

Tahara & Tuma – Maintaining Conductivity

by David Bar-Cohn

One of the most perplexing and often misunderstood areas of Torah is the area of *tahara* – specifically the states of *tuma* and *tahara*. In this article we will try to gain some insight as to what these states are, specifically as they relate to *netilat yadayim*.

Tuma – Lack of Energy, not “Negative” Energy

Tuma is often taken to mean the presence of “negative energy,” a spiritual *cooties* of sorts. Indeed, since *tuma* can transfer from one person to the next, we have come to view it as a kind of contamination. But as we’ll see, *tuma* may be something altogether different – not bad energy, but a lack of energy. We spoke earlier about *chol* as being depletion, a lack of energy. In Torah, we find that the same thing that depletes (is *m’chalal*) simultaneously causes *tuma*, as it says:

לְמַעַן טָמְאָה אֶת מִקְדָּשִׁי וְלַחֲלִיל אֶת שְׁם קֹדֶשִׁי

“he has given his offspring to the Molech

in order to make My Mikdash Tamei and deplete my energized name.”¹

The state of *tuma* is also linked in the Torah with the state of mourning, a low-energy state (as opposed to *simcha*, which we described earlier as a high-energy state), as it says:

לֹא אָכַלְתִּי בָּאֵי מִמֶּנּוּ וְלֹא בִעַרְתִּי מִמֶּנּוּ בְּטָמֵא

“I did not eat from it in my mourning, and I did not devour it in a Tamei state.”²

Perhaps the most suggestive evidence that *tuma* comes from a loss of energy is the fact that it’s so strongly linked to death. The most severe level of *tuma* (the *avi avot ba’tuma*) is that of a dead person. Death is a total loss of vital energy, a cessation of movement. The heart stops, blood no longer circulates, and all *nefesh* is drained from the body. The sharp depletion of *nefesh*, of bioenergy, leaves in its wake a severe *tuma*.

Death, Sleep, & Loss of Nefesh

Sleep, Chazal say, is one sixtieth of death.³ During sleep, the conscious, thinking mind is temporarily out of commission. The body’s basic metabolism slows down – heart rate and blood pressure drop, respiration and core body temperature decrease.⁴ With less movement, less flow of energy, the *nefesh* is diminished. Thus, just as death (the greatest loss of *nefesh*) incurs the highest level of *tuma*, so too sleep (a partial death, partial loss of *nefesh*) incurs a lesser *tuma*. In other words, the severity of *tuma* is proportional to the amount of *nefesh* lost.

Waking Up & Loss of Nefesh

The traditional concept of sleep is a partial death and therefore a loss of *nefesh*. This is fine except for one small detail: sleep revitalizes – it *restores* the *nefesh*. Death does just the opposite – it *drains* the *nefesh*. So how do we understand that sleep brings on *tuma*? Some explain that *tuma* is produced because during sleep we may have touched a sweaty area of the body or a part that is usually covered. Others say that *ruach ra’a* (“evil spirit,” i.e. destructive energy) comes upon the hands during sleep. Let explore another possible answer.

¹ Vayikra 20.3

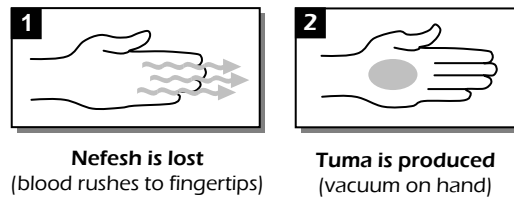
² Devarim 26.14

³ See: Brachot 57b

⁴ Although these rise sharply during REM sleep.

Perhaps it's not while a person sleeps that the *nefesh* is actually lost, but rather when he initially wakes up. As we said, the body's metabolism decreases during sleep. When the circulation slows, blood does not reach the extremities as well as it usually does. Upon awakening however, the metabolism rises sharply, and blood pressure increases, and blood itself is pumped to the fingertips. (This can produce the sensation of tingling.) As blood rushes to the hands, the primary "output" locations, heat is lost, *nefesh* is ejected from the body, leaving a slight vacuum – *tuma* – at the area of the hands, particularly on the fingertips.

Fig. 1.10 Blood flow & Nefesh loss



Netila – not “Washing” but “Lifting”

After washing the hands for Netilat Yadaim, we are supposed to lift our hands, fingertips up. One reason given is that it prevents poured water from dripping down the arm to the fingertips, which would render them *tamei* once again.⁵ But if that is the case, that lifting the hands is merely a safeguard, then why does the *bracha* itself emphasize the lifting? The *bracha* does not say “*al rechitzat yadaim*” (“upon the *washing* of the hands”), but rather “*al netilat yadaim*” (“upon the *lifting* of the hands”). Perhaps we can also understand it in terms of blood-flow and loss of *nefesh*. That is, lifting the hands simply allows gravity to act on the hands, pulling the blood (and *nefesh*) down and away from the fingertips. Thus, less *nefesh* will leave the body.

Tuma, Nida & Childbirth

Since *nefesh* is tied to the blood, a sharp loss of blood will bring about a corresponding depletion of *nefesh*, resulting in the state of *tuma*. As such, a woman is *tamei'a* during her menstrual cycle (*nida*) and after childbirth, both of which involve a considerable loss of blood. With childbirth however, not only does the mother lose *nefesh* through the loss of her own blood, but she also loses the *nefesh* associated with her baby. That is, during pregnancy, the *nefesh* of the baby is subsumed within the energy field of the mother. At birth, when the baby separates, the fields of the two living beings are separated, and this is experienced by the mother as a loss of *nefesh*.

Tuma & Gender of the Newborn

There's a fairly glaring question regarding the laws of childbirth as stated in the Torah: What does the Torah mean when it says that a post-partum mother is *tamei'a* for twice the amount of time for a baby girl (6 weeks) than for a baby boy (3 weeks)?⁶ If we define *tuma* not as impurity but rather as a loss of *nefesh*, then this leads us to a potential answer: a girl is understood in Torah as possessing twice the *nefesh* of a boy. Therefore, the birth of a girl results in a greater loss of *nefesh* (x2) for the mother, while the birth of a boy results in less of a loss (x1). The more *nefesh* lost, the more time it takes to be replenished. Why a girl would have a double-dose of *nefesh* is then the question, but perhaps we can reason that having the ability to produce and support a whole new human life by definition makes her twice the person that a boy is. In other words, in order to be a working life-support system, you have to have extra life-energy to give.

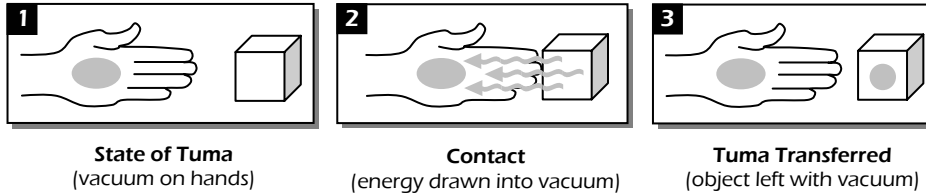
⁵ See: Orach Chaim 162.1

⁶ See: Vayikra 12.1-5

Transfer of Tuma via Vacuum

If we understand *tuma* not as a “negative energy” but rather as a lack of energy, how then do we account for the phenomenon of *tuma* transference? That is, how does “lack” get transferred from one person to another? Here is a possible answer: When energy is lost, it leaves a vacuum in its place. A vacuum has the tendency to draw energy into itself. So rather than think of transfer of *tuma* in terms of *Person A* (with *tuma*) “giving stuff” to *Person B*, understand it the opposite way – *Person A*’s vacuum draws energy from *Person B*, leaving *Person B* with a vacuum. Thus, touch something *tamei*, and you will become *tamei*.⁷

Fig. 1.11 Transference of Tuma



One curious feature of *tuma* however is that the energy it sucks into itself from other things does not “fill” its own vacuum. The energy does not get integrated – instead, it simply dissipates.⁸ In this way, *tuma* is capable of multiplying itself, spreading from *Person A* to *B*, *C*, *D*, and so on. (Hence it seems like “contamination.”) The force of *tuma* however diminishes with each generation of contact – i.e. $tuma_A > tuma_B > tuma_C \dots$ ⁹

Tahara & Conductivity

The state of *tuma*, as we have said, is a disturbance in the *nefesh* caused by a localized vacuum. When there is a “hole” in the *nefesh*, this interrupts normal, healthy circulation. It’s like a pothole in the road that causes a car to slow down and bump through it before proceeding. In Torah, something that has this impedence by virtue of lack is called *tamei*, while something that allows the free flow of energy is called *tabor*.

The word *tahara* is commonly translated to mean “purity.” When speaking about energy, we can understand purity in terms of *conductivity* – again, relating to free-flow. For example, the Torah specifies not simply gold but *zabav tabor* (pure gold) as a material needed for building the Ark. Not only is pure gold more “precious” than gold with impurities, with foreign elements – it is a better conductor of energy, electricity. Likewise, a person who is *tabor* is a better conductor, more readily able to circulate *nefesh* and integrate *kedusha*, conduct energy, than a person who is *tamei*. A general principle in Torah is that *tahara* (the ability to conduct energy) is a prerequisite for *kedusha* (the infusion of energy).

Tahara via Time/Water

Two principal methods for nullifying *tuma*/restoring *tahara* are 1) the passage of time, and 2) immersion in flowing water, as the *psukim* say:

וְטָמֵא עַד הָעֶרֶב וְטָהֵר

“He will be Tamei until evening, and (at that time) he will become Tabor”

⁷ Transfer of *tuma* from *A* to *B* assumes that *B* is *m’kabel tuma* – i.e., that its structure is susceptible to disruption by vacuum.

⁸ This may be why, as we discussed in the last section, we are permitted to drink milk but not blood, even though both contain *nefesh*. Whereas milk is packaged in a form whereby our systems are able to integrate the *nefesh*, blood is not packaged as such, and by drinking it the *nefesh* is dissipated, wasted.

⁹ Distinctions in the strength of *tuma* correspond to the Halachic statuses of “*avi avot ha’tuma*,” “*av ha’tuma*,” “*rishon l’tuma*,” “*sbeni l’tuma*,” and so on.

וְרָחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בְּמַיִם חַיִּים וְטָהַר

“He will wash his flesh with flowing water and become Tabor”¹⁰

Just as wounds heal over time, so too is the vacuum of *tuma* gradually replenished with *nefesh* over time. The greater the loss of *nefesh*, the more time is necessary.¹¹ Besides (or in addition to) allowing a certain amount of time to pass, it can be necessary to immerse (either the hands or the entire body) in water. But what is it about water that restores a person’s *nefesh*, her energy?

One very obvious answer is that water is simply the basis of life. It is the main ingredient in the human being. It’s the basis of blood and milk, of all nourishment, all sources of *nefesh*. But perhaps more to the point is that every living system is made up of two parts: *guf* (material body, structure) and *nefesh* (animating energy). Within the body, flesh is the *guf*, and blood is the *nefesh*. The flesh is static, and the blood is dynamic. Within the Earth, the soil/rock is the *guf*, and flowing water (*mayim chaim*) is the *nefesh*. And so it is the connection to another source of *nefesh*, to “live” flowing water, that revives our *nefesh*, alleviating the vacuum of *tuma* and restoring proper energy circulation.

While Netilat Yadaim involves *nefesh* in its subtle “raw energy” state, the upcoming *bracha* of Asher Yatzar deals with *nefesh* as localized very tangibly, concretely, in the flow of fluids and materials through the vessels of the body.

Netilat Yadaim & the Kiyor: a Matter of Life & Death

Among the items the Torah instructs us to make and place in the *mikdash* (Temple) is the *kiyor*, the wash basin. It is placed outside the *kodesh* (inside chamber), and the *kohanim* (priests) are commanded to wash their hands and feet with it before entering. But it is more than just for purposes of cleanliness, or even respect. Use of the *kiyor* is considered to be a life and death proposition, as the *psukim* state:

וְרָחֲצוּ אֶהָרֶן וּבְנָיו מִמְּנוּ אֶת יְדֵיהֶם וְאֶת רַגְלֵיהֶם
בְּבַאִם אֶל אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְרָחֲצוּ מֵיִם וְלֹא יָמוּתוּ

“Abaron and his sons will wash – from [the Kiyor] – their hands and their feet.
When they come to the Ohel Moed, they will wash (with) water, so they will not die.”¹²

The question is, what is it that is so dangerous about entering the *kodesh* without washing your hands and feet?

Tuma & the Mikdash

Torah prohibits a person who is *tamei* (in a vacuum state) from contacting *kedusha* (that which is concentrated with energy). One who is *tamei* may not enter the *mikdash* (the “concentrated” inner chamber of the Temple) nor may he touch *kedoshim* (“concentrated” sacrificial offerings), as it says:

בְּכָל קִדְשׁ לֹא תִגַּע וְאֶל הַמִּקְדָּשׁ לֹא תִבֹּא עַד מְלֵאת יְמֵי טְהָרָהּ

“She should not touch any Kodesh, and she should not
enter the Mikdash, until she fulfills the days of Tahara.”¹³

¹⁰ Vayikra 11.32, 15.13 – *Korban* (sacrifice) and *mei nida* (water with ashes from the Red Cow) also restore *tabara*, and these are discussed in Part 2 – “Korbanot.”

¹¹ Although it is curious that for those cases of *tuma* that make one *tamei* until the evening, one regains *tabara* in the evening whether he became *tamei* 6 minutes ago or 6 hours ago. It would seem in this case that it is not so much the duration of time but rather the special property of “*erev*” (evening) that replenishes the *nefesh*.

¹² Shemot 30.19-20

¹³ Vayikra 12.4

As we mentioned in our initial discussion of *kedusha*, laws regarding the *mikdash* both safeguard the energy of the *mikdash* and its contents as well as protect the *tamei* individual. Here we will focus specifically on the danger posed to the individual.

Plagues from Hashem – from the Mikdash

The Torah gives numerous accounts of “plagues” and other maladies that ravage *Bnei Yisrael* in the desert – the stories of Nadav and Avihu, the Spies, Korach, and Pinchas among the more conspicuous examples. In every case, the calamity is described as issuing forth *from Hashem*, in some instances using the specific phrase “*mi’lifnei Hashem* (from before Hashem). While one might visualize a plague from Hashem as descending from the heavens, the Torah clearly uses the phrase “*before Hashem*” as referring to the *mikdash* (also called the *mishkan*, the *tent of meeting*, or the *kodesh*), for example:

וְנָתַן הַכֹּהֵן מִן הַדָּם עַל קַרְנוֹת מִזְבֵּחַ
קִטְרֵת הַסַּמִּים לִפְנֵי ה' אֲשֶׁר בְּאֹהֶל מוֹעֵד

“*And the Kohen will put some of the blood on the horns of the incense-burning altar before Hashem, which is in the Tent of Meeting.*”¹⁴

That is, anything described in the desert as coming “from Hashem” can be understood as emanating from the *Shechina* (Hashem’s tangible presence), and the *Shechina* rests in the *mikdash*. Indeed, after repeated incidents of “plague,” *Bnei Yisrael* specifically pinpoint the *mishkan* as the source of devastation, regarding it with great fear, as the *pasuk* says:

כָּל הַקָּרֵב הַקָּרֵב אֶל מִשְׁכַּן ה' יָמוּת הָאֵם תִּמְנוּ לְגוֹעַ

“*Each and every one who approaches the Mishkan of Hashem dies – will we ever stop perishing!*”¹⁵

In response, the tribe of Levi is set up as a “buffer” around the *mishkan* to protect the people, as it says:

וּשְׁמֵרְתֶם אֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ
וְלֹא יִהְיֶה עוֹד קֶצֶף עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“*They will guard the safeguard of the Kodesh and the altar, and there won’t be more outburst against Bnei Yisrael.*”¹⁶

Punishment vs. Direct Consequence

But what exactly is this devastation that the Torah refers to as “plague” (*mageifa*), “outburst” (*ketzef*), and “flaring anger” (*charon af*)? As we said in the first chapter regarding blessing and curse, one can either think of calamity as a punishment from Hashem or as a direct consequence of an action. Whereas the punishment orientation paints a picture of Hashem as harsh and temperamental, the cause-and-effect orientation merely casts Hashem as one who sets up a system whose rules – if not adhered to – have consequences. So in this spirit, we will take a crack at understanding Hashem’s “anger” and specifically how it is triggered by *tuma* and *cheit*.

Vitalizing Discharge of the Mishkan

The *mikdash* contains a massive amount of energy. In relative terms, the *mikdash* could be considered as having a (+) charge (a surplus of energy) and *Yisrael* a (–) charge (a deficit of energy). Since energy flows from plus charge to minus charge, the system is designed – under normal conditions – to transmit energy judiciously from *mikdash* to *Klal Yisrael*. In this

¹⁴ Vayikra 4.7; also see Rashbam on Vayikra 9.24, who states that fire going out “*from before Hashem*,” means *from the kodesh kedoshim*, specifically by way of the incense altar.

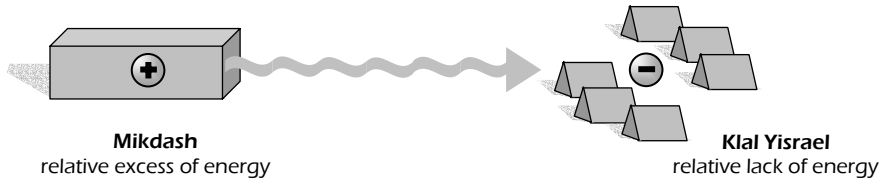
¹⁵ Bamidbar 17.28

¹⁶ Bamidbar 18.5

way, *Klal Yisrael* can be continuously vitalized with the energy of Hashem, in accordance with its original intent:

ועשו לי מקדש ושכנתי בתוכם
 “Make a Mikdash for Me, and I will dwell among them.”¹⁷

Fig. 2.10 Energy transfer from Mishkan to Yisrael



Destructive Discharge & Tuma

But the system is also sensitive to imbalance. If *Klal Yisrael* were to become *tamei*, its net charge dropping sharply, the potential difference in charges between the *Klal* and the *mikdash* would become significantly increased. That is, what was once a moderate potential difference of (+1) and (-1) could as the result of *tuma* turn into a strong potential difference, say of (+1) and (-4). The greater the difference, the more “voltage,” and the more force in the discharge. Thus, the same system that produces a vitalizing flow of energy can – in the wrong conditions – turn into a devastating release. The term *charon af* (anger) literally means “flaring nostril.” Agression, even as we understand it in human beings, is a destructive release of built-up of energy (in the form of anger or frustration). *Charon* means flaring in the sense of opening up a pathway for excess energy to be released, discharged.

Fig. 2.11 Destructive discharge brought on by Tuma



Likewise, if *Klal Yisrael* develops a (+) charge by means of *cheit*, this can also pose a problem of discharge. When there is less potential difference between the *mikdash* and Yisrael, the *mikdash* will not release its energy as it normally does, and instead that energy will start to build up in the *mikdash*. If this continues for long enough, and enough potential difference accumulates, this can also cause the *mikdash* to release a dangerous discharge of energy.

Fig. 2.12 Destructive discharge brought on by Cheit



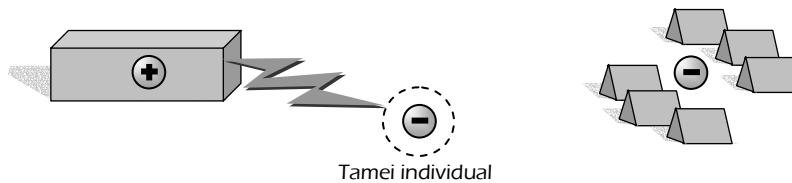
¹⁷ Shemot 25.8

Discharge on the Individual

Aside from the danger of national calamity, there was also a risk to the individual in proximity to the *mikdash*. If a person who is *tamei* approaches the *mikdash*, this can cause the system to short circuit. Because the *tamei* person is so strongly depleted (charged in the minus), his entering the *mikdash* is the equivalent of walking out into a thunderstorm carrying a lightning rod. He risks drawing a potentially lethal discharge of energy, as it says:

וְהִזַּרְתֶּם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִטְּמֵאתָם
וְלֹא יָמָתוּ בְּטִמְאתָם בְּטִמְאָם אֶת מִשְׁכְּנֵי אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹכָם
“You will detach Bnei Yisrael from their Tuma, so they won’t die
in their (state of) Tuma, while making the Mishkan Tamei.”¹⁸

Fig. 2.13 Tamei individual too close to Mikdash

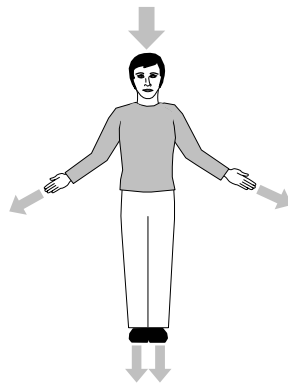


Now that we’ve explored a bit of the danger in the *mikdash*, perhaps we can understand the logic behind using the *kiyor*, the wash basin.

Kiyor & Nefesh Circulation

The function of the *kiyor* is to wash the hands and feet of the *kohanim* before they enter the *mikdash*. But what is significant about the hands and the feet in particular? We spoke earlier about the circulation of *nefesh* (bioenergy), which enters the body primarily at the crown of the skull, circulates along the pathways of the blood through the various organs, vessels, and other tissues, and exits through the hands and feet.

Fig. 2.14 Nefesh flow – primary input/output



In order for proper output to take place, energy must be able to pass through the exit points without resistance. If the hands and/or feet are *tamei* (depleted of energy), this will effectively interrupt the circuit and prevent energy from properly exiting the body. When entering the *mikdash* in this state, aside from the danger of absorbing too much energy without being able to effectively expell it, there is as we said earlier the problem of drawing a lethal discharge of energy.

¹⁸ Vayikra 15.31

The Torah warns the *kobanim* to use the *kiyor* before entering the mikdash – “so that they won’t die.” When natural flowing spring water (*mayim chaim*), is poured over the hands and feet, this works to neutralize *tuma* and restore *tabara* (conductivity), and – assuming they are otherwise prepared mentally and physically – allows them to enter safely.

Explaining the Apparent “Paradox” of Para Aduma

Among other topics for which a more precise understanding of *tuma/tabara* can help shed some light is that of the *para aduma*. There is one aspect of the *para aduma* procedure which has perplexed people throughout the ages. That is, whomever contacts the *para aduma*, anywhere along the sequence of procedures (burning, collecting the ashes, carrying and administering the mixture), becomes *tamei* – his energy is drawn out, and he is left with a (–) charge. Thus, the same mixture which is designed to make a *tamei* person *tabor* (neutral, conductive) also renders a *tabor* person *tamei*.¹⁹

Because of this seemingly paradoxical feature, the *parsha* of the *parah aduma* has gained a certain mystique and is often cited as the prime example of a law that is “beyond human comprehension.” But as we shall see, once looked at from the perspective of energy dynamics, the laws of the *para aduma* are quite straightforward, containing no paradox or contradiction whatsoever.

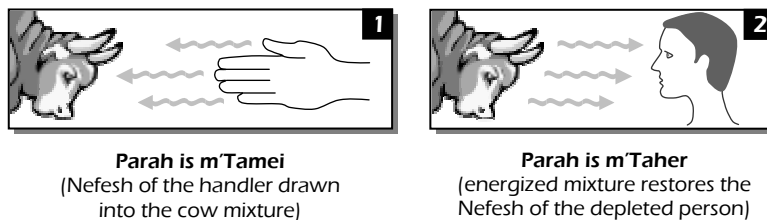
Unlike a regular *chatat*, the *para aduma* is slaughtered outside the camp. There is no mention of *smicha* (leaning hands on the head of the cow), nor are there any persons present whose *cheit*, (+) charge, is being removed. So one has to ask the question, if the *para aduma* mixture is meant to give (+) charge (extra *nefesh*) to the person with a (–) charge (depleted *nefesh*), from where is its extra energy derived? Perhaps the answer is that it is drawn *from its handlers*.

Secret of the Para Aduma: Taking and Giving

The *para aduma* essentially functions as an energy magnet. From the time the cow is burned to the time the mixture is administered, anyone who touches its ashes or the mixture is depleted of *nefesh*. Thus, it makes the *tabor* person *tamei*. However, since the mixture itself has collected all this *nefesh*, a strong (+) charge, when it is sprinkled on someone with a strong (–) charge, it will have a neutralizing effect. Thus, it makes the *tamei* person *tabor*.

So in short, the *para aduma* mixture acts as a conduit for transferring the energy of one party (the handlers) to another (the depleted person).

Fig. 2.15 Transfer of Nefesh & Para Aduma



¹⁹ Although it should be stated that this phenomenon is not entirely exclusive to *para aduma*. For example, by *para aduma* it says: וְהִשְׂרַף אֹתָהּ כִּבְסוֹ בְּגָדָיו בַּמַּיִם וְרָחַץ בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם – “The one who burns it will launder his garments in water and wash his flesh in water.” (Bamidbar 19.8) And this is almost verbatim what is commanded in the Yom Kippur service: וְהִשְׂרַף אֹתָם כִּבְסוֹ בְּגָדָיו וְרָחַץ אֶת בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם – “The one who burns them will launder his garments and wash his flesh in water.” (Vayikra 16.28). In these cases it appears that the one who does the burning becomes *tamei* not because of any energy drawn by the *korban* but because the procedure is done outside the camp, not in a “*makom tabor*.” (See: Sifra Acharei Mot 5.1, who gives this reason regarding the person who sends out the goat to *P'azazel*.)

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