

Our Bodies, Our Selves: Parshat Tazria/Metzora 2020

This week we celebrate the natural world – this past Wed. marked the 50th anniversary of the first Earth Day across the globe, a time to pay special attention to the state of our planet and how we are – or are not – caring for it. Pandemic notwithstanding, spring is arriving around us, with trees budding, early flowers blooming – and – typical of early spring here in the Northeast – with random bursts of snow. Our tradition keeps us connected to the cycles of nature too, as we set our calendar by the phases of the moon; and today, this Shabbat, we celebrate Rosh Hodesh, the new moon, beginning the Hebrew month of Iyar.

Our deepest connection to nature, we might say, lies in our very own bodies – these intricately designed bodies for which we thank God every morning. We thank God for creating us in wisdom, (*asher yatzar et ha-adam b'chochmah*) says the prayer – for creating openings and pipes and organs that work together in a magnificent, delicate balance. Each day in our prayers we thank God for the ability to walk, to see, to move through the physical world. When our bodies are functioning smoothly, these morning blessings remind us not to take that for granted; still, we often do. Then when we are ill, or now – in this time of pandemic – we suddenly appreciate our bodies, and we are also in touch with their vulnerability.

This week's Torah portions, Tazria-Metzora, which deal with bodily functions and with disease, usually make some of us squeamish, while others find it distasteful. But this year, their topics are all too familiar: we read that when someone was diagnosed with this disease, *tza'ra'at*, they were placed in quarantine, in isolation, for seven days. If they were not clearly cured after seven days – we might say, if they still tested positive – they were quarantined for another seven. Their clothing and objects which they touched were considered unsafe and off limits, and even homes and other structures were subject to contamination. Suddenly, this Torah portion is relatable; suddenly, it can be instructive for us today.

First, these parshiyot remind us that we share the experience of illness with others across time and space. While the pandemic we are living through is unique in our lifetime, all of the health concerns of diagnosis, testing, contagion, and quarantine exist as part of the universal human condition at different points in time and in different ways.

Second, the Torah assumes that wholeness of body and of soul are inseparable. We know so much more than our ancestors about the biology of our bodies, and we naturally think about illness in scientific terms. We compartmentalize, and separate our physical from our non-physical selves. Yet, our *experience* of illness is never purely physical: when our bodies are not well, our emotional health and our spiritual wellness are also challenged. And in a time like this, when we are living with *fear* of illness, as well as the isolation of quarantine, our emotional and spiritual health are affected.

So in addition to the purely medical, we must confront layers of concerns that lie at the core of our Torah portions and of our current situation: What constitutes health and what constitutes illness? How do we as individuals and as communities care for ourselves and for

each other - both physically *and* emotionally - when we are sick? What happens when someone needs to be isolated from the community?

Body and soul are one in our beings. In the Torah, it is the Kohen, the religious leader, who manages the course of illness for the afflicted person. And the Torah assumes the soul's place in illness by offering rituals of recovery, something we do not have in our time, but which we might find ourselves creating after this pandemic: that is, a ritual for re-entering community after illness. Here in our parsha is a fascinating ritual: after a period of isolation, once *physically* healed, a person immerses in a ritual bath and brings an offering that includes material taken from two plants, cedar (*erez*) and hyssop (*eizov*) (Leviticus 14:4). Why those two plants? The Rabbis explain that these two plants reflect the experience of illness. Cedar trees, tall and stately, are the highest of the plants, while hyssop is the opposite - a lowly shrub. The two plants are mixed together, reflecting the spiritual condition of the sick: before illness, a person was strong and proud like a cedar; afterwards, that person has been humbled, like a hyssop; reminded that all of us humans are vulnerable and subject to the frailties of our bodies.

Through their symbolism, these plants express the shock of going from strength to being laid low when we face illness. Then when we emerge from illness, the mixture of the two also may reflect the idea that as we recover, we should carry with us both renewed strength and the humility that illness teaches.

The COVID-19 virus has humbled us all, and reminds us not to take our bodies and our health for granted, and to be grateful for them each and every day. We must take care of our bodies, guarding our health and the health of our community by following all of the recommended precautions. And we must also remember to take care of our souls: to use prayer, rituals, silence, connection, solitude, reading – whatever nourishes and soothes our souls. We must remember to be gentle with ourselves, knowing that we are living through a trauma; and to be kind, giving and patient with others, as we are *all* on this challenging journey together.

Our Jewish healing prayers acknowledge both the physical and the spiritual aspects of illness, asking simultaneously for *refuat ha-nefesh* and *refuat ha-guf*. Let us pray for healing for all those who are suffering from the physical illness of the COVID-19 virus and other physical illnesses. And let us pray for healing for all of us, for the souls of our global community, as we make our way through this challenging time.

Yehi ratzon m'l'phanecha....

May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, ruler of time and space, to send blessing and healing to all who are afflicted with illness. Send healing of body and healing of soul. Grant strength to all who are caring for the ill, to all who are sustaining our communities at this time and let this new month bring healing and peace to the souls of us all.

Chodesh tov (a good month) and Shabbat Shalom