei* to come.

Another idea is that this baby girl will grow up and she also has the potential to come into immediate contact with that ultimate mystery of giving birth; so doubling the number of days honors that *tamei* to come.

We prefer another explanation:

There is nothing more awe-inspiring than being one and then being two. You go from being one person to being two people, just like that! And it's not necessarily an easy transition. At a minimum, we put women in protective custody for their spiritual vulnerability for a period of forty days (in itself a significant biblical number, e.g., forty days of rain during Noah's flood<sup>20</sup>; forty days that Moses was on Mount Sinai<sup>21</sup>; forty years of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness<sup>22</sup>).

But in a time when men's and women's societies were quite separate, the boy child would grow up and go into the men's community. A girl child will remain part of her mother's society. So the extra 33 days that the mother has with the girl child is to help create the *tahor* of individuating that girl child; it is very easy for women to have blurred boundaries with their mothers!

So the fact that the 80 days that the mother of a newborn girl is not punitive. It's about something that used to be a part of her that is now itself, its own person, and who will eventually individuate from her completely is one of the most powerful pieces of life.

There is an old saying that "A son is a son 'til he takes a wife, but a daughter is a daughter for the rest of your life." It is easier for a mother to see a son as 'other,' there are obvious differences.

It is harder for a mother to see a daughter as 'other.' It's also easier for mothers to reflect themselves onto female children. Having more time to establish, and to get to know this person: by 73 days, a baby starts to show who they are, they start to show their own personalities, and maybe that's what's important for creating the next generation of people, is that they can individuate and be who they are. To find their own *tahor!*

### **Performing *taharah***

As previously noted, coming into contact with death – one of life's ultimate mysteries – makes us *tamei*. This obviously affects those members of a Jewish community who are also members of *Chevrah Kadisha*, the 'Holy Society' who care for the body of the deceased. This mostly takes the form of performing the ritual of *taharah*, washing and cleaning the body of the deceased, and dressing the body in shrouds, before placing the body in a casket for burial.

During the *taharah*, as a person is departing this world, we prepare the body such that only what was created by God goes on. We remove dirt, makeup, nail polish, jewelry, etc.

We go to great lengths to put all their pieces together to send them on as a whole. What we are trying to do during *taharah* is to help the soul of the *met/metah* (deceased man/woman) recognize the wholeness of their soul, even if the body is not completely whole. The physical body may have remnants of incompleteness, or not wholeness; we send any blood, hair or other physical remnants with the body.

In other words, we send on the physical remains with all of that person that we are able to send; but with **only** that person, nothing more.

But while seeing to the physical *taharah* of the *met/metah*, the people who are performing the *taharah* ritual become, themselves, *tamei* – spiritually vulnerable; and that's not a bad thing, it's a very open place to be. But as we explain to people who are new to the work, it is very important that, for a week after participating in a *taharah*, we are spiritually vulnerable and need to take care of ourselves. Having been in close contact with death, even the simple task of driving home from the *taharah* becomes something to which we must pay more than usual attention!

After each *taharah*, members of the team have an opportunity to process the experience. Every *taharah* is unique and every *chevrah* member is unique. By providing safe space to share whatever was experienced, each member is able to recognize and honor their experience.

We always try to introduce the deceased to the *Chevrah Kadisha* volunteers involved in their care. We are a small community and often know the *met/metah* well. But we are also a travel and retirement destination and find ourselves caring for strangers. We invite families to bring photos or stories to introduce their loved ones to us. This situation has resulted in some interesting stories.

In the weeks after the 9/11 attack, we had a need for a man's *taharah* team. Until that moment, all previous *taharot* in our community had been for women, so our *Chevrah* had no trained or experienced men. I called all the men in our community that I thought might be willing to take part in a *taharah*. I had to leave many messages on voice mail; others, who answered their phones, thought the idea of caring for a *met*, especially in that post-9/11 period, was not for them. I finally located five men willing to participate. The *taharah* was scheduled for that afternoon.

At that point, my phone began to ring. All of those for whom I had left messages wanted to participate; and all those who had declined had reconsidered and wanted to participate. Eighteen men arrived to complete a *taharah* for someone they did not know. The room we use for *taharah* can hold, at most, six people, so I asked some of the men to wait for another opportunity; but none of them would leave!

Since none of them had experience in performing a *taharah*, I offered to sit with my back to the room and guide them through it. They asked if a woman is usually present for a men's *taharah*, and, when I said no, they insisted on "doing it right." They spent time going over the instructions, then performed the *taharah* on their own.

After the *taharah* they stayed to process the experience. Their responses were interesting. They identified that prior to participating in the *taharah* they felt vulnerable and helpless. After some consideration, they all wanted to help bury this man properly. It was important that, at this time when so many would never be able to be identified and buried, they were able to provide a proper Jewish burial for the man they did not know. Participating in this particular *taharah* actually helped them move away from the *tamei* of a national crisis.

Another situation involved a woman who was traveling through our community when she suffered a fatal stroke. The family contacted the local funeral home and requested a traditional

Jewish preparation. The family would not arrive until the next day and we had no available information on the woman.

One of our regular *shomerets*, who was present during the late-night shift, reported she was very surprised to find herself singing show tunes throughout her shift. This woman has a long-standing practice of reciting psalms through her shift. She was not a singer and did not know show tunes, yet for two hours she sang Broadway show tunes from very old shows.

Later that morning, the family arrived with photos and stories. The photos were 60 years old and showed a young woman on stage in wonderful Broadway costumes. She was in the chorus line! This woman's unexpected death left her to complete her life review with a sensitive stranger available to assist her in her journey.

It is important to share and validate these kinds of experiences, to support this holy work. These experiences are part of what makes the work so life-affirming, but they also leave us vulnerable.

It was a great feeling when, after only a very few *taharot* in Fort Collins, someone other than the leader of the *taharah* crew told a newcomer during the debriefing, "By the way, you're spiritually vulnerable now. Please drive carefully, please give yourself extra time, please take care of yourself." The speaker, who may have only done one *taharah* before this one, had integrated it into themselves, and created an awareness of how to move back toward *tahor* and was able to pass that on.

The tradition teaches that, when we perform a *taharah*, we are doing *chesed shel emet*, a true act of loving kindness for the *met/metah*. Many members of *Chevrah Kadisha* feel that they are the recipients of such an act on the part of the *met/metah*, who is allowing us to enter their space to help them on their way. It is intimate moments like this where we truly experience life – but when we open ourselves to the experience, we make ourselves *tamei*. We need to be mindful of that.

While it would be nice if we all walked around in our total and complete boundaried selves all the time, it would not necessarily make for a better life. These periodic boundary crossings and that touching of the divine are all things that make us human.

### **Modern Helping Professionals**

Members of the *Chevrah Kadisha* who perform *taharah*, like the priests in the Temple, are involved in holy work of transitions, helping people move towards *tahor* includes allowing oneself to take on *tamei*. This process is analogous to what happens in helping professions

today, such as medical professionals, first responders, social workers, clergy and teachers, to name a few. In each instance, these professionals need to maintain their own boundaries, while helping others through transitions. Much has been written about the need to maintain professional boundaries, but much less about personal recovery from the secondary trauma experienced by these professionals.

Our culture is just beginning to understand the danger of secondary trauma and compassion fatigue. Professional training has started teaching about the importance of self-care. Understanding *tahor/tamei* provides a whole new level of understanding to the situation. When professionals don't understand their own vulnerability, we have a situation ripe for abuse and damage to those who should be helped.

Ideally, as professionals are able to identify their level of *tamei*, they will also develop tools for processing and addressing their vulnerability.

### **3. Protecting the *Tamei* person, and returning toward *Tahor***

Very early on, Judaism created ways of taking care of people are in a state of spiritual vulnerability.

The *Torah* teaches that someone who is in a state of *tamei* is temporarily ineligible to participate in the Temple rituals. The traditional understanding of why they were ineligible was that they were somehow ‘impure’ or ‘unclean,’ and therefore they should not enter the sacred precincts of the Temple.

Our understanding, that *tamei* means temporarily spiritually vulnerable, changes that perspective. The person in that state is actually, for a limited time, being protected from the effects of the strong spiritual encounter they are likely to have in the Temple, when they have already been made vulnerable by a previous experience.

There are different timelines for *tamei*: daily, overnight, seven days, forty days, seventy-three days. What they all have in common is time in a protected state.

There are two ways to be protected: you can be protected by moving toward the *tahor* end of the scale, because when you are *tahor* and boundaried, you are protected by your boundaries; and when you are at the far *tamei* end of the scale, you are protected by ritual, because, as in the Torah, the ritual says you are to go outside the camp, and you are freed from your usual responsibilities.

In the Torah, there seems to be an urgency to get out of the state of *tamei* as soon as possible. The truth is, you can’t leave it right away, because according to the Torah you are going to be there, in many cases, for seven days or longer. It’s not that we don’t want to be there, it’s that we don’t want to stay there. Being aware that you have had this high moment, in order to be safe you need to be regrounded before returning to the world of *tahor*.

Sometimes we welcome staying in a state of *tamei* for a while, because there may be unfinished business, or we want to continue learning, or we want to continue giving. At other times, we may want to just go and do our transitional ritual and move on. You can’t hurry it; it is important to recognize that every one of these different kinds of *tamei* has its own timetable.

Transitional rituals are symbolic acts that note a change in status or circumstance. It is not the ritual itself that confers the new status. For example, it is not a *brit milah*, a ritual circumcision of a Jewish baby boy, or a naming ceremony for a girl, that makes them Jews, it is the fact of being born to a Jewish mother. It is not a *bat mitzvah* ceremony in a synagogue with a

rabbi that makes Jewish girl an adult, or such a *bar mitzvah* ceremony for a Jewish boy that makes him an adult; it is when she reaches the age of twelve, and when he reaches the age of thirteen, whether a ceremony is held or not.

The rituals are not themselves important. It's the mindfulness of performing the ritual as marking the transition that is important.

In the Jewish tradition, water rituals are very common. Probably the best known is the *mikveh*, the immersion pool that is used as a transitional ritual for women at the end of a monthly *nidah*, for people converting to Judaism, and for other uses.

As anyone who has immersed in a *mikveh* knows, it isn't for physical cleanliness. Before entering the pool, we shower, wash our hair, clean our nails. We don't wear makeup, jewelry, hair pins, nail polish, or anything else that isn't us, the way we were created. We immerse entirely under the water, including our hair; and with our feet off the floor of the pool, assuming a fetal position. It is like returning to the waters of birth and coming out new.

The *Chevrah Kadisha* in Fort Collins offers to pay for an immersion in a *mikveh* for everyone who participates in performing a *taharah*. Although not everyone takes advantage of that offer, for many years a group of *Chevrah* members has gone together to a *mikveh* during the Ten Days of Repentance between *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, to be able to be more present, more fully themselves, for the prayers of the Day of Atonement.

A traditional *mikveh* is not always available or necessary. Even when a *mikveh* is available, the feeling of *tamei* might require a washing of hands, to provide the transitional ritual to move from *tamei* back toward *tahor*.

Transitional rituals can be useful in other circumstances, such as simply experiencing an "Ahah! moment," loss, growth, or a spiritual experience, that open us up to our surroundings, to nature or the presence of God.

People who work in hospitals or as first-responders are often confronted with trauma and some pretty horrendous situations. While dealing with those situations, they must remain boundaried and focused while assisting patients; but they will nonetheless be impacted by the experience. It is important that they have a way to recognize that impact, and to move back toward *tahor*, so that they can care for the next patient. It's impossible to deal with such situations that don't take pieces of us and leave pieces on us.

One of the importance things about transitional rituals for returning from *tamei* toward *tahor* is to recognize what your Self looks like, so that you recognize when you are missing

something, or when you are carrying something extra. Then the ritual that you find that best helps you to return to wholeness is going to be the ritual that works for you.

After any of these kinds of experiences that can make us *tamei* – vulnerable – we may need time to integrate that. We may not have these experiences every day, so we need to have a mechanism to help us recognize them, and then heal, integrate the new learning, and move on. The mechanism – the transitional ritual – gives us a way to talk about how we deal with such moments, our own moments of vulnerability that open us to an expansive new knowledge; and once we have integrated that experience, transitioning back toward *tahor* so we can move on with our daily lives.

In the words of Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfeld, “After the ecstasy, the laundry.”

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Lev. 12:4

<sup>2</sup> Exod. 25:11, 25:17, 25:24, 25:29, 25:31, 25:36, 25:38, 25:39, 28:14, 28:22, 28:36, 30:3, 37:2, 37:6, 37:11, 37:16, 37:17, 37:22, 37:23, 37:24, 37:26, 39:15, 39:25, 39:30.

<sup>3</sup> Exod. 30:36

<sup>4</sup> Exod. 37:29

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 2:18

<sup>6</sup> Prov. 1:2

<sup>7</sup> Mishna Avot 2:16

<sup>8</sup> Lev. 21:16-23

<sup>9</sup> See Ezek. 11:16, 41:22; Talmud Bavli *Megilla* 29a

<sup>10</sup> Num. 19:11

<sup>11</sup> Num. 19:7

<sup>12</sup> Gen. 1:28

<sup>13</sup> Lev. 12:2-5

<sup>14</sup> Deut. 12:23

<sup>15</sup> Lev. 15:24

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.drnorthrup.com/wisdom-of-menstrual-cycle/>

<sup>17</sup> Lev. 12:2

<sup>18</sup> Lev. 12:5

<sup>19</sup> Lev. 12:2, 5

<sup>20</sup> Gen. 7:17

<sup>21</sup> Exod. 24:12

<sup>22</sup> Deut. 8:2