



Parashat Para 5768
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On Shabbat Para we read the prophecy of Yechezkel which speaks of the spiritual rejuvenation that *Am Yisrael* will experience at the time of the final redemption. God declares:

I shall take you from among the nations and gather you from all the lands, and I shall bring you to your land. I shall cast purifying waters upon you, and you shall be purified; I shall purify you from all your impurities and filth. I shall give you a new heart, and I shall place a new spirit within you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your flesh, and give you a heart of flesh. I shall place My spirit within you, and I shall act such that you follow My statutes and observe and perform My laws.

(Yechezkel 36:24-27)

Maimonides makes reference to these verses in the final passage of *Hilkhot Mikva'ot* (11:12), where he notes how the prophet here alludes to the symbolism latent within the halakhic concept of ritual purity:

It is clear and obvious that the impurities and purities are Scriptural decrees and are not matters that a person's mind could decide; they are thus under the category of *chukim* [statutes whose underlying reasoning eludes human comprehension]. Similarly, immersion from impurities is among the *chukim*, for impurity is not mud or filth that can be removed with water. It is rather a Scriptural decree and hinges upon the intent of one's mind... Nevertheless, there is an allusion contained in this matter: Just as when one's mind intends to be purified he is purified once he immerses, even though nothing new happened to his body, similarly, if one's mind intends to purify his soul from the spiritual impurities – namely, evil thoughts and bad character traits – once he resolves in his mind to separate from those ideas and brings himself in the waters of knowledge – he is purified. It thus says, "I shall cast purifying waters upon you, and you shall be purified."

The prophet employs the image of "purifying waters" eliminating a person's status of impurity as an allegorical description of *Am Yisrael's* eventual change of heart and newfound devotion to God. As Maimonides explains, this allegory sheds light on the general symbolic meaning of immersion. Namely, a person "cleanses" himself, meaning, he purges himself of inappropriate thoughts and conduct, by "immersing" in what Maimonides calls "the waters of knowledge." Through intensive study, a person learns the appropriate way to think and behave, and thereby "purifies" himself much as one does through immersion in a *mikveh*.

Some writers sought to extend Maimonides' analogy one step further, and apply it to yet another means of purification. *Halakha* establishes that if a utensil contracted *tum'a* (ritual impurity) and subsequently broke, such that it no longer retains its original identity, it becomes pure. Even without immersion in a *mikveh*, a utensil loses its state of *tum'a* once it is broken. This *halakha* applies to a garment, as well: once it is torn such that it loses its original identity, it becomes pure even without immersion.

Might the symbolism of "purifying waters," as developed by Maimonides, apply even to this kind of "purification"?

The work *Marbeh Tevuna* (written by Rabbi Yehoshua Eizik of Slonima, published in Vilna, 5632) suggested such an application based on Maimonides' famous comments in *Hilkhot Teshuva* (2:4) describing the transformational nature of repentance:

It is in accordance with the ways of repentance for the penitent sinner to always cry before God with weeping and supplication, to perform charity according to his ability, to distance himself greatly from the matter regarding which he sinned, to change his name as if to say, "I am somebody else, and I am not that person who committed those acts," and to change all his actions favorably and to the proper path, and to leave his location into exile, for exile atones for sins as it causes one to be subdued and be humble and lowly of spirit.

The purification through "breaking" is perhaps symbolic of the fundamental, internal change required as part of the process of *teshuva*. Just as a utensil or garment is rendered pure once it becomes broken to the point where it loses its identity, so does a person cleanse himself of the effects of sin once he "breaks" himself to the extent that he becomes a different person, wholeheartedly committed to personal change and a life of complete devotion to God.