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Personal Discharge and Defilement

15: 1-33

Beginning with the previous Torah portion and continuing with this one, we have been examining the concepts of being ritually clean and ritually unclean in terms of what they can teach us about two kingdoms: the kingdom of sin and death (to see link click [By](#) - The Test of Tsara'at), and the Kingdom of Life and Righteousness (see [Cg](#) - The Test of M'tsora).



This is the last chapter dealing with the issue of uncleanness. After considering unclean animals (to see link click [Bk](#) - Ritually Clean and Unclean Animals), the section turned to uncleanness at birth (see [Bt](#) - Women After Childbirth) and external manifestations of uncleanness on the outside of the body as well as on the clothing and homes of people. Now the focus shifts to the interior to the person, examining uncleanness from within. Thus, there is a general direction from the outside to the interior.²⁵⁸

Chapter 15 sets forth the procedures required when an Israelite male or female experiences discharges from the sexual organs. Most of the chapter deals with discharges that are the result of illness or infections not to be confused with the normal menstruation of the female or the seminal emissions of the male. Here, we observe more clearly than elsewhere in **Leviticus**, the essential relationship between two conditions: illness and ritual impurity. By classifying illness and disease as forms of impurity, the Israelite priesthood placed them in the realm of religious concern. It was probably thought that impurity was contagious or, to put it another way, that the effects of abnormal discharges - and, to a lesser degree, or normal emissions and menstruation - were contagious. Impure persons

were prohibited from worshiping at the Tabernacle or participating in the **Levitical** sacrifices. In stark contrast, it must be remembered that in all other ancient Near Eastern religious everything that pertained to sexuality had a role in cult and ritual.²⁵⁹

Two frequent, and therefore key words, occur in the chapter. One is **discharge**, from the Hebrew root *zwb*. Of the fifty-five occurrences of this root in the Bible, it is found twenty-six times in **Leviticus 15**, both as a noun and as a verb (translated as *flowing*). Elsewhere it commonly describes Canaan as **a land flowing with milk and honey** (twenty times, beginning with **Exodus 3:8**). The most disputed aspect of this term's use in **Chapter 15** concerns what the discharge refers to in a man. It is clear that it cannot be ejaculation (addressed in **verses 16-18**), but it seems related to the genitalia, as is learned from the discussion of the discharge of **women (verses 19-30)**. Thus, it may be either a sexually transmitted disease, such as gonorrhea or a parasitical infection of the urinary tract producing blood in urine and/or kidney stones.

A second key word is **bathe**, which occurs twelve times in the chapter, usually in the phrase: **Whoever touches his bed is to wash his clothes and bathe himself in water; he will be unclean until evening (15:5-8, 10-11, 13, 16, 18, 21-22, and 27)**. The seventh occurrence adds the term **living** to describe **the waters**. This occurs several times in **Chapter 14**, but only here and describes the water as **fresh**.²⁶⁰

The balance and symmetry of the arrangement is striking. Two types of discharge, long-term and transient, are distinguished. Since they can affect both sexes, that gives for main cases. It should also be noted that the discharges of **women** are discussed in the reverse order to those of **men**. Chiasmus is regularly used in Hebrew to bring out the unity of a double-sided event. It is most appropriate device to employ in these particular mitezvot, focusing as they do on the unity of mankind in two sexes. Form and content here complement each other to express the idea that **God created man in his own image . . . male and female created He them (Genesis 1:27)**. The unity and interdependence of the sexes finds its most profound expression in the act of sexual intercourse, and very fittingly this is discussed in **15:18**, the midway of the literary structure.²⁶¹

A. Introduction (15:1-2a)

B. Abnormal male discharges (15:2b-15)

C. Normal male discharges (15:16-18)

C. Normal female discharges (15:19-24)



B. Abnormal female discharges (15:25-30)

A. Conclusion (15:31-33)