

Tum'ah (Ritual Impurity): Is it "REAL?" Chullin 71a

Chullin 71a describes a phenomenon in which ritual impurity "breaks through" an enclosed space. What does this mean? It impurity consider a real force in nature, akin to electricity? Or is ritual impurity a legal convention created by our intentions for objects? Or maybe both???

1. חולין עא.

טומאה רצוצה בוקעת ועולה עד לרקיע

Impurity in a tight space breaks through and ascends up to heaven

2. משנה אהלות ג:ז

טפח על טפח על רום טפח מרובע מביא את הטומאה וחוצץ בפני הטומאה. כיצד? ביב שהוא קמור תחת הבית: יש בו פותח טפח, ויש ביציאתו פותח טפח, טומאה בתוכו, הבית טהור. טומאה בבית מה שבתוכו טהור, שדרך הטומאה לצאת ואין דרכה להכנס...

A space of one handbreadth square and one handbreadth high, in the form of a cube, serves both to give passage to impurity and to act as a screen against impurity. How so? If there was an arched gutter beneath the house - if it had a handbreadth opening, and its outlet had a handbreadth opening - if there was impurity within it, the house is pure; if there was impurity within the house, what is in it is pure; because impurity tends to exit, and it does not tend to enter...

3. משנה אהלות ז:ג

המת בבית ובו פתחין הרבה כולן טמאין. נפתח אחד מהן - הוא טמא וכולן טהורין. חשב להוציאו באחד מהן או בחלון שהוא ארבעה על ארבעה טפחים הציל על כל הפתחים...

If a corpse lies in a house to which there are many entrances, they are all impure; if one entrance is opened, it alone is impure and all the others are pure. If there was an intention to take out the corpse through a specific one of them, or through a window measuring four handbreadths square, this affords protection to all other entrances...

4. משנה אהלות ו:ו

טומאה תחת העמוד, טומאה בוקעת ועולה, בוקעת ויורדת

If there is impurity under a pillar, the impurity breaks forth upwards and downwards.

5. משנה טהרות ח:ב

המפקיד כלים אצל עם הארץ...ר' יוסי אומר אם מסר לו תיבה מלאה בגדים, בזמן שהיא רוצצת טמאין מדרס, אם אינה רוצצת טמאין מדף...

If one deposited vessels with an *am ha'aretz*...R. Yose says : if it was a chest full of clothes - if it was tightly packed, the clothes become impure with *midras* impurity; if it was not tightly packed, the clothes become impure with *madaf* impurity...

6. ויקרא יא: לז-לח

וְכִי יִפֹּל מִנְבֵּלְתָם עַל-כָּל-זֶרַע זְרוּעַ אֲשֶׁר יִזְרַע טְהוֹר הוּא:

If such a carcass falls upon seed grain that is to be sown, it is pure;

וְכִי יִתֵּן מַיִם עַל-זֶרַע וְנִפֹּל מִנְבֵּלְתָם עָלָיו טֵמָא הוּא לָכֶם: {ס}

but if water is put on the seed and any part of a carcass falls upon it, it shall be impure for you.

7. ויקרא יד:לו

וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וּפְנֵי אֶת-הַבַּיִת בְּטָרָם יָבֵא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאֲוֹת אֶת-הַנֶּגַע וְלֹא יִטְמָא כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בַּבַּיִת וְאַחַר כֵּן יָבֵא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאֲוֹת אֶת-הַבַּיִת:

The priest shall order the house cleared before the priest enters to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become impure; after that the priest shall enter to examine the house.

8. פסיקתא דרב כהנא ד:ז

גוי אחד שאל את רבן יוחנן בן זכאי א' ליה, אילין מיליא דאתון עבדין נראין כמן כשפים, מביאין פרה ושוחטין אותה ושורפין אותה וכותשין אותה ונוטלין את אפרה ואחד מכם מטמא למת ומזין עליו שתיים שלש טיפים ואומרין לו טהרתה. א' לו לא נכנסה רוח תזזית באותו האיש מימיו, א' לו לאו, אמ' לו ולא ראיתיה אחר שנכנסה בו רוח תזזית, א' לו הין. א' לו ומה אתם עושין, א' לו מביאין עיקרין ומעשנין תחתיו ומרבצים עליה מים והיא בורחת. א' לו ולא ישמעו אזניך מה שפיך מדבר, כך הרוח הזה רוח טומאה היא, דכת' וגם את הנביאים ואת רוח הטומאה וג' (זכריה יג:ב). וכיון שיצא אמרו לו תלמידיו ר' לזה דחיתה בקנה לנו מה אתה משיב, א' להם חייכם לא המת מטמא ולא המים מטהרים אלא גזירתו של הקב"ה הוא, א' הקב"ה חוקה חקקתי גזירה גזרתי ואין אתה רשאי לעבור על גזירתי זאת חוקת התורה (במדבר יט:ב).

And a non-Jew asked R. Yohanan ben Zakkai saying to him: "These things that you do seem like witchcraft. You bring a cow and you slaughter it and you burn it and you crush it and you take its ash, and if one of you becomes impure from a corpse, you sprinkle on him two or three drops [of the ash mixed with water] and say to him: 'Ah, now you are pure.'" So R. Yohanan said to him: "Has the spirit of madness never entered you?" and he answered: "No, never." "And have you never seen anyone else who has had the spirit of madness enter into him?" And he said: "Yes." And he said to him: "And what do you do?" And he said: "Roots are brought, they are burned to smoke beneath him, and water is sprinkled on the spirit until it flees." And he said to him: "Do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying? This spirit is the spirit of impurity, as it is written, I will cause [false] prophets and the spirit of impurity to flee from the Land" (Zech 13:2). Once the person had left, his disciples said to him: "Master, you pushed him off with a mere reed [a weak answer]. What explanation will you offer us?" R. Yohanan replied: "By your life! The corpse does not defile nor does the water purify. It is simply a decree of the Holy One, blessed be He. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'I have ordained a statute, I have issued a decree, and you may not transgress My decree. This is the statute of the Torah (Num 19:2).'"

9. Dr. Vered Noam, ["Ritual Impurity in Tannaitic Literature: Two Opposing Views."](#) p. 96

the portrait that emerges from the laws of overhanging objects. Accordingly, the natural, immanent conception of impurity is at the foundation of the halakhic system as a whole and determines its basic definitions, among them the dissociation of the concept of "tent" from its literal meaning; the unifying definition of the laws of grave and house; and the principles of containment and dissemination of impurity ("a cubic handbreadth," "cramped impurity," "impurity that breaks through," the passage of impurity through "an opening one handbreadth square," "the nature of impurity is to exit," and the like). By contrast, the nominalistic elements, as bold and far-reaching as they are, are much less prevalent and their role in the system is more secondary. They create exceptions, serving as a kind of "footnotes" appended to the fundamental principles of the realistic approach. To illustrate:

- Impurity "flows" to all openings. This is a basic statement of concrete, immanent impurity. True, human intention is likely to divert it to a particular opening, but this is a secondary option grafted onto the "realistic" original situation.
- Impurity passes from one space to another by way of holes that measure at least one handbreadth square. This is a realistic depiction. In certain cases, man's intentions (designating an opening for a special purpose) can override this minimum measure. Here too, we are speaking of a minor exception to a realism-based rule.
- Objects that are not susceptible to impurity "block" its movement. This is a realistic principle. At the same time, however, certain objects can lose this "immunity" as a result of human intention. This too is a nominalistic secondary layer added onto realistic foundations.
- An opening provides an "outlet" for impurity, leaving the remainder of the outer walls pure. This is a characteristic of realistic-ontological impurity. The inclusion of the walled-off "virtual doorway" in the definition of openings that serve as conduits for impurity is a type of nominalistic "footnote."

10. Dr. Yechezkel Kaufmann, *Israelite Religion, from its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, p55

THE BATTLE OF GOOD AND EVIL—Paganism regards impurity, or demonic evil, as an autonomous, baleful realm as primary as the holy and the good. Death, disease, darkness, and the host of evil spirits who seek to destroy gods and men are the domain of the unclean. The eternal struggle between these two realms is vividly reflected in the cult.