

**Parshat Tazria-Metzora:
On Liminality**
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Liminality, from the Latin word *limine*, means on the threshold or between two actual or existential moments. “In-between” time. Sometimes, liminal time can be but a fleeting moment, like the breath between life and death or the brief moments between unmarried and married life. Sometimes, liminal time can drag on, like the days, months or years it takes for a non-Jew, who has committed to Judaism, to actually convert. This in between time is often marked with anxiety, a sense of being overwhelmed, and in some cases, despair. Does Jewish ritual offer an antidote to relieve individuals of this tension?

This week’s double parsha largely deal with the laws of *tumah* and *tahor*. In many cases, in order for a person to change their status—from *tamei* to *tahor*—from a state when one cannot enter the Temple, to a state of purity where one can enter the *Beit HaMikdash*, chapter 15:13 states that one must immerse in *mayyim hayyim* (a living body of water). *Mayyim hayyim* is interpreted by *chazal* as immersion in the *mikvah*.

Today, it is the *mikvah* ritual that marks the transition from unmarried to married, from a a women in *nidah* to a women who can have sexual relations with her husband, and from non-Jew to Jew. Through the *tahara* process of pouring *mikvah* water on the deceased body, the *mikvah* ritual marks the moment from life to death.

Water symbolizes birth—we are embraced by water in the womb and therefore, immersion is meant to be a moment of rebirth, of renewal, of new possibilities. In fact, the word *mayyim* (water) from the phrase *mayyim hayyim* (a living body of water), can be vocalized as *ma im* (what if). It is a nexus of possibility where complete transformation is suddenly imaginable. It is the ritual that totally transforms one’s status. There are two Biblical characters who used the *mikvah* ritual to change their status, and transform themselves. *Adam Harishon* and *Sara Imaynu*.

The Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer (a Tannaitic midrashic work) teaches us that “...after his expulsion from Gan Eden, Adam sat in the waters of the upper Gichon where, without food, he stood up to his neck in the water. He then prayed to God saying: 'Forgive my sins and accept my repentance.' Whereupon God stretched forth His right hand, accepted Adam's repentance and forgave his sins.” (Ch. 20).

Rabbi Menachem HaMeiri, (Provence, 1249-1306) teaches that on the day God commanded Avraham to become circumcised, Sarah went to the *mikvah*. Despite the fact that the Torah makes no mention of Sarah’s immersion, the Meiri recognized that Sarah sought out a ritual that would transform her essence, changing her from Sarai to Sarah, from a woman to the mother of the Jewish people. This is the power of the *mikvah*. The waters have the ability to transform, to unleash human potential.

Adam used the ritual of *mikvah* as a means of *teshuvah*, to transform himself to become a better person. Sarah needed a tangible ritual to mark her change in status. For both Adam and Sarah, immersion in the *mikvah* was the necessary ritual that marked the transitions in their lives and can be seen as a metaphor to help mark the transitions in our lives, the moments of liminality, in which we inevitably find ourselves. These moments of liminality need not be shrouded in uncertainty. The root of the word “*mikvah*” is -k-v-h which means hope. The *mem* at the beginning of the word implies *makom*, which can mean either God, place, or a place where God’s presence is felt. The mikvah then, is the *makom* where one can find hope; where one can find God. The mikvah is an opportunity to return to the source, and to seek out hope. So too, liminal times can also be a time of hope, of a place to seek out the divine.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha’s three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week’s 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek’s 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.