

## KORACH

Numbers 16:3-1-18:3-32

(Place a bar of Ivory soap on the bimah.) You'll see the reason for this soap soon enough. The word "pure" is one of the most fascinating in the English language. Webster's Dictionary defines pure as "free from moral fault or guilt." Then there is the wildly popular juvenile definition-lack of cooties. The British anthropologist Mary Douglas devoted an entire book to the subject. Thus, I was very excited to take on a drash for Korach.

No, not *that* Korach. I'm talking about the Korach of chapter 18, where only those priests who were pure, along with their sons and daughters, were allowed to eat of the sacrifices from the Tabernacle.

Now, here's the rub. There are as many translations of "pure" as there are bibles, or, as I like to say, Haggadot on the seder table. I found no less than 4 myself: "clean", "holy", the already mentioned "pure", and "ritually pure." I'd now like to bring in another word for purity-perfection, courtesy of JUDAISM AND DISABILITY by Rabbi Judith Jacobs(Z'L). Our friend Webster's Dictionary defines perfection as "freedom from fault or defect." The Tenach defines it as "without blemish." Not a mark was supposed to be found on the animal offerings at the altar's front. Not a mark was to be found on the priest, either. According to Rabbi Jacobs, he was the intermediary between the perfection-there's that word again-of heaven and the chaos of earth. Only the best of the best could have that job. There was no ADA then. The priest wasn't to have any disability of any sort, which meant no blindness, deafness, or anything else deemed "wrong."

We've heard a lot about the role of the priest in the clerical owner's manual of Leviticus. But not only is this the first mention of a specific state that the priest must be in order to earn his keep, it's a specific state that his own household must be in as well.

It's obvious on the face of it as to the reason for this ritual purity, cleanliness, holiness-call it what you will. You're going to have to be worthy in the eyes of God to eat his leftovers. But there's also the notion of being the model of purity because you're in a position of authority. The priest was the gonsen macher (other than Moshe and Aharon, of course). You are a leader who has to be an example to others. In short, you've got to *be better than everyone else. And if that isn't enough, your own family, who didn't even ask for this, has to be the same way.* It's as big a responsibility for the priest's son or daughter as it is for the priest himself. Why? Because these people are in close contact with the priest when he's not on duty. Aharon and his priestly descendants' every move was scrutinized because they were the priests. So, too, were every move of the children of those priests. The expression "the preacher's son gone wrong" has as much to do with our definition of "wrong" as it does with anything else.

And just why is the bar so much higher for the priest? This may be the fall-out from the DIY religion of the Golden Calf. It may be that Adonai decided that there was going to be an adult in the room now that the Israelites were coming into their own as a society. And if that's the case, then it follows that he has to be without blemish, or perfect.

But, a perfect outside isn't necessarily a perfect inside. In 2019 I was ordained as a Maggid. It was a 2-year process that got me on Zoom long before it became a household word. Learning one's spiritual genealogy is part of the training. You not only have to know your own teacher, but his teacher, and *his* teacher. My teacher's teacher was Yitzhak Buxbaum, my spiritual grandfather if you will. His teacher was Shlomo Carbach. For all his spiritual purity, there were some personally impure things he allegedly did. Having this man as one of my forbears has been a difficult part of being a maggid. On the one hand I can point to him with pride, while on the other I must point to him with shame.

This disturbing dichotomy is not confined to Judaism. We have all heard the stories of abuses done by Catholic priests both in this country and abroad. There may have been plenty of purity, or perfection on the outside, but there was none to be found inwardly.

I leave you with a couple of questions. What is purity, anyway? For that matter, what is impurity? It's clear cut in some cases, and not in others. What was in the hearts of the priests tending the Tabernacle? And, finally, how much or how little impurity is allowed for something to function?

That brings me to this bar of Ivory soap. It claims to be 99 and 44 100<sup>th</sup> percent pure. Hmm. Not totally pure, but it can still clean your hands really well. Not completely perfect, but it can still get the job done. How not cut and dried is that? Shabbat Shalom.