

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [336]

Once, [Human] Bones Were Found in the Chamber of the Woodshed

Babylonian Talmud Zevaḥim 113a



Background to Our Story (What you need to know to better understand the story)

Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Bava Metzia Volume I. Koren Publishers. Jerusalem. Page 55

This *tanna*, often referred to simply as Rabbi Yehoshua, lived in the generation following the destruction of the Temple. He had been one of the Levite singers in the Temple and he married the daughter of a priest. While in Jerusalem he studied under Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, and he even aided Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai's famed escape from the siege of Jerusalem. After the Sanhedrin was reestablished in Yavne, Rabbi Yehoshua became one of the most prominent members there. Later, he moved to Peki'in, where he established his own study hall. Rabbi Yehoshua was well-known for his sharp mind as well as for his great modesty. There are many stories told of his encounters with a Roman emperor, apparently Hadrian, as well as with the sages of other nations.

Introduction to the Jewish Rules of Purity and Impurity

By Rabbi Ephraim Diamond

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The Hebrew Bible and Talmud both deal extensively with states of impurity and purity — *tumah* and *taharah* — that can affect both objects and people. Although sometimes translated as "unclean" and "clean" this is not about dirt, and often it has no moral valence. Rather, the terms connote a sense of ritual fitness or unfitness for various purposes. In this article, we offer an orientation to the complex rabbinic system of *tumah* and *taharah*.

There are six distinct aspects to *tumah* and *taharah*. First is the source of *tumah*. Second, the severity of *tumah*. Third, its modes of transmission. Fourth, the susceptibility of a person or item to becoming *tamei* (impure). Fifth, a person or item's sensitivity to *tumah*. Sixth, purification rituals that can reverse impurity.

The rules are complex and the exceptions more so. Seder Toharot, the sixth and final order of the Talmud, generally concerns itself with these issues. Below is a brief introduction to these topics.

Sources of Tumah

The Torah describes a number of sources of tumah which can be broken down into two basic categories.

The first, are external sources of tumah, such as humans (tumat meit) and certain animals (n'veila) and rodents (sheretz) that have died. These items are by their very nature tamei and coming in contact with them will make a person tamei.

The second category are situations where the person internally, due to a change in his own body, becomes tamei (i.e., the tumah flows from the person himself). Examples of this include, a zav (a man with abnormal discharge), zavah (a woman with abnormal discharge or a niddah — a menstruant), yoledet (one who has recently given birth) and a metzora. These persons have the power to transmit tumah as well.

Severity of Tumah

Not each source of tumah is created equal.

A corpse is the highest level of tumah and is called an avi avot hatumah (the "father of the father of impurity" — the ultimate source of tumah). Its severity is most notable in the way it transmits tumah and its purification ritual (i.e., sprinkling of the mei chatat — spring water mixed with ashes of the Red Heifer). Most other sources of tumah are called avot hatumah ("father of impurity"). Their severity can be seen by the fact that certain fluids that emanate from their bodies (e.g., saliva) are avot hatumah as well.

Importantly, as tumah is transmitted from one person or item to another, it typically steps down a level of severity. Therefore, if an av hatumah touches a person or item, the person will become a rishon (first derivative). A rishon will create a sheini (second derivative). A sheini will create a shlishi (third derivative). A shlishi will create a revi'I (fourth derivative).

There are, however, certain exceptions to the step down in severity paradigm. First, in certain instances the transmitted level of tumah remains the same, i.e., an av hatumah will make the recipient an av hatumah as well (for example, the cushion on which a zav sits — which likely absorbs some of the flux — will likewise be an av hatumah capable of transmitting tumah). Second, certain avot have the power, so long as they remain in direct contact with a person, to turn that person temporarily into an av hatumah as well. Finally, the sages decreed that liquids, even when touched by a sheini (someone with second degree impurity), will always become a rishon, with the capabilities of even making vessels impure.

Modes of Transmission

The most typical mode of transmission is via touch. If an av hatumah touches a person, that person will become a rishon (first derivative). If that person then touches an apple, the apple will become a sheini (second derivative). Similarly, if a person wearing a glove touches a sheretz (which is an av hatumah) the glove will be a rishon and the person will remain pure.

In addition to direct touch, a corpse's tumah spreads via tumat ohel — literally, "tent impurity," impurity that is contracted by sharing the same space — in one of three ways (i) by being under the same roof as the corpse, (ii) the corpse hovering over a person or (iii) a person hovering over the corpse. In the case of being under the same roof, everything in the house will become tamei. The one main exception are earthenware pots (klei cheres). These cannot become tamei via touch on the outside; rather only by their interior space being exposed to tumah (therefore, if a pot remains lidded and sealed in a house that has a corpse in it, both the vessel and its contents will remain tahor).

A zav, zavah, yoledet and metzora can also transmit tumah via leaning on an item, carrying (even without touching) an item or being carried by an item or person. These laws are very complex and can be found in the final chapter of Tractate Zavim.

Susceptibility to Becoming Tamei

There are differences in susceptibility between a person, their utensils, and their food. People and most non-food items are susceptible to tumah at any time. No preconditions exist. A vessel, however, will only become susceptible to tumah when it is close to its finished state (i.e., a piece of wood which has not yet been shaped into a bowl is not susceptible to tumah).

Food's susceptibility to tumah is far more complex. The rabbis learned that prior to becoming susceptible to tumah, food must have become consciously wet (i.e., washed with water or other liquid). In the language of the Mishnah, *huchshar l'kabel tumah*. Therefore, if after picking an apple off the tree you guard it from ever becoming wet, that apple is not capable of becoming tamei.

Sensitivity to Tumah

Sensitivity to tumah is influenced by both the type of item and its intended purpose. At its most basic level, tumah will not extend beyond a *rishon* (first derivative) and in rare occasions a *sheini* (second derivative). So, for instance, a person and *keilim* (utensils), can only become tamei from an *avi avot* or an *av hatumah* so that they will become, at worst, a *rishon*. There is no *sheini l'tumah* for a person. (A utensil can under certain circumstances become a *sheini* if touched by a liquid *rishon*.)

Foods are more sensitive to tumah and can become a *sheini*. Liquids, being even more sensitive, per the sages, will always remain a *rishon*.

The above rules are for *hullin*, non-consecrated food. However, the sages identified a number of levels of sanctified foods and liquids that, given their levels of holiness, are more sensitive to tumah — and hence, more susceptible as well. These levels are as follows:

- **Ma'aser Sheini** (the second tithe). It was brought to Jerusalem and was to be eaten in a state of *taharah*.
- **Terumah**: The portion of the crop given to the priests. It could only be eaten by the priest and his family. Its holiness level made it susceptible of becoming a *shlishi* (third derivative).
- **Kodshim**: sacrificial meat and bread. Its holiness level made it susceptible of becoming a *revi'i* (fourth derivative).
- **Mei Chatat**: at its core, the heightened level of holiness and its sensitivity to tumah gave the waters of the red heifer purification ritual no limit to level of tumah to which it was susceptible. In other words, so long as there was somewhere in the chain some very low level of tumah, it gets passed along as if it were a severe tumah — despoiling the *mei chatat*.

The corollary to this sensitivity to tumah is the requirement that a person likewise take more focused and, at times, stringent, measures when purifying himself prior to consuming and/or handling each successive level of consecrated food. What works to ensure purity for *terumah* may not work for *kodshim*. As you move up each level in purity, it demands more scrutiny in the chain in purity.

Purification Rituals

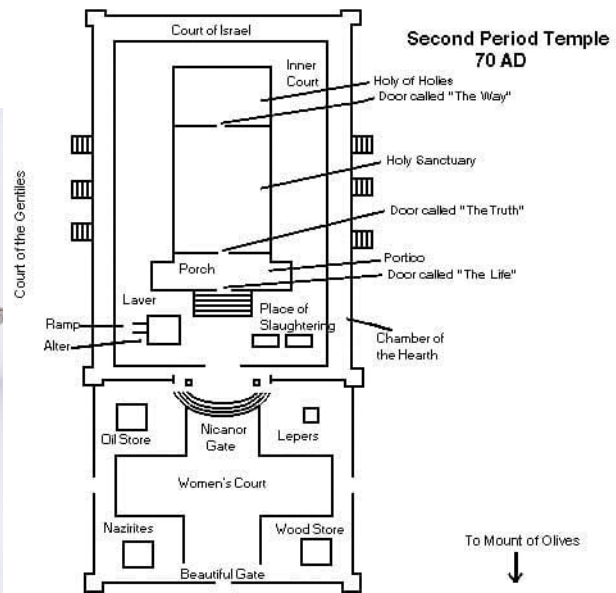
Once impure, a person and/or most items will remain in that state until they undergo a purification ritual. These diverse rituals will depend on the source and level of tumah trying to be cleansed. The most typical form of purification ritual is submerging oneself or the item in a *mikveh*. This works for most situations. For some forms of tumah, rather than a *mikveh*, the source of water must be a flowing spring of water. Finally, cleansing *tumat meat* —

impurity via contact with a corpse — requires, in addition to submersion in a mikveh, the sprinkling the mei chatat on the person or item.

Notably, earthenware vessels cannot be cleansed of tumah except by shattering the vessel. In addition, food cannot be cleansed in any instance.

Chamber of the Woodshed

In the Chamber of the Woodshed, wood was inspected and selected for the altar.



Mishnah Middot 2:5

The courtyard of the women...In the four corners of the court there were keturot courts” (Ezekiel 46:21-22) and keturot means that they were not roofed. For what were they used? The southeastern one was the chamber of the Nazirites where the Nazirites used to boil their shelamim and shave their hair and throw it under the pot. The northeastern one was the wood chamber where priests with physical defects used to pick out the wood which had worms, every piece with a worm in it being unfit for use on the altar. The northwestern one was the chamber of those with skin disease. The southwestern one: Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob said: I forget what it was used for. Abba Shaul says: they used to store there wine and oil, and it was called the chamber of oil....

The Text Babylonian Talmud Zevahim 113a

אָחַד מֵצֵאוּ עֲצָמוֹת בְּלִשְׁפֵת דֵּיר הָעֵצִים וּבְקִשּׁוֹ לְגָזוֹר טוּמְאָה עַל יְרוּשָׁלַיִם.
עָמַד רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ עַל רִגְלָיו וְאָמַר: לֹא בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלִימָה הִיא לָנוּ שֶׁנִּגְזָר טוּמְאָה עַל עִיר אֲבוֹתֵינוּ? אֵיךְ מֵתִי מִבּוֹל, אֵיךְ מֵתִי נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר?

Once, human bones were found in the Chamber of the Woodshed, and the Sages sought to decree impurity upon the entire City of Jerusalem, i.e., to proclaim all who go there to be impure, as if a corpse can be found in a chamber of the Temple there is reason to be concerned that there are lost graves in other places as well.

Rabbi Yehoshua stood upon his feet and said: Is it not a shame and disgrace for us to decree impurity upon the city of our fathers? Show me: Where are the dead of the flood, and where are all the dead killed by Nebuchadnezzar?



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? What do we know about the human bones found in the Chamber of the Woodshed?

? Why did the Sages seek to decree impurity upon Jerusalem?

? What is “problematic” about impurity being decreed upon Jerusalem?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? What are Rabbi Yehoshua’s two arguments against decreeing impurity upon Jerusalem?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? Why isn’t Rabbi Yehoshua’s first argument strong enough?

Bonus ? What does Rabbi Yehoshua’s second argument come to add?

Extra Bonus ? Our short story tells us that before Rabbi Yehoshua made his arguments, he “stood upon his feet.” What is this seemingly superfluous detail come to add?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.

! How to prevent a molehill from becoming a mountain, or a few bones from becoming a “dead” city.



When human bones were found at the Chamber of the Woodshed, Rabbi Yehoshua understood that the centrality of Jerusalem in the lives of the Jewish people was at stake. If the entire city of Jerusalem were to be declared impure, the entire sacrificial system, pilgrimage journeys, and Temple structure, would be automatically obsolete, erasing de-facto the uniqueness of Jerusalem.

Being proactive, and using the authority of his position, Rabbi Yehoshua made a passionate plea in favor of the exceptional status of Jerusalem and against the measure proposed by the Sages. Then, understanding that you cannot win a legal argument by arousing strong feelings alone, he logically disarmed the argument of the Sages.

Our short story showcased a passionate Rabbi Yehoshua, who, using his leadership skills, prevented a molehill from becoming a mountain, or more concretely a few bones from becoming a "dead" city.

Appendix

Mishna Eduyot 8:5

...העיד רבי יהושע על עצמות שנמצאו בדיר העצים, אמרו חכמים, מלקט עצם ועצם והכל טהור:

... Rabbi Yehoshua testified concerning bones found in the woodshed that the Sages said: one may gather them, bone by bone, and everything is ritually pure.

Commentary by Rabbi Joshua Kulp

Rabbi Yehoshua testifies that the bones of a human were found in the woodshed in the Temple in Jerusalem, and that the Sages said that they could gather up the bones and bring them out of the Temple, without fearing that the bones had come into contact with other things in the Temple and impurified them. This is because the Temple is public-domain and all cases of doubtful impurity in the public domain are deemed pure.

? Rabbi Yehoshua testified...How is a testimony stronger than a teaching?

Tosefta Eduyot 3:3

...אמר ר"ש בן עזאי אמר להן רבי מעשה שנמצאו עצמות בירושלים בדירת עצים ובקשו חכמים לטמא את ירושלים כולה אמר להם ר' יהושע בושא וכלימה הוא לנו שנטמא את בתינו איה מתי מבול איה הרוגי נבוכדנצר איה ההרוגים שנהרגו מן המלחמה ועד עכשיו אלא אמרו ודאי טמא ספק טהור...

...Rabbi Shimon ben Azzai said to them, a ma'aseh in which bones were found in Jerusalem in the woodshed and the Sages wanted to deem the whole of Jerusalem impure. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them, a shame and a disgrace it would be for us to declare our house impure. Where are the dead of the [great] flood? Where are the dead of Nebuchadnezzar? Where are the dead that died in war up until now? They have said, if it is definite, it is impure. [If there is] a doubt, it is pure...

Extra Bonus **?** Rabbi Yehoshua features as the main character in both tannaitic texts (the Mishna and the Tosefta). Both texts are from the same time, hence, we don't know which one originated first (scholars disagree on this topic). Which text do you think originated first? Why?

? Assuming the story in the Tosefta happened first, why was it necessary for Rabbi Yehoshua to present his testimony (in the Mishna)?

? If we assume Rabbi Yehoshua's testimony (in the Mishna) happened first, why was it necessary Rabbi Yehoshua's strong argument in the Tosefta?