

Today's Torah Portion: *Tazria-Metzorah*

These two portions look at various forms of impurity that our ancestors feared deterred from the holiness (*Kedusha*) of the community. The mindset of Leviticus is Exilic, from the time during the Babylonian Exile when Israel was faced with questions that face us today after the Holocaust. How could God have allowed such a terrible thing to happen? Where is God? How do we bring back God to our midst? For them, the way to bring divinity back into their midst was to remove themselves from things that were considered impure: illness (such as leprosy), death, and blood (which is seen as the “stuff” of life). These two portions are most difficult for us to understand, yet they contain valuable lessons and insights into ancient and contemporary moral issues.

Issues for Discussion:

1. *Tazria* means “she gives birth.” It begins with a discussion of the ritual defilement of a new mother. It has been suggested that a woman in the pain of labor vows to herself that she will never go through such pain again. Such an oath is a transgression of the commandment, “be fruitful and multiply.” The oath renders her ritually impure. Upon seeing a new son, she immediately recants her oath, thus mitigating her period of “uncleaness” for two weeks.

Physical impurity was of great concern in biblical days. An impure person could make the priests and the sanctuary impure.

Who is an “impure” person in today’s society? How does such a one threaten to make others impure?

2. The word, *Metzarah*, means “leper.” Leprosy is a disease which Jewish tradition considered inflicted by God. The cure, therefore, has both a medical and cultic dimension. (The priests were the physicians of their day.)
3. The rabbis used word-play to associate the term, *Metzarah*, with the expression, *Motzi-Shem-ra* (to spread gossip). They considered skin afflictions to be the punishment for gossip and this part of the Torah as a warning against the evils of gossip. Rashi said that the use of chattering birds in the purification ceremony was to be a reminder of the nature of the sin. The sages believed that to slander a person was tantamount to killing him.

Is slander deserving of punishment? If so, how should a modern slanderer be punished? Is there anyone not guilty of this crime? Does the fact that gossip is so socially acceptable (and in some cases, a prerequisite for any conversation) make it less serious a crime? What can you do to limit the amount of gossip that comes from your mouth? One idea would be to try to go an entire day (24 hours) without talking about a single person behind his back – positively or negatively. See if you can do it.

4. The Talmud tells us that slander injures three persons – the one who speaks the slander, the one who hears of the slander, and the person who is slandered.

When you are the recipient of gossip, do you pass it on, keep it under your hat, tell the gossip to stop, inform the one who is being talked about? What risks do you take with each of these courses of action?

5. The categories of “purity” and “impurity” are very important in the Torah and Mishna, less so in the Talmud. These had little to do with hygiene but with life and death. Objects associated with death (e.g., diseases, corpses, menstrual blood, even mildew on houses) were considered “unclean.” People wanted to dissociate themselves from all things relating to death. Death was a mystery.

Death is still a mystery to us. In our society, which items would we render “unclean” and thus try to eliminate or avoid? Pesticides? Nuclear weapons? Handguns? Cocaine? Alcohol? Perhaps we should declare some of them “impure” in the religious sense.

6. The text says that both rich and poor must bring a sacrifice, but a poor person may substitute a lesser offering for the required large animal. What lessons can you derive from this? In our society, which payments, dues or donations should be reduced for those who are impoverished?
7. The idea of stones and plaster being afflicted with plague is an unusual one. While some think this refers to a simple case of mildew, others believe the affliction was a possible sign of improper behavior by members of the household. What kinds of family behavior would warrant the appearance of such a sign?