



Starting next week, the newsletter will be on a
summer hiatus for several weeks.

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From the Chabura
By: Adam Friedmann

Can Impurity Silence the Shema?

The final halacha in the Rambam's *Hilchot Keriat Shema* deals with the question of whether people who are impure can read the Shema.

The Rambam first states:

All those who are ritually impure are obligated to read the Shema and recite the blessings before and after it in their impure state. This applies even when it is possible for them to purify themselves that day. (Moznaim translation, amended)

He then goes on to discuss the special case of a man who has seen an emission:

Ezra and his colleagues decreed that a man who had seen an emission was forbidden to read the words of the Torah. Thus, they separated him from the other ritually impure until he immersed himself in a *mikveh*. This ordinance was not universally accepted among the Jewish people. Most were unable to observe it and it was therefore negated.

Finally, the Rambam concludes:

The Jewish people accepted the custom of reading the Torah and reciting the *Shema* even after seeing an emission, because the words of Torah cannot contract ritual impurity. Rather, they stand in their state of purity forever. (Moznaim translation, amended)

There are some questions to ask about the Rambam's formulation. The first section declares that impurity is not a limitation on reading the Shema. The Rambam emphasizes that even if a person *could* become pure and still read the Shema that day, they don't need to. Why would we have thought that an impure person is limited from reading the Shema in the first place?

The Rambam continues this line of argument in the last section. Ezra's decree was negated because of the halachic criteria that the Rambam mentions. Namely, that it didn't spread and was difficult for people to accept. Once this occurred there was presumably no limitation for reading the Shema after seeing an emission. But in his final section, the Rambam makes a quasi-philosophical argument about the purity status of words of Torah. Why is this necessary? Was there some other reason that compelled people to refrain from the Shema after seeing an emission?

We see the Rambam use similar language and arguments in other places. Our halacha has a sister

passage in *Hilchot Tefila* (4:4). There, the Rambam discusses impurity and seeing emissions in the context of prayer. Once again the Rambam is emphatic that impurity in no way limits prayer. He argues at length that Ezra's decree had nothing to do with impurity. Rather, it was a way to prevent *talmidei chachamim* from being overly promiscuous.

In the *Sefer Hamitzvot* (*Aseh* 109), the Rambam again argues that the Torah's prescription of becoming pure by immersing in water is not an obligation per se. The Torah is only teaching us that *when* one wishes to become pure, there is a specific way to do so. But a person can choose to remain impure as long as they want. This is, of course, unless they want to do something that requires purity, such as enter the *Mikdash*.

The Rambam seems to be engaged in a polemic against the view that impurity is somehow damaging or limiting in a spiritual sense. We might have thought that this limitation would prevent someone who is impure from reading the Shema, learning Torah, and praying. We might also have thought that there is therefore an active obligation to become pure. The Rambam argues that this is not the case. But where does this view come from? Let's review a few potential sources.

The Tosefta (*Yadayim* 2:9) and the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Berachot* 3:4) mention a group of people called the *Tovlei Shacharin* (those who immerse in a *mikva* each morning). Evidently, they felt it was important to be pure before praying or learning Torah. In both passages, Chazal (in one case identified as "The Pharisees") chastise the *Tovlei Shacharin* and indicate that their practice is meaningless.

In kabbalistic literature, impurity is dangerous. According to the *Zohar* (part 1, 184:2) one of the reasons we wash our hands right after waking up is because the remnants of a spirit of impurity (*ruach ra'ah*) remain in a person's hands after waking up. This can be dangerous, which is why the Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 4:3) rules that a person shouldn't touch their mouth, nose, or eyes before washing their hands (see *Mishna Berura*, *ibid.*, 11).

The Gemara (*Berachot* 22a) records a story of Rabbi Yehuda ben Beteira. One day, he heard one of his students stuttering his words as he was learning. Rabbi Yehuda understood that the student felt compelled to do this because he had seen an emission. He tells the student to open their mouth wide and speak normally because "words of Torah cannot become impure". This is the source for the Rambam's final section. The Gemara uses this story as proof that Rabbi Yehuda believed that Ezra's decree had been nullified. But this doesn't seem to be the main point of contention in the story. The student clearly feels inhibited or somehow damaged by his impurity. Rabbi Yehuda convinces him that there is nothing to fear. Words of Torah cannot be affected by impurity.

These sources indicate exactly the kind of perspective the Rambam seems to be arguing against. The idea of impurity as something debasing or dangerous has deep roots in human psychology. According to the Rambam, the Torah has a different perspective. At least when it comes to our personal daily service of Hashem, there is no force of impurity that can or should hold us back.

This marks the end of our study of *Hilchot Keriat Shema*!

ברוך רחמנא דסייען

Mishnah: A Philosophy of Life

By: Dovid Campbell

Peah 1:2 — Smart Chesed

The Mishnah in *Peah* 1:2 addresses the laws of agricultural charity—specifically, the mitzvah of *peah*, leaving a corner of one’s field for the poor. While the previous mishnah famously declares that *peah* has no set measure, our mishnah records a rabbinic minimum: “One should not set aside less than one-sixtieth.” This may seem paradoxical—how can something that “has no measure” also have a minimum? But this very tension reveals the Mishnah’s deep concern with human psychology and the ethical demands of effective generosity.

Bartenura explains the contradiction by distinguishing between Torah law and rabbinic enactment. Biblically, *peah* has no defined limit. Yet the rabbis, aware of the temptation to “do the minimum,” instituted a floor—*miderabanan*, a person should not give less than one-sixtieth. This is an act of moral scaffolding. The Torah left the law open-ended to cultivate generosity and individual conscience. But the rabbis, wary of self-serving interpretations, imposed a baseline to prevent stinginess masquerading as piety.

But the mishnah does not stop there. It insists that even this minimum is not universally sufficient. “Everything depends on the size of the field, the number of poor, and the *anavah*.” Bartenura unpacks these criteria in turn. A large field, even with few poor people nearby, may require more than one-sixtieth simply because of its abundance. A small field in a densely poor area may also require more, due to urgent need. And then comes the enigmatic third factor: *anavah*.

Here, Bartenura records several textual variants and interpretations. Some read it with a *vav*—*anavah*, meaning humility or modesty. A humble person, says this version, will naturally want to give more. This aligns beautifully with the idea that true generosity flows from internal refinement; *chesed* is not just action, but character.

Rambam, however, reads the word as *aniyah*—the responsiveness of the land itself. That is, how fertile is the field? How much did it yield? Giving must be calibrated not just to external need, but also to the giver’s capacity.

A third reading—*anavah* with a *bet*—refers to the nature of the produce. If some areas of the field yielded plump stalks while others yielded withered grain, one should not only leave the *peah* from the worst portions. Smart *chesed* is not just about giving; it’s about *how* and *what* one gives.

The Mishnah, then, is not a dry legal guideline. It is a manual in ethical discernment. Charity is not fulfilled by technical compliance, but by attunement to human need, social context, and personal character. The rabbis emerge as both guardians of Torah law and students of human nature—crafting halacha not just to regulate behavior, but to refine it. In doing so, they offer us our model of smart *chesed*—compassion governed by wisdom.

Sforno on the Parsha By: Nochum Spiegel

Peace Out

Maintaining the balance of an ecosystem is a difficult endeavor. Whether in the natural world or the social order, discrepancies in the equilibrium will lead to confusion and disarray. The introduction of foreign elements intent on challenging the existing hierarchy will result in utter breakdown. The social fabric is fragile and a subtle but well planned sedition can have devastating results. Our *parsha* highlights Korach's machinations against the G-d appointed authority of Moshe Rabbeinu.

The commentaries to the beginning of our parsha contend with several issues. (1) There are several individuals and groups mentioned along with Korach, what was their role in his plan? (2) Something is being taken (*vayikach*) by Korach, who or what is that a reference to? (3) Is there any thematic connection with *parshattzitzit*, the passage in the *Torah* immediately preceding the events of Korach?

Sforno explains (*Peirush Bamidbar* 16:1-7, *Amar Hagaon*) Korach's strategy as follows. Moshe, as part of his daily routine, would be holding court, available to the people of Israel for teaching and judgments. Korach "took" two hundred and fifty highly respected princes of Israel who were part of his group, and had them appear before Moshe, joining the crowd before Korach arrived. It would seem to others that their intentions were solely to learn from Moshe as befitting those of such stature, none would suspect them of ulterior motives. Now as Moshe is teaching, surrounded by a multitude of people; Korach, Dasan and Aviram arrive for the confrontation. This is the opportune time to spread their message of dissent and gather further supporters. The two hundred and fifty princes are present and in place, a common person will look to their reaction for guidance on who to support. He will think that they too are impartial, innocent bystanders, with no skin in the game, and that their support of Korach's position is purely *l'shem shamayim*. Korach's claim that each individual member of the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* is holy is based on *parshat tzitzit* which states, "so you shall remember and do all My commandments, and you shall be **holy to your God**" (*Bamidbar* 15:40). No distinctions are made between Jews, Moshe and the *Kohanim* ascendancy over the others is unjust and not the product of *Hashem's* command.

Moshe is wise to the plot and responds to Korach and his assembly (*edah*) (*Bamidbar* 16:5). He realizes there is a pre-planned group here, not just some individuals trying to garner support. He calls them all out, "you come before me as ones motivated by the fear of heaven seeking to enhance the spiritual service of the people. Tomorrow, Hashem will publicly show which of us He chooses to serve Him, and who is truly motivated by pure intentions. Those not chosen will not be saved". At this stage Moshe seeks a remedy, the time delay and severe warning were intended to arouse them to teshuva before it is too late, because ultimately Hashem does not desire man's death.

Our social interactions are delicate and vulnerable. Much effort must be invested in nurturing relationships and not allowing ego and conflict to rupture the desired peace.