

Tazria - A Matter of Life and Death

Source: JTS commentary by Ismar Schorsch and other commentaries

<http://www.jtsa.edu/lifes-triumph-over-death>

Usually this portion linked with Metzora -- an uncomfortable one... Three big questions that we have to meet head on:

- 1) **What do physical things have to do with religion in the first place? If religion is for the soul, for heaven, for God, why does the Torah devote so much space to skin, infection, blisters, leprosy?**
- 2) **Secondly, if aspects of the body have to be dealt with, why can't it be in terms of the Song of Songs, where human beauty is presented so pleasantly, so nicely: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness." Why have Tazria and Metzora which could not be more unpleasant?**
- 3) **Thirdly, if we have to be physical in order to be spiritual, if disease and abnormalcy have to be faced, diagnosed and healed, isn't it dangerous to leave these matters to the priest, the Kohen, the religious figure? How far is this from witchcraft? Is the priest a witch doctor?**

We want religion to be spiritual, and clean and we do want modern medicine, not witchcraft. So what do we do?

IT'S ALL ABOUT LIFE AND DEATH -- AND THE JEWISH VIEW OF EACH

- 1) **BODY AND SOUL:** Judaism is about life -- all of life, body and soul. That is why the Torah deals with food, as well as with prayer; with sex as well as with study; with the body as well as the soul.

- The emphasis on the body in the Jewish concept of *tehiyat ha-meitim* (the quickening of the dead) is not primitive religion, as Maimonides would have us believe, but a healthy appreciation of **the sanctity of the whole person**. I prefer to understand this article of faith not as a claim about what will happen in a time beyond our understanding, but rather as a view on how we ought to conduct our lives here and now.
- Similarly, the abhorrence of death prompted the Torah to forbid priests to come near the corpse of an Israelite, except for their immediate relatives. And the high priest was denied even that dispensation. . Prof. Baruch A. Levine: **the intent of these restrictions was to prevent the appearance in ancient Israel of a cult of the dead**, a form of worship widespread among its neighbors. **By imputing extreme impurity to the dead, the Torah squelched the possibility that the sanctuary and temple could become the locus for any funerary rites.** That selfsame abhorrence induced the Torah **not to invest the afterlife with any religious significance**. In fact the Torah has no clear notion of what happens after death and surely does not hold out

any prospect of personal salvation. Instead, it opted resolutely for embracing the gift at hand: "*I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse,*" declares Moses to Israel just before his death. "**Choose life** (Deut. 30:19)." Nor do we have any idea where Moses is buried. His grave was not to become a shrine. Neither death nor the dead were to dominate our lives.

- **QUESTION:** How does this relate to death practices we know of? (wash hands after cem./ cohen stays outside/ funerals in the synagogue...**should we do them so often here???** Has that had an impact on us??? (Living next to a cemetery -- death is no longer "other." *Is this a good thing?*
- But that view could not long prevail. Gradually, rabbinic Judaism developed clearer notions of individuality, life after death, and personal salvation, while the customs of yahrzeit and yizkor did not emerge until even later, after the First Crusade. In the process **biblical terms had to be shifted from this world to the next**. A particularly striking example is to be found in the delicate and well-known phrase "*may their souls be bound up in the bond of life,*" in the Eil Malai Rahamim prayer recited in memory of the dead. In the context of this moving dirge, the phrase is an elusive expression of hope that the souls of our loved ones will find eternal rest in God, the bond of all life. But the phrase **is borrowed from a biblical context where it has no connection to the afterlife**. David and his men are on the run from Saul's wrath and about to attack a wealthy scoundrel named Nabal. His wife Abigail, both arrestingly beautiful and intelligent, intercedes to stay David's hand from murder. She assuages David with a munificent gift of her own and acknowledges the righteousness of his cause, which must not be tarnished by innocent blood. She assures David of God's protection in battles to come. "And if anyone sets out to pursue you and seek your life, the life of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life in the care of the Lord; but He will fling away the lives of your enemies as from the hollow of a sling (I Samuel 25:29)." While both the biblical and liturgical uses of bi-zror ha-hayyim (the bundle or bond of life) refer exquisitely to God (non-pictorially, I might say), **the biblical instance is decidedly this worldly**. Because of its antipathy to death, the Bible simply lacked the vocabulary to meet the need of imagining the world-to-come. Indeed, it triumphed over death by affirming life.

2) Dirt, sickness, disgust: Is cleanliness next to Godliness??

Bathroom prayer...

Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe
who with wisdom fashioned the human body, creating
openings, arteries, glands and organs, marvelous in
structure, intricate in design. Should but one of
them, by being blocked or opened, fail to function, it
would be impossible to exist. Praised are You, Lord,
healer of all flesh who sustains our bodies in
wondrous ways.

- We desire to put religion on a pedestal, and say, incorrectly, Cleanliness is next to Godliness. Not since the pristine Garden of Eden has life or religion been clean, pure, fresh, unspoiled and virginal. Ever since Adam and Eve messed around with each other, religion has had to deal, and properly so, with the bedroom and the bathroom, the slaughter house and the surgery, with abortion, umbilical cords, foreskins, menstrual cycles and leftovers from the beautiful Shabbat meals.
- Religion can't win. If it is realistic and deals with life and death, disease and pain, it is called filthy, repellant. If it deals only with pie-in-the sky, hope and faith, it is accused of wishful thinking and illusion. Tazria and Metzora are in the Torah, and actually read in the synagogue, because the body has to be dealt with, even the diseased body, even disgusting leprosy. **Judaism is real or it is nothing.**
- Jewish belief in this life: skin diseases symbolize death (note Miriam's leprosy in Numbers 12:12 - "*Let her not be as a dead person.*") These thoughts are triggered by the Torah's current preoccupation with the subject of leprosy and illness. The Torah considers the status of new mothers, persons afflicted with a disease of the skin, and persons experiencing abnormal discharges from sexual organs. All three are deemed to be conditions of less than perfect health warranting some degree of separation. For the Torah, which is wholly committed to affirming life, death becomes the ultimate source of impurity. And conditions regarded as life-threatening or a diminution of life likewise contaminate. Prof. Jacob Milgrom explains the Torah's underlying worldview in his new Anchor Bible commentary on Leviticus:

...in the Israelite mind, blood was the archsymbol of life. Its oozing from the body was no longer the work of demons [a worldwide view], but it was certainly the sign of death. In particular, the loss of seed in vaginal blood was associated with the loss of life. Thus it was that Israel -- alone among the peoples -- restricted impurity solely to those physical conditions involving the loss of vaginal blood and semen, the forces of life, and to scale disease, which visually manifested the approach of death. All other bodily issues and excrescencies were not tabooed, despite their impure status among Israel's contemporaries, such as cut hair or nails in Persia and India and the newborn child as well as its mother in Greece and Egypt. Human feces were also not declared impure.... The elimination of waste has nothing to do with death; on the contrary, it is essential to life. (p. 767)

3) Of the three challenges the third is the most difficult. Is the Kohen a doctor? Is the Kohen qualified to diagnose, treat and cure the disease? **Are we to use the medicine of the Torah or modern medicine?**

- Let us look at the text. The Kohen only diagnoses, **he does not treat**. There are no ointments, no pills, no cures in Tazria. **Only diagnosis**, on the basis of mere external appearance. If it is white, if it spreads, if it is red, if it is raised. **The Kohen was not a doctor**. He merely decided when something was wrong, and the patient should be quarantined. Perhaps they had conceptions of contagion in those days. The Torah speaks of a transfer of the state of Tumah, contamination, from person to person, from person to garment or other object. Is this a matter of sterility? Probably not. It is a matter of social and spiritual purity.
- Real medicine is referred to elsewhere in the Torah. With reference to the person who has been hurt in an assault, it says: **Verapo Yerape**. Which means the attacker must pay for the medical expenses suffered by his victim. From this passage the Talmud deduces: **Mikan Shenitan Reshut Lerofei Lerapot**. From here we learn that the physician has permission to heal. We do not say it is God's will that he be sick. From this there flows a distinguished history of Jews in Medicine. Which has nothing to do with the Kohen in Tazria. Tumah and illness are not the same. Tumah has a spiritual dimension to it. The Kohen deals with Tumah, the doctor deals with illness.
- What is the spiritual dimension of Tazria? The Rabbis find hints in the Torah that Tzoraat, leprosy, is associated with pride, arrogance, gossip, the evil tongue. We find this in the story of Miriam who gossips about Moses and her hand becomes white as snow. We find this in the Haftarah of Tazria which tells the story of Naaman, the general who had to wash away his pride in the lowly waters of the Jordan, as you heard from the Bar Mitzva in his wonderful Dvar Torah earlier.

Whether we have answered the three questions adequately is not the point. The point is how we approach Torah. We should not be shocked when it deals with physical things. We should be willing to get into the dirt of life, face the unpleasant, if we expect Torah to be relevant to reality, if we expect to emerge clean and pure from the Mikveh of religious experience. **Its ways are ways of pleasantness, indeed, but its byways are full of garbage**. Just as our kitchens are clean, but a lot of trash is removed from it every day. **Perhaps one of the functions of religion is to teach us the art of Waste Disposal, Proper skin care, and purity of the mouth, as well as the heart and mind**. If we have to read Tazria once a year, let us learn what we can from it, and move on to Kedoshim, Holiness, and Behar, the mountain of inspiration and revelation.