Leviticus

Lesson #10

Echoes of Onan

(Leviticus 15: 1-33)

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Review

As we entered Leviticus 13-14 we encountered detailed instructions concerning a condition that Scripture terms *sara'at*, a Hebrew word traditionally translated "leprosy." To be sure, *sara'at* is a much broader term than "leprosy," or modern-day Hansen's disease; in Scripture it is a condition that infects people, clothing and even houses in the form of "mold" or "mildew," and it manifests itself as "scales"; hence, our *Catholic Study Bible* translates *sara'at* as "scaly infection"; Jacob Milgrom renders it as "scale disease."

Ask a modern-day dermatologist what *sara'at* is, based upon Leviticus 13-14, and he or she will say, "I don't know," for *sara'at* does not describe any known medical condition, either today or in the ancient past.

In Leviticus *sara'at* is not a medical condition, but an emblem of sin and death. Understanding the condition in this way opened the door to a much deeper understanding of the "scaly infections" in Leviticus 13-14.

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Preview

Leviticus 15 now takes us into the arena of normal and abnormal sexual discharges among men and women, a topic that baffles (and embarrasses) many readers! Why would a woman be "unclean" during her menstrual cycle? Why would a man with a "genital discharge" be "unclean?" And why would any article that touches such a person (bedding, clothing, dishes, etc.) also be "unclean?"

In short, why this obsession with sexual bodily fluids?

In Lesson #10 we find out!

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I where Dr. C. will go with this lesson?
I think I'll go hide.
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In our study of Leviticus we have highlighted the basic dichotomy between life and death, the sacred and profane, the clean and unclean.

Virtually every ancient polytheistic culture believed that the negative side of the equation—death, the profane and the "unclean"—resulted from the actions of demonic forces that inhabit our world, forces that strive mightily to corrupt humanity, moving us ever-closer to death. Such ancient cultures developed rites and rituals—some simple, some profound—to expel the demonic and to cleanse the people.

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Judaism banished the idea of the demonic, however, replacing it with the corrupting influence of *sin*, although remnants of the demonic lingered in the background even in New Testament times (for example, Jesus "casting out" demons).

The levitical system, however, expunged such ideas. In Leviticus it is humanity's sin that corrupts, not demons. Like a poisonous cloud, sin makes "unclean" all that it penetrates: the Tabernacle, the covenant community and the sinful person himself. When such contamination occurs, it must be cleansed, or God will leave his sanctuary and his people.

Jacob Milgrom summarizes how such contamination works:

1. The contamination of the sacred varies directly with the intensity of the impurity source; directly with the holiness intensity of the sacred; and inversely with the distance between the two;
2. the Tabernacle is a special case, for severe impurities will contaminate the sanctuary from any distance; and
3. each stage of purification reduces the communicability of the impurity source by degrees.

***Leviticus, (*Continental Commentary), p. 140.)**

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Leviticus 12-15 discuss three types of contamination:

1. **genital discharges during childbirth (12: 1-8);**
2. ***sara'at*, "scaly infections" or "leprosy" (13: 1 – 14: 57); and**
3. **bodily discharges of a sexual nature (15: 1-33).**

The fact that all three are grouped together suggests they have common characteristics: all three make a person "unclean," unable to interact with the sacred or participate fully in the life of the covenant community.

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I've learned by now that nothing in Scripture is accidental. I wonder why the three types of impurities are presented in the order they are?
Only you would think of that question!
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Types of Contamination

1. genital discharges during childbirth (12: 1-8);
2. *sara'at*, "scaly infections" or "leprosy" (13: 1 – 14: 57); and
3. bodily discharges of a sexual nature (15: 1-33).

If the categories were arranged *<u>thematically,</u>* #3 "bodily discharges of a sexual nature" would follow or precede #1 "Genital discharges during childbirth."

Types of Contamination

1. genital discharges during childbirth (12: 1-8);
2. *sara'at*, "scaly infections" or "leprosy" (13: 1 – 14: 57); and
3. bodily discharges of a sexual nature (15: 1-33).

Once again, Professor Milgrom rides to the rescue: Instead of being arranged thematically, the categories are arranged *according to the duration and complexity of the purification process, in descending order*.

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So, that means that the "bodily discharges of a sexual nature" are the least complex!
I wouldn't know. I got "fixed" when I was a puppy.
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So, let's have a look at these "bodily discharges of a sexual nature."

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Oh, my!
Here we go.

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Bodily Discharges of a Sexual Nature

(Leviticus 15: 1-33)

Introduction (v. 1)

- **A** Men
  - **a** Abnormal discharges (2-15)
  - **b** Normal discharges (16-18)
- **B** Women
  - **b'** Normal Discharges (19-24)
  - **a'** Abnormal discharges (25-30)

Conclusion (vv. 31-33)

We have a basic 2-part structure, A & B. But notice the artful chiastic cohesion holding the two parts together:

Abnormal a — b Normal

Normal — b' — a' Abnormal

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Leviticus 15 focuses on discharges from the sexual organs, the source of life. When a man and a woman have intercourse, the potential for creating life exists. Any other purpose *of* or result *from* the sexual organs is the opposite of life: death.

So once again, we see in the "clean" and "unclean" laws of sexuality a symbolic representation of the primal struggle between life and death, with life seeking to emerge victorious and death lurking at the foot of the bed, as it were.

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Bodily Discharges

"Men/Normal," (15: 2-12)

"When any man has a genital discharge, he is thereby unclean. Such is his uncleanness from this discharge, whether his body drains freely with the discharge or is blocked up from the discharge. His uncleanness is on him all the days that his body discharges or is blocked up from his discharge; this is his uncleanness. . . . any bed he lies on . . . article he sits on . . . whoever touches the bed, article or body of the man . . . whoever the man spits on . . . any saddle he sits on . . . whoever touches anything that was under him . . . anyone the man touches . . . any earthenware or wooden object he touches . . . shall be unclean.

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Look closely at the text:

•"*When any man has a genital discharge*" mutes the statement in Hebrew. A more graphic rendering reads: "*Should any man have a flow from his penis*." As Robert Alter points out, the primary meaning of the noun *basar* is "flesh," an obvious euphemism for "penis," and the Hebrew *zov* (here "flow") is the root in "a land *flowing* with milk and honey."

•The most probable disease referred to here is gonorrhea.

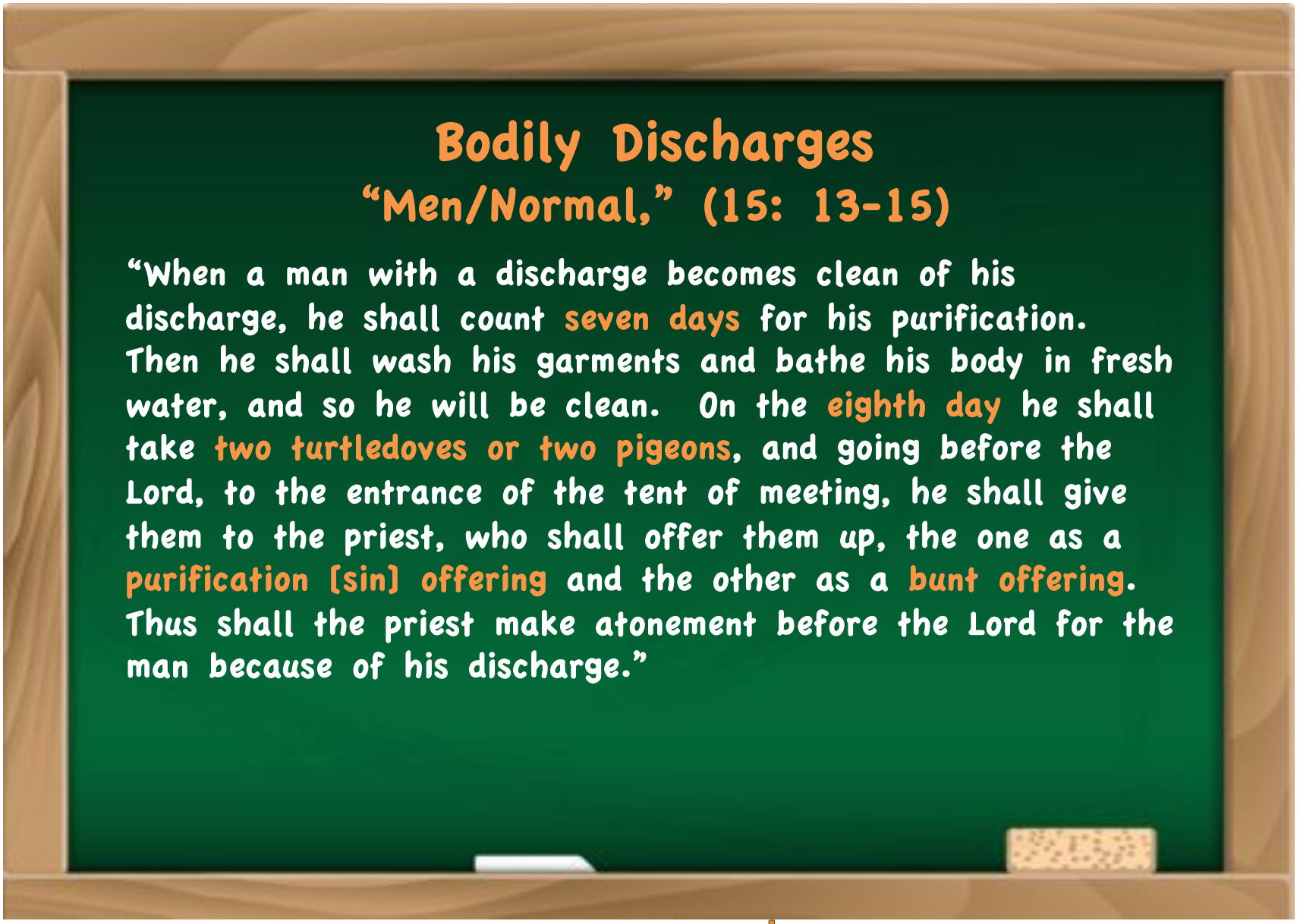
•Importantly, the use of the imperfect verb tenses throughout this section imply that the man in question is not banished from the community, as he would be with "leprosy," nor even isolated within the community: he continues to live at home.

•Unlike other types of impurity which are like a noxious cloud, the man with the discharge must touch something to make it unclean, and by the principle of *sanctum contagion*, anything someone else touches that he touched becomes unclean, as well.

Bodily Discharges

"Men/Normal," (15: 13-15)

"When a man with a discharge becomes clean of his discharge, he shall count seven days for his purification. Then he shall wash his garments and bathe his body in fresh water, and so he will be clean. On the eighth day he shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, and going before the Lord, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, he shall give them to the priest, who shall offer them up, the one as a purification [sin] offering and the other as a bunt offering. Thus shall the priest make atonement before the Lord for the man because of his discharge."



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The purification rite supports Jacob Milgrom's contention that the contamination categories are arranged not thematically, but according to the duration and complexity of the purification process, in descending order.

- **Purification after childbirth takes 40 or 80 days and 2 sacrifices;**
- **Purification after *sara'at* ("leprosy") requires 8 days, 4 sacrifices and anointing; and**
- **Purification after a man's genital discharge requires 8 days and 2 sacrifices.**

Bodily Discharges

"Men/Normal," (15: 16-18)

"When a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water and be unclean until evening. Any piece of cloth or leather with semen on it shall be washed with water and be unclean until evening."

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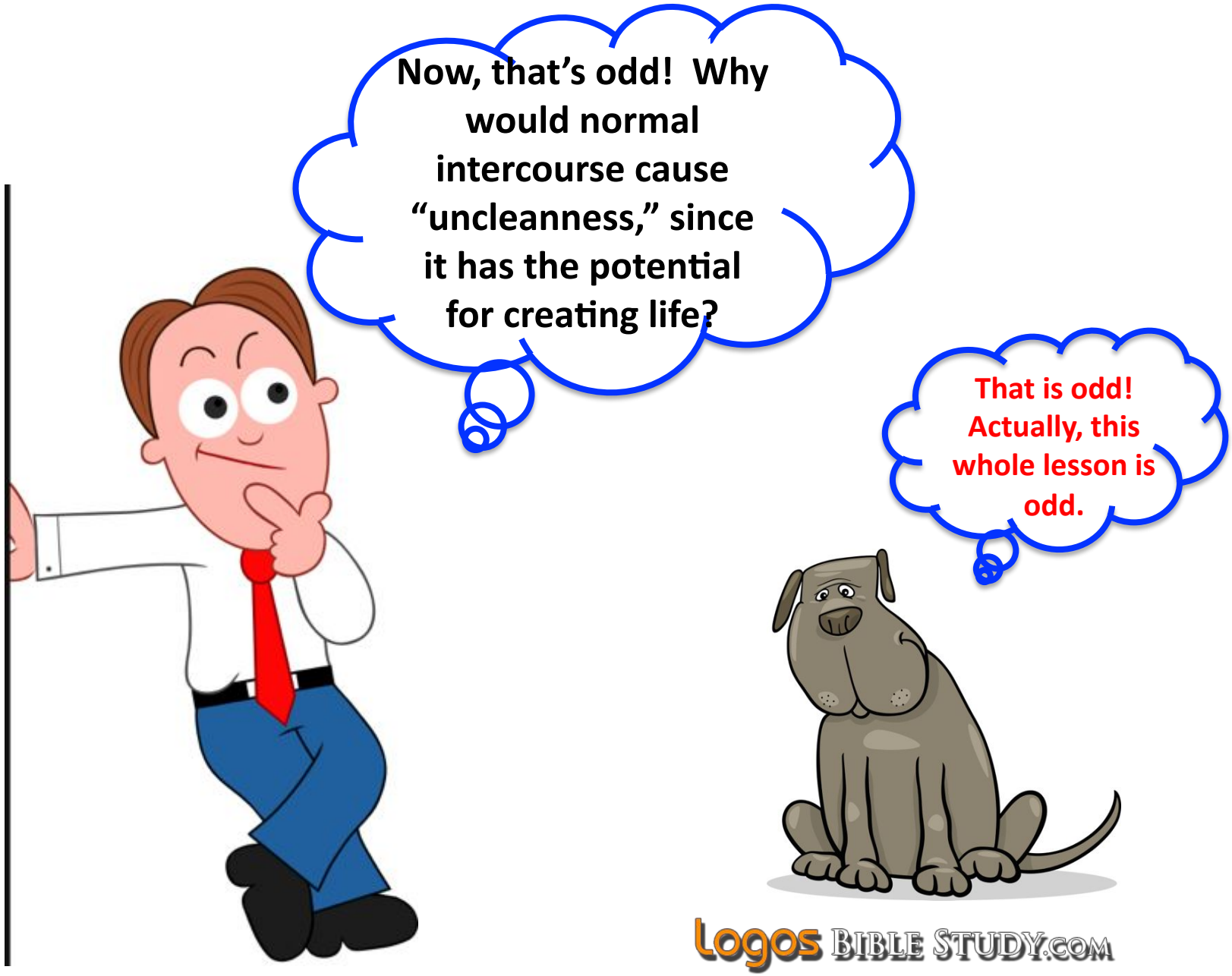
Now, that's odd! Why would normal intercourse cause "uncleanness," since it has the potential for creating life?
That is odd! Actually, this whole lesson is odd.
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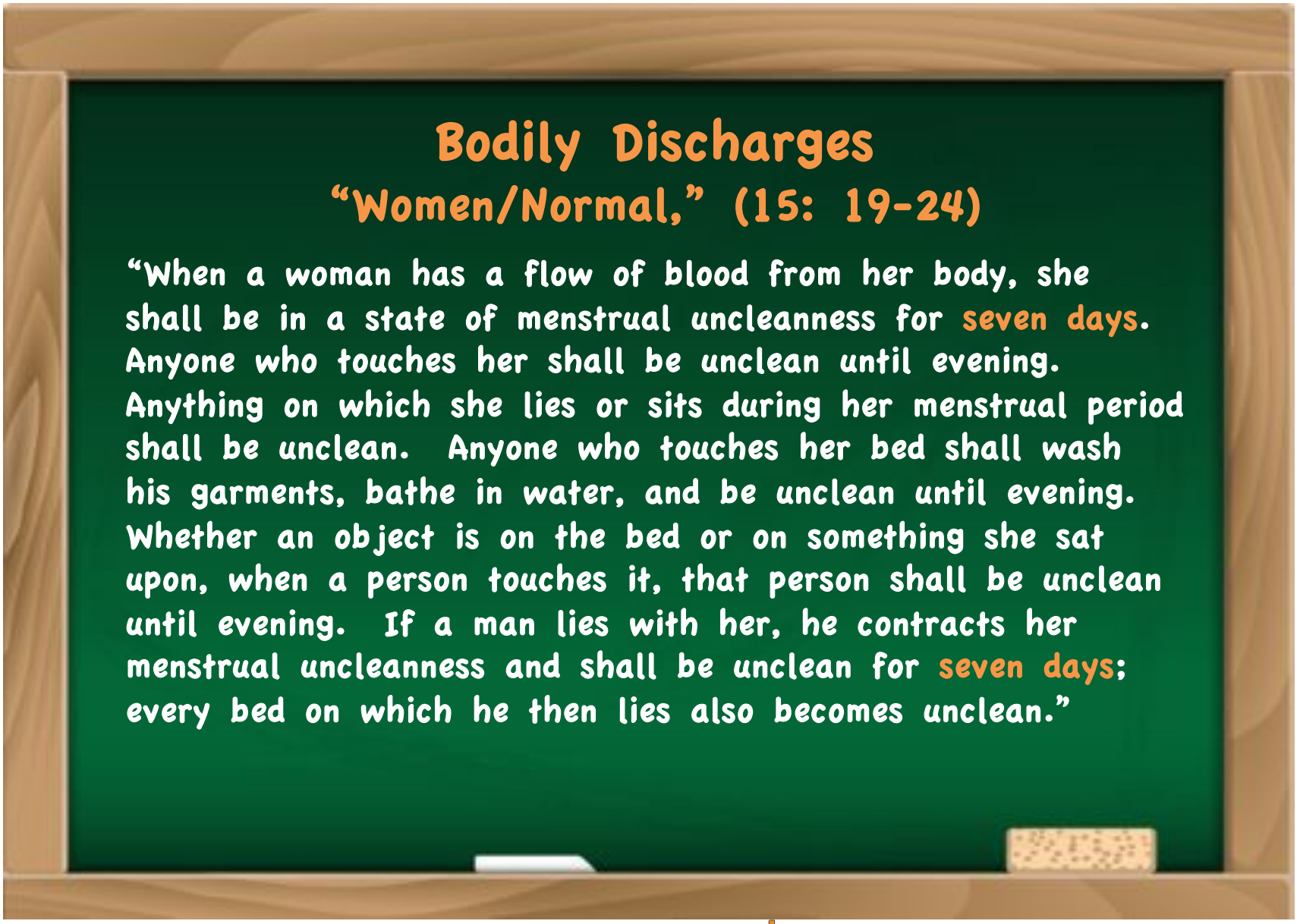
That puzzled us, too! But the great sage Nahmanides, who lived in Spain, A.D. 1194-1270, suggested that when a man has intercourse "he doesn't know if his seed will be wasted, of if a child will result."

Hence, better to be safe than sorry!

Bodily Discharges

"Women/Normal," (15: 19-24)

"When a woman has a flow of blood from her body, she shall be in a state of menstrual uncleanness for seven days. Anyone who touches her shall be unclean until evening. Anything on which she lies or sits during her menstrual period shall be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed shall wash his garments, bathe in water, and be unclean until evening. Whether an object is on the bed or on something she sat upon, when a person touches it, that person shall be unclean until evening. If a man lies with her, he contracts her menstrual uncleanness and shall be unclean for seven days; every bed on which he then lies also becomes unclean."



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Look closely at the text:

- **As with a man, a woman's normal sexual functioning creates the potential for life. During a woman's menstrual period, that potential does not exist. Coupled with the flow of blood from her body, the symbolism is that of death in opposition to life; hence, she is "unclean" during this time.**

It is important to remember that "unclean" has nothing whatsoever to do with physical cleanliness or hygiene; it is ritual impurity.

Bodily Discharges

"Women/Abnormal," (15: 25-30)

"When a woman has a flow of blood for several days outside her menstrual period, or when her flow continues beyond the ordinary period, as long as she suffers this unclean flow she shall be unclean, just as during her menstrual period . . . any bed she lies on . . . any article on which she sits . . . anyone who touches [her or] them . . . shall be unclean until evening. . .. When she becomes clean from her flow, she shall count seven days; after this she becomes clean. On the eighth day she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons and bring them to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The priest shall offer them as a purification [sin] offering and the other as a burnt offering. Thus shall the priest make atonement before the Lord for her because of her unclean flow."

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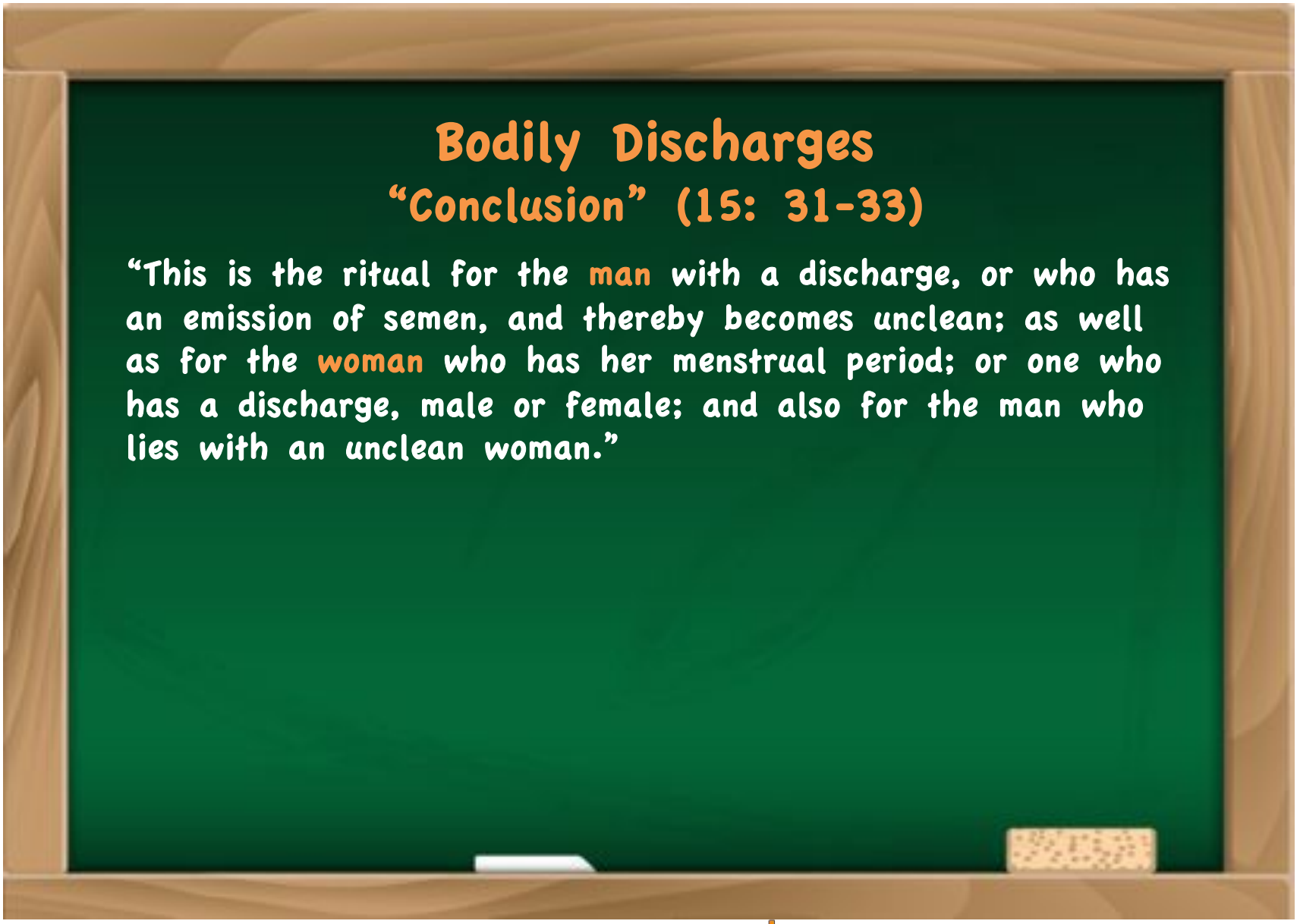
Bodily Discharges

"Conclusion" (15: 31-33)

"This is the ritual for the man with a discharge, or who has an emission of semen, and thereby becomes unclean; as well as for the woman who has her menstrual period; or one who has a discharge, male or female; and also for the man who lies with an unclean woman."



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Reminder!

Once again it is important to stress that Leviticus 15 focuses on discharges from the sexual organs, the source of life. When a man and a woman have intercourse, the potential for creating life exists. Any other purpose *of* or result *from* the sexual organs is the opposite of life: death.

In Leviticus 15 we see again in the "clean" and "unclean" laws a symbolic representation of the primal struggle between life and death, with life seeking to emerge victorious and death in the shadows.

Remember, the laws regarding bodily discharges have nothing whatsoever to do with physical cleanliness or hygiene.

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Are there any examples in Scripture of these laws being applied?
Yep, yep. I know what they are!
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Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. ***Rachel Sitting on Laban's Idols*** **[Genesis 31: 19-35] (fresco), c 1726-1729. Bishops' Palace, Udine, Italy.**

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Aert de Gelder. ***Ahimelech Giving the Sword of Golaith to David*** **[1 Samuel 21: 1-10] (oil on canvas), c. 1680. Getty Center, Los Angeles.**

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Veronese. ***Christ Healing a Woman with an Issue of Blood*** **[Mark 5: 25-35] (oil on canvas), 1548. National Gallery, London.**

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Now, for the hard question. Why did we title this lesson, "Echoes of Onan"?
I think we're about to find out.
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Echoes of Onan?

That's easy!

Genesis 38: 1-12

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Leviticus 12-15 discusses three types of contamination. What are they?
2. What does blood symbolize in Scripture?
3. Why is a man "unclean" when he has a genital discharge?
4. Why is a woman "unclean" during her monthly period?
5. What is the deeper message of these "bodily discharge" laws?

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