Purity and Impurity are central religious categories in Judaism. They delineate space, objects and people. They divide the sacred and from the profane, the permitted from the forbidden, the moral from the immoral, the attractive from the repulsive, and the Jew from the gentile. A heightened concern with purity, together with the avoidance of impurity, lies at the center of Jewish religious, spiritual and communal life from Biblical times until the late Talmudic period.

We have already seen the powerful concern with ritual purity that characterized Ashkenazic synagogue life. In this chapter, we will show how care for purity and the avoidance of impurity extended to other areas of religious practice and awareness.

Torah Study and Worship

Jewish tradition, first Biblical and then Rabbinic, posited several types of ritual impurity, of different levels of gravity. The most severe source of pollution, literally the ‘grandfather’ of all pollutions (Avi Avot ha-Tum’ah), was that imparted by direct or indirect contact with a dead human body (Tum’at Met). Of the


4 Cf. Ex. 19, 14–22 and ET, xx, 463–487. The designation ‘Avi Avot ha-Tum’ah,’ does not appear in either Tannaitic or Amoraic literature. It first appears in Rashi’s Talmudic
other sources of pollution, the most ubiquitous and significant are those brought about by a genital discharge (tum’ah ha-yotzet mi-gufo). In Temple times, one who was rendered impure via tum’ah ha-yotzet mi-gufo was barred from the entire Temple Mount. Subsections of this group, e.g. menstrual and gonorrheal discharges (niddah and zavah), also generated a prohibition against marital relations prior to purification by immersion in a miqveh, the violation of which bore the dire punishment of excision (karet).

Over time, Talmudic and post-Talmudic authorities significantly extended the parameters of these forms of impurity. A menstruant, whose Biblical impurity had been set at seven days, was now additionally classified as a zavah and was required to wait seven ‘clean’ days, after her last blood discharge, before

commentaries (Rashi, Shabbat 66a s.v. ve-en tameh; Rashi, Pesahim 14b s.v. be-halal herev. Cf. Tosaftot Baba Bathra 20a s.v. be-havit); and then in the twelfth century midrashic anthology, Midrash Aggadah, ed. S. Buber, ad Num. 19 pars. 16 and 21. Rabbi Daniel Wolf, of Yeshivat Har Etzion, observed to me that he is convinced that the phrase was Rashi’s invention. If so, its presence in Midrash Aggadah, which is of Ashkenazic provenance, testifies to the speed with which it became part of the halakhic vocabulary. Cf., e.g., Cf. mt, Hil. Tum’at Met 5, 9.

Ashkenazic discussion of death pollution is somewhat anemic. Prima facie, this is due to the simple fact that, in the absence of the ashes of the Red Heifer, purification from death pollution was impossible. I address this question in a forthcoming study.

Cf. Lev. 15 and Deut. 23, 11–12. According to the Bible, almost all discharges of blood or of semen render the individual impure. The exception is post-partum bleeding which, as far as the Bible was concerned, did not render the woman impure, after the parturient impurity of one week (for a male-child) or two weeks (for a female child). Later developments included these blood discharges as well. See et, iv: 130–148 (Ba’al Qeri); ix: 621–654 (Zav and Zava); and xxii: 297–362 (Yoledet). By contrast, Islamic tradition views all bodily emissions as defiling. Cf. M. Holmes, Body of Text: The Emergence of the Sunni Law of Ritual Purity, Albany: SUNY Press 2002, 1–13.

Cf. B. Pesahim 68a. One who has contracted the most severe form of impurity, contact with a corpse (tame met), is only restricted from entering the actual Temple precincts. One who emits semen, whether man or woman after relations (Ba’al Qeri and Poletet Shikhvat Zera), on the other hand, was allowed entry to the Temple Mount after immersion in a miqveh. This is the most reasonable explanation for the large number of Second Temple era ritual baths that have been uncovered around the site of the Temple Mount. See, per contra, E. Regev, ‘The Ritual Baths near the Temple Mount and Extra-purification Before Entering the Temple Courts,’ Israel Exploration Journal 55 (2005): 194–204.

Lev. 20, 18 and M. Keritot 1, 1. There are varying opinions as to the nature of karet. See E.E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs, trans. I. Abrahams, Jerusalem: Magnes 1989, Index s.v. karet.