

## **Drasha Metzora 5768—Coming back into the camp**

As the days between now and Pesah grow fewer and fewer, I find myself thinking more and more about what I consider “meta-level” concerns. Perhaps it’s just my rabbi’s way of avoiding cleaning my kitchen, but whatever the reason, I’ve been spending a lot of time considering the countless ways we can interpret and enrich our understanding of the Haggadah, the seder, and even the story of the Exodus itself. There are many powerful and meaningful spiritual places these ideas can take us, most of which are quite lofty. Fortunately, just in case the prospect of cleaning out our *hametz* isn’t quite enough, we have this week’s parashah to bring us back down to earth.

And earthly Parashat Metzora is—visceral might be an even better adjective. Most often read together with Parashat Tazria, it is a continuation of the themes of that parashah: how to handle some of the more severe physical ailments and bodily changes that can affect a person and a community—the aftermath of pregnancy, menstruation, unusual disease, and even a version of disease that can infect the walls of one’s home. The parashah pays most careful attention to the affliction it calls צרעת, *tzara’at*, translated as leprosy, but actually referring to a mysterious disease that causes scaly lesions to erupt on the skin.

As Parashat Metzora teaches, the method employed for caring for a person afflicted by this disease is a complex one. First, the affected person must be sequestered from the rest of the camp, left to dwell apart until the lesions heal. After the *kohen*, the priest, confirms that the “patient,” has been healed, he then presides over an elaborate ritual of purification. Following this ritual, the formerly ill person is welcomed back to the camp and then, after another seven days, back to his home.

The parasha makes quite plain the clinical details of the disease as well as the method for treating it. The Torah is silent, however, on why this disease crops up in the first place. What is its genesis? Why would such a plague afflict the Israelite camp?

In trying to answer these questions, the rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash turn *tzara'at* into something else altogether. Seeing a connection between the name of our parasha, Metzora, which is the word we would use to refer to a person afflicted by *tzara'at*, and the Hebrew phrase, *motzi ra*, meaning “one who brings forth evil,” the rabbis place the blame for this disease squarely on the heads of those suffering from it. One becomes a *metzora* as a punishment for being a *motzi ra*. Midrash Vayikra Rabbah, the midrashic commentary on our book of Leviticus, goes into further detail here. It sees seven ways of being *motzi ra* that result in the punishment of

*tzara'at*: haughtiness, lying, spilling innocent blood, harboring sinful thoughts, hurrying to carry out evil, spreading rumors, and causing strife between fellows. One who is guilty of bringing forth evil in one of these ways is liable to be stricken with *tzara'at*.

This theory underlies our understanding of another bizarre, *tzara'at*-related story in the Torah—the scene in Numbers 11 where Miriam is suddenly stricken with the disease. Only after Moshe's soulful intercession is she healed, and after seven days outside the camp, she is allowed to return. Why was she stricken with this affliction? As Rabbi Lerner mentioned last week, all traditional sources point to her words just a few verses earlier, where she speaks harshly toward Moshe and about his wife. She brought it on herself.

Though troublesome, we can see the way that this theory tries to preserve a sense of justice about the world. You do something wrong, you get punished. Moreover, the way that the punishment is carried out is not entirely lacking in poetry. Most of the ways of being a *motzi ra* are sneaky, taking place in private quarters—a whispered rumor here, a few evil thoughts there. Lest you think that your punishment will preserve your privacy, *tzara'at* is a punishment that is not only visible to the eye, but that also requires a communal response. The privacy and secrecy you sought in

committing your sin will be taken away from you, and everyone will know what you've done.

This kind of poetic justice appears in all sorts of places. While I won't claim that J.K. Rowling used the Torah and the Midrash as her source for this, there's a startlingly similar scene in the fifth Harry Potter book. Facing cruel and tyrannical decrees from the new headmaster, the students secretly form a new group, Dumbledores' Army, to help them learn the skills they need to survive the new regime. As each student agrees to participate in this group, they sign an attendance sheet and are sworn to secrecy. One attendee, Marietta Edgecombe, is a little reluctant to participate in this group—she only came to the first meeting because her best friend dragged her along—but she agrees to participate anyway. Shortly thereafter, the group's existence is discovered, and the students didn't have to look very far to figure out who had tattled on them. Marietta Edgecombe's face had suddenly erupted with purple, pimply pustules that spelled out the word "sneak" across her forehead. The attendance sheet had been jinxed to afflict anyone who betrayed the group with this awful condition. And while her pimples eventually faded, they never went away entirely, leaving Marietta with the shadow of the word "sneak" etched into her forehead.

While this is a comic example of how the *motzi ra* understanding of *tzara'at* can play itself out, and while we might occasionally wish for such an easy, tit-for-tat kind of world, the Midrash teaches us that the results of such a view were anything but funny. Later on in this same section, the Midrash relates the stories of a number of rabbis, revered scholars, who would respond to a person afflicted with *tzara'at* in different ways. Rabbi Yohanan taught that it was forbidden to walk within four cubits (about 6 feet) of a *metzora*. Rabbi Meir would not eat an egg that was laid in the courtyard where a *metzora* lived. Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Assi would not enter an alleyway that abutted a *metzora's* house. Whenever Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish saw a *metzora*, he would throw stones at him and say, "Go back to your own place! Don't pollute the rest of us!"

These are not especially charitable stories about people we see as our sages. But they teach us a powerful lesson. By looking for and finding a powerful explanation for this disease, the rabbis of the Midrash took it out of the physical realm and planted it firmly in the moral realm. When one acquired *tzara'at*, one also acquired a stigma that would not disappear after the *tzara'at* had healed.

We have seen how this can happen in our own society. In the 1980's, as AIDS was being identified in more and more places, I remember the fear

and even hatred with which many people approached those infected with this virus. Just a few months ago, we at Temple Emunah were privileged to host panels from the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Over the course of an entire week, members of our community, as well as people from around the Boston area, were able to view and discuss the memorial panels that make up this monument. Many of the panels included painful expressions of the shame, the secrecy—the stigma—experienced by those whose lives were memorialized there. A number of panels listed only first names, or were entirely anonymous—even after death, the stigma of AIDS was too great for its victims and their families to bear. Those people, as it were, will remain outside the camp forever.

Often, when I stand up here teaching difficult passages of Torah, I bring us a passage from our rabbinic or modern tradition that helps to shed light on the particular difficulty. Especially after witnessing the power and the sadness of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, this particular rabbinic interpretation, that one becomes a *metzora* because one has been a *motzi ra*, a bringer of evil, is one, at least for the time being, whose problematic nature outweighs the light it shines on the parasha. Instead, I'd love for us to examine this parasha and see what it can teach us from its own context.

So what do we learn? First, *tzara'at* is a medical condition that seems to be contagious. In order both to protect the community and allow the patient time and space to heal, the person afflicted with it is secluded outside the camp. Sickness is something that can happen to anyone. When it does, the treatment required may be serious.

Next, we learn that, although secluded, the *metzora* receives check-ups from the *kohen*, the priest, who keeps tabs on his progress. Even if someone's treatment takes her out of the community, the community does not abandon her, but rather checks in on her, offering support and guidance, as well as filling other, more practical needs.

Next, we learn that the *kohen* also supervises the *metzora's* return to the community, which is not immediate, but requires careful ritual and a measured process. The healing process is one that can take time. Even when someone has recovered from the acute ailment that he faced, he may not be ready to resume his former activities and involvements immediately.

Finally, we learn that the *metzora*, once healed, is no longer a *metzora*, but a member of the community, just like everyone else. His affliction may have left him with physical and emotional scars, but he is embraced by his family and community upon his return.

Illness can be a marginalizing experience. Even after someone has recovered, our duty to care for them has not been totally fulfilled. As members of a community, we must reach out to those recovering from illness and help them find their way back to the warmth of our embrace.

Our parasha speaks directly about illness, but illness is only one of numerous marginalizing experiences that can make people feel that they have been placed outside the camp. The Torah often reminds us to care for those on the margins because we as a people knew what it was like to be strangers in the land of Egypt, cruelly cast ourselves to the margins. One week from tonight, we will celebrate Pesah, the holiday that celebrates our liberation. As we prepare for that celebration, Parashat Metzora reminds us how essential it is that we open our hearts and our community to those who, even today, feel the same way.

Shabbat shalom.