

Parashat Acharei Mot

Sharon Rimon



Impurity and Holiness, Forbidden Relationships and the Land of Israel

- What words appear in both the first and last verses of this chapter?
- What are the 'acts' of the Canaanites and Egyptians that are mentioned at the beginning of the chapter?
- What is the significance of the numerous repetitions in the first and last verses of the chapter?
- Who becomes impure by engaging in forbidden relations?

A. The Introductory Verses

The
Introductory
Verses to
Chapter
Eighteen

Parashat Acharei Mot concludes with the warning against forbidden relations (Lev. 18). This section is preceded by five verses which serve as a conceptual introduction, after which the Torah details the various prohibited relationships:

And God spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: '**I am the Lord, your God.** Like the acts of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled, you shall not act; and like the acts of the

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אֲנִי ה'
אֲ-לֹהֵיכֶם: כְּמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁבַתְתֶּם בָּהּ
לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ וּכְמַעֲשֵׂה אֶרֶץ
כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְבִיא

land of Canaan to which I bring you, you shall not act; and you shall not live by their laws. My judgments you shall enact, and My laws you shall keep, to walk by them; **I am the Lord, your God.** And you shall keep My laws and My judgments, which if a man shall do, he shall live by them; **I am God.**”
(Lev. 18:1-5)

אַתֶּם לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ
וּבְחֻקֵיהֶם לֹא תֵלְכוּ: אֵת
מִשְׁפָּטֵי תַעֲשׂוּ וְאֵת חֻקֵי
תִשְׁמְרוּ לְלֶכֶת בְּפִנְיָ
ה' אֲנִי-לְהֵיכָם: וְשִׁמְרֵם
אֵת חֻקֵי וְאֵת מִשְׁפָּטֵי
אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאֵל
וְחִי בְּהֵם אֲנִי ה'
וַיִּקְרָא י"ה, א-ה

**Forbidden
and
Appropriate
Acts**

In these verses, the root ע-ש-ה [‘act,’ ‘do’] is repeated six times. In verse 2, the Torah mentions the **acts** of the Egyptians and Canaanites, regarding which it commands: **“You shall not act.”** Verses 4-5 describe God’s laws and judgments **“which...a man shall do.”**

These verses distinguish between forbidden and appropriate acts.¹ This distinction is also made with regard to laws: Verse 3 states: “And you shall not live by their laws”; conversely, verses 4 – 5 state: “My laws you shall keep”; “And you shall keep My laws.”

1 The root ע-ש-ה is used four times in a negative context (i.e., “what not to do”) and twice in a positive context. The four negative instances may be divided into two groups:

- (1) Like the **acts** of the land of Egypt... (2) You shall not **act**
- (3) And like the **acts** of the land of Canaan... (4) You shall not **act**

Two groups are described as engaging in inappropriate behavior – Egypt and Canaan. In parallel, the root ע-ש-ה is used twice to describe desirable behavior. We will return to this point below.

QUESTIONS

- What are these forbidden acts and why are they linked specifically to Egypt and Canaan?
- What are the laws and judgments that were given in this chapter? Does this refer to all of the commandments, or only to those that are the antithesis of the Egyptians' and Canaanites' behavior?
- Why do the verses repeat each statement?
- Why is the phrase "Like the acts of...you shall not act" stated twice – once with regard to Egypt and a second time with regard to Canaan? Why didn't the Torah simply state: "Like the acts of Egypt and Canaan you shall not act"?
- Why does verse 5 reiterate what is stated in verse 4 – that the nation must keep these laws and judgments?
- Which forbidden acts does the text refer to?

**Rashi: A
General
Warning
Regarding
all the
Command-
ments**

Rashi interprets these verses broadly, explaining that they apply to all the commandments:

"My judgments you shall do" – "את מושפטי תעשו" – "אלו דברים האמורים בתורה במושפט, שאילו לא נאמרו היו כדאי לאמרן."
– These are matters that are stated in the Torah in **judgment**, for if they had not been stated, they would still have been worthy to be stated [by man].

<p>“And My laws you shall keep” – These are things that are the decree of the King, against which the evil inclination argues, “Why should we keep them?” And the nations of the world argue against them, for example: eating pig, wearing a garment of linen and wool, and purification via the waters of the sprinkling. For this reason it is said: “I am God” – I have decreed this upon you, and you are not permitted to be exempt from it. (Rashi on Lev. 18:4)</p>	<p>”ואת חקתי תשמורו” – דברים שהם גזירת המלך, שיצר הרע משיב עליהם למה לנו לשמור, ואומות העולם משיבין עליהם, כגון אכילת חזיר ולבישת שעטנז וטהרת מי חטאת, לכך נאמר ”אני ה'” גזרתי עליכם, אי אתם רשאים להפטור. רש”י, ויקרא י”ח, ד</p>
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According to this interpretation, the laws and judgments mentioned in the verses refer to all the commandments detailed in the Torah. “Judgments” refer to logical commandments – those which man should instinctively observe even without being commanded by God to do so. “Laws” are commandments that man would not have conceived of by himself. These commandments are observed solely because of God’s decree, which we uphold with no knowledge of the reasons behind these commandments.

In contrast to God’s commandments, the forbidden behavior of the Canaanites and the Egyptians refers to a corrupt culture that the Torah commands us to distance ourselves from. Rashi describes this culture in his commentary on verse 3:

“Like the acts of the land of Egypt” – this tells us that the acts of the Egyptians and the Canaanites were the most corrupt of all the nations, and the place in which the Israelites had dwelled was the most corrupt of all. (Rashi on Lev. 18:3)

”כמעשה ארץ מצרים” – מגיד שמעשיהם של מצריים ושל כנעניים מקולקלים מכל האומות, ואותו מקום שישבו בו ישראל מקולקל מן הכל.

Rashi’s interpretation assumes that the opening verses to chapter 18 are an independent section and are not linked to the verses which detail the prohibitions regarding forbidden relationships.²

Ibn Ezra reduces the scope of the prohibitions included in these verses:

IBN EZRA – FROM IDOLATRY TO FORBIDDEN RELATIONSHIPS

And since [the Torah] had mentioned the customs relating to satyrs that they would do in Egypt, this section was put

ובעבור שהזכיר דברי השעירים שהיו עושים במצרים, נסמכה זו הפרשה. והעריות על

2 Yet in his commentary on verse 2, Rashi quotes the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: “I am the Lord, your God’ – Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] says: It is revealed and known before Me that in the end they will be drawn after **forbidden relationships** in the days of Ezra; therefore, He came to them with a decree...” According to this interpretation, the first verses of the chapter are connected to the topic of forbidden relationships. However, Rashi’s preferred interpretation is that verses 2-5 separate the previous verses from the discussion of forbidden relationships that follows.

adjacent to it. And the forbidden relationships [are mentioned in connection with] the acts of the land of Canaan, for this is mentioned explicitly at the end. (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 18:2)

מעשה ארץ כנען, כי כן
מפורש בסוף.
אבן-עזרא, ויקרא י"ח, ב

According to Ibn Ezra, “**the acts of Egypt**” refers to their custom of sacrificing to satyrs, which was mentioned in the preceding verses (Lev. 17:7).³ “**The acts of Canaan**” refers to their engaging in forbidden relations, mentioned immediately afterwards (Lev. 18).⁴ Verse 3 marks the transition between two sections: the prohibition of slaughtering an animal outside of the camp⁵ (Lev. 17) and the prohibitions regarding forbidden relationships (Lev. 18). This verse emphasizes that both of these practices are gentile

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- 3 The Torah states: “And they shall no longer sacrifice their sacrifices to the satyrs after whom they go astray. This shall be a law forever for them, throughout their generations” (Lev. 17:7). Ibn Ezra comments: “And the words ‘**no longer**’ teach us that the Israelites had done so in Egypt” (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 17:7).
 - 4 This interpretation is supported by a later statement in verse 24: “Do not become impure by any of these, for by all of these the nations that I cast out from before you became impure.” Apparently, these transgressions were widespread among those who lived in the Land of Israel (see also Ramban on Lev. 18:2).
 - 5 The reason for this prohibition is stated explicitly in Lev 17:7 – to keep the nation from offering idolatrous sacrifices to the satyrs in the fields. It is possible that the other commandments detailed in chapter 17 (the prohibition against eating blood, the obligation to cover blood, and the prohibitions against eating animals that were not slaughtered properly or had certain defects) are also meant to distance the nation from the Egyptians’ customs.

customs – whether Egyptian or Canaanite – and it is forbidden to practice them.

This interpretation explains the apparently superfluous repetition in verse 3: “Like the acts of... you shall not act.” According to Ibn Ezra, this verse is a warning against two **distinct acts** corresponding to two **different nations**.⁶

**Ramban – An
Introduction
to Forbidden
Relationships**

Ramban quotes Ibn Ezra’s opinion and comments that “according to the opinion of the Sages on Leviticus, the Egyptians were also immersed in immorality, in all of the forbidden relationships... and this is the truth.” Ramban interprets the “acts of Egypt” as referring to forbidden relationships as well.⁷ According to this explanation, the first verses of chapter 18 serve only as an introduction to the topic of forbidden relationships, and are unrelated to the previous chapter.

6 The fact that the Egyptians are mentioned in connection with forbidden relationships, despite that they did not live in the Land of Israel, is explained by the *Ba’alei HaTosafot*:

כמעשה ארץ מצרים וכו'. משל לבת מלך היו לה ב' שכנות, א' מכשפה וא' מנאפת. אמר לה המלך: לא תעשי בתי לא כמעשה זו ולא כמעשה זו...

“Like the acts of the land of Egypt, etc.” – This may be likened to a princess with two neighbors – one who is a sorceress and another who is an adulteress. The king says to her: My daughter, do not act like this one or like that one... (*Ba’alei HaTosafot* on Lev. 18:3)

7 However, Ramban does not interpret the phrase “laws and judgments” mentioned in verses 4-5 as referring specifically to the prohibitions of forbidden relationships. Rather, he explains the word “judgments” [*mishpatim*] as referring to “the laws stated in *Parashat Mishpatim*.”

In summary, we have seen three opinions with regarding the purpose of the opening verses of chapter 18. We will now shift our focus to the remainder of chapter 18 and return to these verses later.

B. The Structure of Chapter 18

The rest of chapter 18 includes a long list of forbidden relationships. At the end of the chapter, the Torah emphasizes the severity of these prohibitions and the punishment for disobeying them:

shall not do any of these	אל תטמאו בכל אלה כי
abominations, neither the	בכל אלה נטמאו הגוים
native nor the stranger who	אשר אני מושלח מפניכם:
lives among you; for the	ותטמא הארץ ואפקד
people of the land before you	עונה עליה ותקא הארץ
did all of these abominations,	את ישיבה: ושמרתם אתם
and the land became impure;	את חקתי ואת משפטי ולא
so that the land not vomit	תעשו מכל התועבת האלה
you out when you defile it,	האזרח והגר הגר בתוכם:
as it vomited out the nation	כי את כל התועבת האל
that was before you. For	עשו אנשי הארץ אשר
anyone who does any of these	לפניכם ותטמא הארץ:
abominations – those souls	ולא תקיא הארץ אתכם
that do them shall be cut off	בטמאכם אתה באשר קאה
from among their people.	את הגוי אשר לפניכם:
And you shall keep My	כי כל אשר יעשה מכל
charge not to do any of	התועבות האלה ונקרתו
these abominable laws	הנפשות העשות מקרב
that were done before you,	עמם:

<p>and you shall not become impure by them; I am the Lord, your God. (Lev. 18:24-30)</p>	<p>וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם אֶת מִשְׁמֶרְתִּי לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת מִחֻקֹּת הַתּוֹעֵבֹת אֲשֶׁר גָּעִשׂוּ לְפָנֶיכֶם וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ בָהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם. וַיִּקְרָא י"ה, ח, כד-ל</p>
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**The End
Recalls the
Beginning**

These verses are reminiscent of the opening verses of the chapter:

The chapter begins and ends with “I am the Lord, your God” (verses 2, 30).

The root ה-ש-ע [“act”, “do”] is repeated several times in both the beginning (six times) and end (five times) of the chapter. This parallel indicates that the first and last verses of the chapter relate to the same topic – forbidden and appropriate behavior.⁸ Both the beginning and the end of the chapter discuss inappropriate behavior that is associated with particular gentile nations and warn specifically against imitating such behavior.

In the opening verses, the commandment to observe God’s laws and judgments is mentioned twice (verses 4-5); in the conclusion, the directive to observe God’s commandments is also mentioned twice (verses 26, 30). (In fact, verse 26

⁸ It should be noted that in the closing verses of the chapter, the root ה-ש-ע is used only to describe **negative** actions, while the obligation to observe God’s commandments and laws is described using the root ש-מ-ר [‘keep’].

is nearly a word-for-word repetition of verse 5: “And you shall keep My laws and My judgments.”⁹

The introductory verses contrast the **laws** of the gentiles with the **laws** of God. The final verses also reference the laws of the gentiles – which are described as “abominable” in contrast to God’s laws.

The word “land,” which appears twice in the opening verses (“land of Egypt” and “land of Canaan”) is repeated five times in the final verses – seven times altogether in the chapter. This indicates that the entire chapter is one unit.

**The
Complete
Structure**

The parallel between the opening and final verses supports the interpretation that the opening verses serve as an introduction to the chapter and, together with the final verses, form a framework for the chapter.

9 With one minor addition: “And **it is you who** shall keep...” This emphasizes the contrast between the nation of Israel and the gentiles.

THE BASIC STRUCTURE¹⁰ OF THE CHAPTER MAY BE DEFINED AS FOLLOWS:

Verses 1-5	Introduction	“I am the Lord, your God” Warning against the “acts of Egypt and acts of Canaan” Keeping God’s laws
Verses 6-23	Main Content	Details of the laws of forbidden relationships
Verses 24-30	Summary	Severity of the transgression, its accompanying impurity and its punishment (“the land vomited out its inhabitants”) Keeping God’s laws “I am the Lord, your God”

The final verses of the chapter clearly indicate that the forbidden behavior mentioned earlier refers to engaging in forbidden relations. In this case, it would seem that the first verses in the chapter refer to forbidden relationships as well, which is consistent with **Ramban’s opinion**¹¹ that both “the acts of Egypt” and “the acts of Canaan” refer to forbidden relationships.¹²

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<sup>10</sup> This is only a basic outline of the structure of the chapter. As we develop a more precise understanding of the final verses of the chapter, we will revise our interpretation of the structure and content of the chapter.

<sup>11</sup> Rashi’s statement, quoted above, may be explained by the commentary of the *Emek Davar* (see *Emek Davar* on Lev. 18:3).

<sup>12</sup> **Ibn Ezra’s** interpretation, which understands “the acts of Canaan” as referring to forbidden relationships, is apparently based on the fact that the final verses refer only

## C. Why the Repetition?

### Repetition in the Final Verses

In the final verses of the chapter, a number of phrases are repeated. The gentiles' abominable acts and subsequent impurity are mentioned three times (verses 24, 26 and 30). The warning against imitating their behavior appears twice (verses 26 and 30). Twice the Israelites are commanded to observe God's commandments and laws (verses 26 and 30), and twice they are warned not to make themselves impure through all of these inappropriate acts (verses 24 and 30). The impurity of the Land of Israel and its inclination to vomit out its inhabitants are also mentioned twice (verses 25, 27-28). Why does the Torah repeat all of these warnings and commandments?

### The Severity of Forbidden Relations

As the verses explain, the prohibition against forbidden relationships is extremely severe because it brings impurity both upon the person and the land. Repeated warnings are necessary to emphasize the gravity of these actions and the impurity they cause. The nation must take particular care to distance themselves from these transgressions.

### Rampant Immorality

In addition, these warnings must be emphasized because the Israelites lived among immoral nations, Egypt and Canaan. The Israelites required repeated warnings against forbidden relationships since immoral behavior was so prevalent in the surrounding

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to the inhabitants of Canaan as being sexually immoral, as is stated explicitly later on: "For the people of the land before you did all of these abominations..." Below we will discuss Ramban's solution to the challenge this verse presents for his interpretation.

culture. They must be constantly reminded that these actions – which were accepted and perhaps even considered holy among the other nations, who included such acts in their religious rituals – are actually a source of severe impurity.

**Eliciting an Emotional Response**

The final verses of chapter 18 repeat the root ט-מ-א [“become impure”] six times. Variations on the word “abomination” appear four times. Being cast out of the Land of Israel is described three times as being “vomited out” – a description that truly captures the attitude of disgust towards forbidden relationships. Ibn Ezra comments: “Anything that a person vomits is disgusting to him, and it will not return to him” (Ibn Ezra on Lev. 18:25).

The Torah chose two ways of establishing the nation’s **emotional response** to forbidden relationships: (a) it describes such acts as viscerally disgusting and (b) it repeats the same warnings and phrases several times. This conditioning was especially necessary in the Israelites’ case, as they had spent a prolonged period living among the sexually immoral Egyptian culture.

**Not Repetition, but Different Emphasis**

Each repetition of the warnings might be independently significant. The closing verses of chapter 18 warn twice against imitating other nations’ behavior:

And you shall not do any of these abominations...for the people of the land before you did all of these abominations... (Lev. 18:26-27)

וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ מִכֹּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה... כִּי אֵת כָּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵל עָשׂוּ אֲנֹשֵׁי הָאֲרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לְפָנֵיכֶם. וַיִּקְרָא י"ח, כו-כו

...Not to do any of these **מחוקות** עשותיך  
abominable laws that were **התועבות** אשר נעשו  
done before you... (Lev. 18:30) **לפניכם**. ויקרא י"ח, ל

In both cases, the forbidden, abominable acts are associated with the **gentiles who inhabit the Land of Israel –the Canaanites**.

The Egyptians' behavior is not mentioned here. Ibn Ezra seems to be correct in his interpretation that the acts of the Canaanites are related to forbidden relationships, while the Egyptians are guilty of other sins. However, a closer look at the verses reveals that these verses focus specifically on the impurity brought upon the **Land of Israel** through forbidden relationships. This might be why the Canaanites actions are highlighted – they are the current inhabitants of the Land.

Is this the **only** issue that these verses seek to emphasize?

## D. Two Types of Impurity

### Personal Impurity

The first words of the final section of the chapter are: “Do not **become impure** by any of these,” and the last words are “And you shall not **become impure** by them; I am the Lord, your God.” These two statements, which frame the section, describe the impurity brought about by sexual immorality – but they refer specifically to **personal impurity, not to impurity of the land**.

The main focus of the chapter seems to be the impurity brought upon the **land** by forbidden relations (this point is repeated a number of times throughout the chapter), yet the introduction and summary of the chapter both emphasize the **personal** impurity caused by such acts. (Of course, the commandment to abstain from forbidden relations is not dependent on being in the Land of Israel, and these transgressions are first and foremost a source of personal impurity.)<sup>13</sup>

In summary, the verses discuss two issues: impurity of the land and personal impurity. The verses may thus be divided into two groups:

#### A. PERSONAL IMPURITY

The verses that refer to this issue appear at the end of the chapter:

|                                                                                                                                      |                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Do not become impure by any of these, for by all of these <b>the nations</b> [that I cast out from before you] became impure.</p> | <p>אל תטמאו בכל אלה כי<br/>בכל אלה נטמאו הגוים...<br/>שם, כד</p> |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|

(Lev. 18:24)

|                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>For anyone who does any of these abominations – <b>those souls that do them shall be cut off</b> from among their people. And you shall keep My charge not to do any of these</p> | <p>כי כל אשר יעשה מכל<br/>התועבות האלה ונכרתו<br/>הנפשות העשת מקרב<br/>עמם: ושמרתם את<br/>משמרתתי לבלתי עשות<br/>מחקות התועבת אשר</p> |
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<sup>13</sup> See Ramban on Lev. 18:25, where he comments on the link between forbidden relations and bringing impurity upon the Land of Israel. We will discuss this point at the end of the lesson.

abominable laws that were done before you, and you shall not become impure by them; I am the Lord, your God. (Lev. 18:29-30)

נַעֲשׂוּ לְפָנֶיכֶם וְלֹא תִטְמְאוּ בָהֶם.  
שם, כט-ל

According to these verses, forbidden relations primarily cause a person to become impure – like the nations whom the Israelites are warned against imitating, who will be punished by spiritual excision [*karet*]. Any Israelite who transgresses these commandments will likewise be punished by excision. The Land of Israel is not mentioned in these verses with regard to impurity or punishment.

## B. IMPURITY OF THE LAND

In the Land of Israel, transgressions of this kind assume significance beyond the aspect of personal impurity. The unique sanctity of the Land of Israel is marred when the people who inhabit it engage in forbidden relations.

The remainder of the summary verses of the chapter discuss the **impurity of the land** caused by forbidden relations. The summary may thus be divided into verses that discuss the **impurity of the land** and verses that discuss **personal impurity**:

Do not become impure by any of these, for by all of these the nations that I cast out from before you became impure.

(כד) אַל תִּטְמְאוּ בְכֹל אֱלֹהֵי כָּל אֲרָצוֹת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מוֹשְׁלֵחַ מִפְּנֵיכֶם:

And the land became impure, and I visited its sin upon it, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. And it is you who shall keep My laws and judgments, and you shall not do any of these abominations, neither the native nor the stranger who lives among you; for the people of the land before you did all of these abominations, and the land became impure; so that the land not vomit you out when you cause it to become impure, as it vomited out the nation that was before you.

For anyone who does any of these abominations – those souls that do them shall be cut off from among their people. And you shall keep My charge not to do any of these abominable laws that were done before you, and you shall not become impure by them; I am the Lord, your God. (Lev. 18:24-30)

(כה) וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ וְאֶפְקַד עֲוֹנָהּ עָלֶיהָ וַתִּקְא הָאָרֶץ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כו) וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת מִשְׁפָּטַי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ מִכֹּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה הַאֲזִיחַ וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (כז) כִּי אֶת כָּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵל עָשׂוּ אַנְשֵׁי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיכֶם וַתִּטְמָא הָאָרֶץ: (כח) וְלֹא תִקְיֵא הָאָרֶץ אֶתְכֶם בְּטִמְאַכֶם אֹתָהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר קָאָה אֶת הַגּוֹי אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵיכֶם:

(כט) כִּי כָל אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה מִכֹּל הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְנִכְרְתוּ הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת הַעֲשֵׂת מִקְרֵב עַמָּם: (ל) וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת מִשְׁמֵרֹתַי לְבִלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת מִחֻקֹּת הַתּוֹעֵבוֹת אֲשֶׁר נַעֲשׂוּ לִפְנֵיכֶם וְלֹא תִטְמָאוּ בָהֶם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

Chapter  
Summary  
- Division  
into Two  
Types of  
Impurity

|                                                   | Verses describing personal impurity                                                                                                                        | Verses describing impurity of the land                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The acts of the other nations (ה-ש-ע, “act”/“do”) | Not to do of these abominable laws<br><br>that were <b>done</b> before you                                                                                 | ... <b>And you shall not do any of these abominations...</b> for all of these <b>abominations</b><br><br>the people of the land before you did |
| Warning (ה-מ-ש, “keep”)                           | <b>And you shall keep</b> My charge                                                                                                                        | And it is <b>you who shall keep</b> My laws and judgments                                                                                      |
| Impurity                                          | Do not <b>become impure</b> by any of these, for by all of these the <b>nations... became impure</b><br><br>And you shall not <b>become impure</b> by them | And the land <b>became impure</b><br><br>And the land <b>became impure...</b> when you cause it to <b>become impure</b>                        |

|                                            |                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Punish-<br>ment<br>(spiritual<br>excision) | Those souls that<br>do <b>them shall<br/>be cut off</b> from<br>among their<br>people | And I visited its sin<br>upon it<br><br>and the land <b>vomited<br/>out</b> its inhabitants<br><br>so that the land<br>not <b>vomit you out...</b><br>as it <b>vomited out</b><br>the nation that was<br>before you |
|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The table above demonstrates that the Torah uses similar language to describe both types of impurity. The numerous repetitions evident in this section reveal that this section is **discussing two distinct topics**.

### C. IMPURITY OF THE NATION AND THE LAND

**The  
Isolated  
Verse**

Verse 28 – “So that the land not vomit you out when you cause it to become impure, as it vomited out the nation that was before you” – does not seem to fit into the structure outlined in the above table. This verse, which describes the land vomiting out its inhabitants, does not have any linguistic parallels to the verses that describe personal impurity. It also seems to repeat the idea, stated in verses 25 and 27, that the land becomes impure and vomits out its inhabitants. Is verse 28 merely another repetition to emphasize this point?

**The Link  
between  
Impurity  
of the  
Nation  
and  
Impurity  
of the  
Land**

There is an additional significance to verse 28. Verses 25 and 27 illustrate how the sins of the gentile inhabitants of the Land of Israel caused the **land** to become impure and vomit them out. However, verse 28 emphasizes the role of the **Israelites** and how they may be affected by their own actions. This verse adds two significant points:

**A.** The nation of Israel is not immune from being cast out of the Land of Israel if they cause it to become impure. This is an important point, as the nation may have otherwise thought that only the gentiles were in danger of being cast out of the land if they sinned.

**B.** Verse 28 describes the scenario where the Israelites engage in forbidden relations as “When you cause it to become impure.” This contrasts the verses that describe the gentiles’ actions, which state only that the people became impure, or that they or engaged in abominable behavior that caused the land to become impure. This verse emphasizes the nation’s active role in the process and the link between the impurity of the nation and the impurity of the land.

## **D. Summary**

Verses 24-30 summarize the topic of forbidden relationships. These verses emphasize the two types of impurity that result from these actions – personal impurity and impurity of the land.

**Personal impurity** is mentioned at the beginning and end of this summary. This reflects the importance

of this point and its status as a **fundamental** aspect of forbidden relations, despite that it is mentioned in only a few of verses and is not mentioned at all in the main section of the chapter.

**Impurity of the land** is strongly emphasized in the main section of the chapter. The word “land” is also repeated a number of times in the introduction and summary verses. This reflects the **inherent moral significance** of the purity of the land.

Personal impurity as a result of sin exists everywhere, both inside and outside the Land of Israel. However, forbidden relationships within the Land of Israel result in an additional aspect of impurity since they cause the land itself to become impure and cast out the offending inhabitants.<sup>14</sup>

## E. Egypt and Canaan

In the introductory section, verse 3 mentions two nations whose behavior must not be imitated – Egypt and Canaan.

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<sup>14</sup> In his commentary on verse 25, Ramban states that “the main portion of the commandments is given to the inhabitants of the Land of God” (Ramban on Lev. 18:25). According to this interpretation, the prohibitions against certain relationships hold greater significance in the Land of Israel. Here Ramban develops the link between forbidden relationships and impurity of the land, but also states that this connection is a “great and hidden secret.” Below we will expand upon the unique relationship between forbidden relationships and the Land of Israel.

Until now, we have interpreted this to mean that the Israelites lived in close proximity to two nations, whose acts were mentioned to contrast with God's commandments to His people. Why are the two nations mentioned separately, as opposed to the text simply stating: "Like the acts of Egypt and Canaan"?

This too may be explained according to the interpretation suggested above, which focuses on the distinction between personal impurity and impurity of the land. The transgressions of both the Egyptians and the Canaanites were in the realm of forbidden relationships. However, **the Canaanites' sins caused the land to become impure and cast them out, while the Egyptians' sins led only to personal impurity.**

Just as the closing verses of the chapter distinguish between personal impurity and impurity of the land, so too the introductory verses describe two separate types of impurity caused by two distinct acts – the acts of Egypt (which led to personal impurity) and the acts of Canaan (which led to impurity of the land). This emphasizes the additional element of impurity inherent in performing these acts in the Land of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

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15 As we mentioned at the beginning of the lesson, the commandment to observe God's laws and judgments appears twice in the introductory verses as well. In light of the interpretation suggested above, this repetition may be viewed as two individual warnings against imitating the distinct actions of two nations. This commandment also appears twice in the final section of the chapter – once in the verses that discuss impurity of the land and again in the verses that describe personal impurity.

F. Forbidden Relations and Impurity of the Land

While this theme is heavily emphasized in this *parasha*, it is actually first mentioned in the book of Genesis.

Ham's Sin and Canaan's Flawed Nature

The verses in Gen. 9:18-29 describe the sin of Ham, Noah's son: he saw his father naked and revealed this to his brothers. Many commentators attempt to explain the exact nature of Ham's sin, but all agree that it was of a sexual nature.¹⁶ Following Ham's actions, Noah curses Ham's son Canaan and blesses Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth, who acted respectfully towards their father.

This story raises a number of questions,¹⁷ but here we will focus on one: why did Noah curse **Canaan**, when the verses state that his father **Ham** was the one who sinned?

A number of commentators have suggested answers to this question,¹⁸ including Radak:

[Noah] saw that he and his descendants would be evil forever... (Radak on Gen. 9:24)

ראה כי רע יהיה הוא וזרעו עד עולם...
רד"ק בראשית ט', כד

According to this interpretation, Canaan was cursed not because of Ham's previous actions, but because Noah realized that these actions reflected

16 See our lesson on *Parashat Chayei Sarah*.

17 For further discussion of this topic, see Sharon Rimon, "Migdal Bavel" in *Dor HaPelaga – HaSippur BeHekshero*, p. 142-155 (MA thesis).

18 See *Bereshit Rabba* 26:7 (on *Parashat Noach*).

the inherently negative nature of Ham and his descendants.

Umberto [Moshe David] Cassuto expands upon this idea:

Noah's words regarding Canaan's curse and his servitude under Shem and Japheth are not directed personally against Canaan, son of Ham, but against the nation of Canaan, Canaan's descendants generations later, who are nearly as far removed from their forefather Canaan as they are from Ham. It is not a case of a son receiving punishment for his father's sins; rather, the perspective here is broader. Even those distant descendants are not punished for the sins of their forefather. In fact, Ham represents the Canaanites who would later be known to the Israelites, and Ham's actions are symbolic of the later actions of the Canaanites. This is the meaning of the phrase "father of Canaan." The curse will affect the descendants of Canaan not because of Ham's sins, but because they will act

דברי נח על קללת כנען ועל שעבודו בידי שם ויפת אינם מכוונים נגד האיש כנען בן חם, אלא נגד עם בני כנען, צאצאי של כנען לאחר דורי דורות, הרחוקים מכנען אביהם כמעט באותה המידה שהם רחוקים מחם. אין כאן מקרה של בן המקבל עונש בעוון אביו. המבט רחב הרבה יותר. ואף אותם הצאצאים המאוחרים אינם נענשים על חטא אביהם הקדמון, אלא חם כאן הוא סמל לבני כנען הידועים לבני ישראל, ומעשי חם הם סמל למעשי בני כנען. זה פירושו של הביטוי "אבי כנען". הקללה תחול על בני כנען לא מפני חטאי חם, אלא מפני שהם עושים כמעשיו של חם, מפני

as Ham did – because of their own sins, which are similar to those attributed to Ham in this symbolic story. (Umberto [Moshe David] Cassuto, *MiNoach ad Avraham*, p. 102-117)

חטאיהם הם, הדומים לאלה המיוחסים להם בסיפור סמלי זה. "מנח עד אברהם", עמ' 117-102

Canaan's curse indicates that Ham's sin was not a one-time act. Rather, it is a **reflection of his nature** –not only Ham's personal nature, but one that would be passed on to his descendants. Had the curse been directed at Ham himself, we would not have understood that this curse relates to an inherent flaw that is evident in Ham's offspring. This narrative reveals Ham's moral shortcomings in the sexual sphere.

WHO ARE HAM'S DESCENDANTS?

**Ham's
Descendants
– Immersed
in Forbidden
Relationships**

Gen. 10 details the genealogy of Noah and his sons. Among Ham's sons are *Mitzrayim [Egypt]*, *Pelishtim [Philistine]*¹⁹ and *Kena'an [Canaan]*. Throughout the

19 Gen. 10:13-14 states:

וּמִצְרַיִם יָלַד אֶת לֹדִים וְאֶת עֲנָמִים וְאֶת לְהָבִים וְאֶת נַפְתֻּחִים וְאֶת פַּתְרוּסִים וְאֶת פְּסָלְחִים
אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מִשֵּׁם פְּלִשְׁתִּים וְאֶת פַּתְרוּרִים.

And *Mitzrayim [Egypt]* fathered Ludim, and Anamim, and Lehavim, and Naphtuhim; and Pathrusim, and Casluhim – from whom the Philistines came forth – and Caphtorim. (Gen. 10:13-14)

Rashi explains:

"את פתרוסים ואת כסלוחים אשר יצאו משם פלשתים" – משניהם יצאו שהיו פתרוסים וכסלוחים מחליפין משכב נשותיהם אלו לאלו ויצאו מהם פלשתים.

"Pathrusim and Casluhim – from which the Philistines went forth" – [The Philistines] came forth from both of them, for the Pathrusim and Casluhim would exchange their wives for relations, and the Philistines came forth from both of them.

Bible, these nations engage the same forbidden sexual acts as their forefather Ham – acts that reflect this flaw in their nature:

The Egyptians were known for their utter lack of

(Rashi on Gen. 10:14)

Ramban, however, prefers to interpret the verse according to its simple understanding:

היו כסלוחים יושבי עיר ששמה כן, והיתה מכלל ארץ כפתור אשר שם כפתורים אחיהם, ויצאו משם מן הכפתורים אשר הם מזרע כסלוחים והלכו לתור להם מנוחה והניחו הארץ לאחיהם וכבשו להם ארץ ששמה פלשת, ונקראו אחר כך פלשתים, על שם הארץ, והוא מה שכתוב (דברים ב', כב): "כפתורים היוצאים מכפתור השמידום וישבו תחתם", והם מבני כסלוחים יושבי ארץ כפתור.

The Casluhim inhabited a city of the same name, and it was part of the land of Caphtor, where their brothers the Caphtorim lived. And they left the Caphtorim, who were descended from the Casluhim, and went in search of a restful place, and they left the land to their brothers. And they captured a land called Peleshet, and from then on they were called *Pelishtim* [Philistines], after the land. And this is what is written: "The Caphtorim, who came forth out of Caphtor, destroyed them and dwelled in their stead" (Deut. 2:23) – they are the descendants of the Casluhim who lived in the land of Caphtor.

The Philistines are identified with the descendants of Caphtor in Jeremiah as well:

על היום הנבא לשדוד את כל פלשתים להכרית לצר ולצידון כל שריד עזר כי שרד ה' את פלשתים שארית אי כפתור.

Because of the day that comes to pillage all of the Philistines, to cut off from Tyre and Zidon every remaining helper; for God will pillage the Philistines, the remnant of the island of Caphtor. (Jer. 47:4)

See also Amos 9:7.

However, it is generally accepted among archaeologists that the Philistines are not descended from the Egyptians, based on an Egyptian document that identifies the Philistines as one of the nations of the sea, who were at war with Egypt during the reign of Ramses III (at the beginning of the 12th century BCE). Further discussion of this issue may be found in Umberto [Moshe David] Cassuto, *MiNoach ad Avraham*, p. 115-117.

morality,²⁰ which forces Abraham to present Sarah as his sister so that the Egyptians would not kill him to make her available to them. The same sequence of events repeats itself with Abimelech, the Philistine king of Gerar. The rape of Dina is committed by Hamor the Hivvite, one of the descendants of Canaan. The abhorrent behavior of Sodom (mentioned in Gen. 10 as being within the borders of Canaan)²¹ is also related to forbidden sexual acts.

**The
Borders
of Canaan
in Noah's
Genealogy**

As mentioned above, Gen. 10 details a genealogy of Noah and his sons. The **only** geographical borders mentioned in this list are those of the land of Canaan:

And the Canaanite border was	וַיְהִי גְבוּל הַכְּנַעֲנִי מִצִּידוֹן
from Zidon, coming toward	בְּאַקָּה גְרָרָה עַד עֵזָה
Gerar, until Gaza; coming	בְּאַקָּה סְדֹמָה וְעֹמֹרָה
toward Sodom and Gomorrah	וְאַדְמָה וְצֹבִים עַד לְשֵׁעַ.
and Admah and Zeboim, until	בְּרֵאשִׁית יִי, יט

Lasha. (Gen. 10:19)

The chapter may be merely listing the people and places that appear in later narratives. The borders of Canaan are important background information for God's promise to Abraham that he would inherit the land.

Many commentators explain that the borders

 20 See also Ezekiel 23.

21 In Genesis 10, which outlines the general borders of Canaan, **Sodom and Gomorrah are explicitly mentioned.** Apparently, it is no coincidence that the Torah chose to mention these two particular cities.

of Canaan are mentioned because of the singular significance of this land, which will ultimately be promised to the chosen people.²² Moreover, the link between sexual morality and inheriting the Land of Israel (formerly Canaan) is established from the time of Noah, the rebirth of humanity. The detailed lineage of each of the nations appears immediately after the story of Ham's sin. The borders of Canaan are outlined specifically within the list of Ham's descendants, who are described as sexually immoral. This juxtaposition emphasizes the incompatibility between the holiness of the Land of Israel and the immorality of its inhabitants, who are ultimately cast out of the land.

**Inheriting
the Land
of Canaan;
Becoming
the Land
of Israel**

The land of Canaan, son of Ham, is the land to which Abraham is commanded to travel. It is the same land promised to him and his descendants; the land that would become the focal point of a conflict between the nations of Israel and Canaan for generations. This very land rejected the descendants of Ham due to their sexually immoral nature; it is the land that the Children of Israel, the descendants of Shem, are given as the land of God. In this land the connection between God and the nation is fully expressed – a connection that was first described by Noah:

<p>Blessed is the Lord, God of Shem; and Canaan shall be their servant. (Gen. 9:26)</p>	<p>בְּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֵי שֵׁם וַיְהִי כְנַעַן עֶבֶד לָמוֹ. בְּרֵאשִׁית ט', כו</p>
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22 See Ramban, *Hizkuni* and Radak ad loc.

In *Parashat Acharei Mot*, the Torah reminds the Israelites that their land, the land of God, rejected the Canaanites due to their unacceptable sexual behavior. God warns the nation repeatedly to avoid engaging in forbidden relations not only because of the counterproductive influence of the surrounding culture, and not only because of the individual transgressions involved, but **because the nation's inheritance of the land depends upon their commitment to observe the commandments regarding forbidden relationships**. Lack of caution in this area may cause the Israelites to forfeit their land. It is no coincidence that the Land of Israel was originally given to the Canaanites, who were later cast out when the Israelites inherited the land (perhaps if God had known in advance that their actions would cause the land to become impure, he could have given them a different land at the outset). This process underscores the clash between the descendants of Ham and the descendants of Shem – one not based solely upon ownership of a certain piece of land, but a deeper cultural-spiritual conflict.

## G. “You shall be holy”

In this *parasha*, the Torah addresses the negative side of sexual behavior by warning against forbidden relations and their consequences – being cast out of the Land of Israel. The next *parasha*, *Parashat Kedoshim*, adds the positive aspect of sexual morality – the holiness granted to the nation of Israel for observing these laws.

*Parashat Kedoshim* opens with a command to be holy:

You shall be holy, for I, the Lord  
**your God**, am holy. (Lev. 19:2)

קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קְדוֹשׁ  
אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם.  
וּקְרָא י"ט, ב

Rashi links this verse to the previous discussion of forbidden relationships. He writes:

“You shall be holy” –abstain  
from forbidden relationships  
and sin, for anywhere you find  
a precaution against forbidden  
relations, there you find  
holiness. (Rashi on Lev. 19:2)

”קְדוּשִׁים תִּהְיוּ” - הוּו  
פְרוּשִׁים מִן הָעֲרִיּוֹת וּמִן  
הָעֵבִירָה, שְׁכָל מְקוֹם  
שֶׁאֵתָהּ מוֹצֵא גֹדֵר עֲרוּהָ  
אֵתָהּ מוֹצֵא קְדוּשָׁה.

The discussion of this topic in *Parashat Kedoshim* (Lev. 20) specifically emphasizes the holiness brought about by observing God’s laws and taking precautions against forbidden relationships. This section begins with the following verses:

And make yourselves holy, and  
be holy, for I am the Lord, your  
God. And keep my laws, and do  
them, I am God, Who makes  
you holy. (Lev. 20:7-8)

וְהִתְקַדְּשִׁתֶּם וְהִיִּיתֶם  
קְדוּשִׁים כִּי אֲנִי ה'  
אֱ-לֹהֵיכֶם: וּשְׁמֹרְתֶם אֶת  
חֻקֹּתַי וְעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם אֲנִי  
ה' מְקַדְּשְׁכֶם.  
וּקְרָא כ', ז-ח

It concludes with the verse:

And you shall be holy to Me, for  
I, God, am holy... (Lev. 20:26)

וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי קְדוּשִׁים כִּי  
קְדוֹשׁ אֲנִי ה'...  
וּקְרָא כ', כו