

Tazria-Metzora Dvar

Under normal circumstances relating to this set of Torah portions is a challenge, for it discusses a disease called Tzara'at and how the priests and community are to handle this disease. Sadly, the relevance of the Torah at this time is much more striking. What *can* we learn from how our ancient ancestors handled *tza'raat* that might help us today? I think there are at least two major lessons.

First, when someone becomes ill with *tzaraat* and their condition is confirmed by the Priest, the Torah requires that they are to be quarantined outside the camp. This seems to be a reasonable response to what might have been considered an infectious disease. Yet, while in some societies the infected would be feared, spurned and alienated from the community, the priest is given regular instructions to check on the afflicted. And in numbers 12 it is clear that when Miriam is afflicted, the camp cannot move forward without her. Thus we learn that while, for the protection of the community, the *metzora* must be quarantined, the Torah models for us how we can continue to value and compassionately care for those who need to be separated. What is more is that the *Siach Hadash* on Leviticus 14:3 reminds us that once the *Metzora* has served his or her time in quarantine she or he must be given an opportunity to again be officially, publicly and fully reintegrated. This process begins with the priest himself, a leader of the community, going out of the camp to where the *Metzora* is, symbolizing the leadership seeking to understand the situation of the one who was separated. Typically the leading *Kohen* would also be joined by many other people. This meant that the *Metzora* was honored with a large

welcoming delegation who went to greet him, again communicating the community's deep love and connection to the individual.

COVID-19 is scary and those with the illness, like all of us, need to separate. But that does not mean we move on without them or dismiss their needs. And I am so grateful that *our* community needed no reminders of this lesson at all. Quite the opposite: from the beginning we had a host of volunteers to reach out to those affected, to check in, to shop for them, to provide for their needs and to let them know we care. For this is the power of a compassionate community, whose true colors are revealed during times such as these and which cannot be replaced by a virtual one.

The second lesson comes from a close reading of the text. Leviticus states, "The priest shall **see** (examine) the affection on the skin of the body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of the body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest **sees** [the person], he shall pronounce the person impure." In the text just cited, we notice that the verb "to see" is repeated twice. The first time, the priest sees the affliction. The second time, the priest sees the **person**. The 19th century Rabbi, Israel Joshua Trunk of Kutno writes, "It seems that there is a hint here, that when one checks a person, one must not see only what they lack, in the place of the affliction; rather, one must see them in their **entirety**, including their elevated qualities. And so Balak (the evil king) said [to Balaam (the sorcerer)]: 'You will see only *aportion* of [the Israelites]; you will not see all of them—and damn them for me from there' (Numbers 23:13). Therefore in our text when it says: 'the priest

will see the affliction’—and after that— ‘the priest will see the person’— we learn that he should see them in their entirety”.

It is striking that Balak understands that Balaam can only curse the Israelites if he sees them partially; if he sees them in their entirety, he will understand that they, like him, are three-dimensional human beings with their own stories and hopes and dreams. He will see that they, like him, want to live; that they, like him, want to be blessed. He will see that they are not so different from him. And as my Colleague rabbi Lisa Gruscow wrote, “When someone who is healthy encounters someone who is ill, for many the first instinct is to distance oneself from their situation; to remind oneself of all the differentiating factors between ourselves and the person who is sick. For example, ‘She has lung cancer; she must have been a smoker.’ ‘I knew he’d end up in the hospital; he’s so out of shape.’ And the subtext is: ‘I am different. I’ll be okay.’ But as Susan Sontag wrote in “Illness as Metaphor,”: Illness is the night side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. When we don’t understand this, we risk seeing each other only partially; we see only the affliction, and not the full human being.”

Mussar, a set of learning around Jewish ethics, teaches that this is seeing someone with the eyes of judgment rather than the eyes of compassion, which detracts from community and holiness. Or as *Orchot Tzadikim*, a fifteenth century German Mussar text, states in the positive , “Just as one would want compassion in his time of need, so should one have compassion on

others who are in need.”. Perhaps the wisdom from this time period which we can take into our post-pandemic state of mind, is to use the lessons we are learning now to always remember to see the whole person, and not just their illness or their problems. In so doing we will better connect to them and relate to them and consequently our compassionate side will more likely kick-in, adding to more holiness and goodness in the world.

I pray for everyone's good health and for our ability to see each other as the beautiful whole persons created in God's image that we most certainly are. *Ken Yehi Ratzon* - May it be God's will! Shabbat Shalom!