

Wholeness and Dilution: Thoughts for Tazria-Metsora, April 13, 2013

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By

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A story is told of a dairyman in a small village who used to provide milk to the local population. In order to increase his profits, he decided to dilute the milk with 5% water. People seemed not to notice the difference, so a few months later he added 5% more water. Again, he received no complaints...so he continued to dilute the milk, little by little, month after month. People paid full price for diluted milk...and the milkman was making a nice profit.

After a while, though, the dairyman felt remorse at his own wickedness. He was literally stealing money from his customers by selling them diluted milk for the price of whole milk. In a spirit of repentance, he decided to stop diluting the milk. But no sooner had he begun to sell whole milk, his customers started to complain angrily. They accused the milkman of altering the milk, of trying to cheat them. The milk no longer tasted the same!

The milkman went to his rabbi in desperation. He told the full story of how he had deceived his customers for many months by diluting the milk. But now that he had repented and was selling milk at its full strength, people were accusing him of cheating them. They had grown accustomed to diluted milk. The real milk now tasted bad to them. The dairyman asked the rabbi what he should do.

The rabbi thought: To sell diluted milk is a sin. To sell whole milk arouses anger and accusations on the part of the customers. So the rabbi advised: just as you diluted the milk gradually so that people got used to the dilution, so you should gradually lessen the dilution until people get used to whole milk again. Whatever profit you make from the dilutions, you must contribute to charity and not keep even one cent of immoral profit for yourself.

This story is relevant not just for dairy farmers, but for nations, for institutions, for each individual. It is easy to dilute principles and ideals for the sake of apparent gains. As long as people feel they can get away with lower standards, they keep sacrificing a bit more, and then a bit more. They gradually lose integrity and authenticity. If/when they wake up and realize how far they've sold out their own

souls, they have trouble figuring out how to return to their original standard. People have become used to their current diluted manner of behavior, and may react badly if they suddenly stand up for their old principles again. It takes time to gradually regain one's own sense of balance and to regain the confidence and trust of others.

This week's Torah reading deals with laws of purity and impurity. While many of these laws are not observed today since we lack a Temple in Jerusalem, yet their underlying theme is relevant. People seek to be in a state of purity, but for various reasons fall into a state of impurity. Then they must find a way to be purified. The Torah describes a purification process that involves bringing an offering in the Temple, and a process which entails seeking the guidance of a priest (Cohen).

Bringing an offering symbolizes the desire to come close to God, to regain purity in God's "eyes." Before bringing an offering, a person must have gone through a period of introspection where he/she recognizes the need for purification. This internal shift in one's self-perception is an important step in purification. It is a recognition that to live full, honest and pure lives, we need to give an accounting before God. We don't want to come before God with a tainted self.

Turning to a Cohen symbolizes the need to consult experts on matters relating to purity and impurity. By candidly discussing one's issues, by revealing one's moral blemishes—one can break through feelings of impurity and move on to feelings of being cleansed, of making a fresh start. Before consulting a Cohen, a person must have undergone an internal transformation, a recognition that regaining purity is more important than living with a "diluted" soul.

To ensure our authenticity and integrity, we need to know what our standards and ideals are; we need to have the clarity and character to avoid diluting or betraying ourselves. We need to be aware of our strengths and weaknesses, and to be able to avoid diluting ourselves for the sake of attaining dubious social or economic gains.

To cleanse ourselves of impurity, it is helpful to come honestly and humbly before God. It is helpful to talk out our concerns with trusted guides and advisers who can see us more objectively than we see ourselves.

Bringing milk back to full strength is far easier than bringing a nation, an institution or oneself back to wholeness.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)