

Metzora, Leviticus 14:1-15:33

A More Holistic Approach to Curing Leprosy?

by Andrew Bossov

Discussions of *Parashat Metzora* generally revolve around one of two topics: the horrendous disease of leprosy as the punishment for *l'shon harah*, harmful language, and the "otherness" of both the outcast lepers and even the *kohanim* in their roles as health inspectors-healers. The *parashah* itself addresses the most immediate issues pertaining to the treatment and containment of *tzara-at*, an eruptive skin disease: Somebody (or something) has it and now, with the priest's assistance, he, she (or it) must get rid of it in order to regain social admittance.

Many people today choose to gloss over this portion because they regard it as too primitive, too "Deuteronomistic." Are we supposed to interpret leprosy as a divinely ordained punishment? Must one have sinned in order to have contracted such a fatal disease? Do we not now realize and acknowledge (in large part because of the teachings of Rabbi Harold Kushner) that bad things very often happen to good people and vice versa? Accepting the punishment theory makes it difficult for us to explain all the ailments associated with the aging process or any chance occurrence that causes pain or death to young and old alike.

And then there are the elaborately described purification rituals, involving sacrificing animals, dashing blood all over, shaving off eyebrows, etc. Although all of this is presented with due seriousness, it surely strikes many of us as being a lot of hocus-pocus. Just as we question the efficacy of these practices, so, too, we wonder whether people thousands of years hence will get a chuckle out of our own so-called "state-of-the-art" medical procedures and treatments.

So now what? We are compelled to return to the Torah text in order to figure out what lesson can be derived from this segment of God's teaching. Even if we accept the punishment theory and even if we can relate to all the details of the purification rites, there still remains one issue that must be addressed, namely, whether all this truly "cures" the individual of the impulse to commit the sin of *l'shon harah*. Does the isolation treatment really rehabilitate the offender? If we have "advanced" in any way since *Parashat Metzora* was written, it would have to be in our increased awareness of the psychological underpinnings of many "unacceptable" behaviors. The knowledge and sensitivity we have derived must be

applied to attempting to cure people, but this point is noticeably absent from the traditional discussion of leprosy in the biblical context.

Whether trying to eradicate leprosy or any other societal ill, we must endeavor to strike at the systemic root of the problem and not merely attack the periphery. For example, in light of Rabbi Eric Yoffie's recent call for Reform Jews to "revolutionize" our worship opportunities, let us keep in mind Rabbi Larry Hoffman's advice (as presented in his indispensable work *The Art of Public Prayer*) that rather than treating the symptoms of a problem, we must delve deeper in order to fix the system that produces those symptoms.

The purification process for leprosy (as punishment) does not guarantee that the disease will not recur. So, too, we must not be disappointed if merely cosmetic changes to worship experiences do not go far enough to achieve our movement's goal of truly affecting the overall role of worship for Reform Jews. Instead, let us make sure to ask the right questions from the outset so that our modern-day cures truly represent an advancement over the primitive ones of yesteryear.

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WITHIN THESE WALLS

by Lisa Langer

I knew it was coming. I had my suspicions. I saw it happen to other buildings in my community. Then the notice went up: Termites were living within my walls. My apartment building would soon be fumigated. My first reaction was something like, "Gross! I'm living with termites!" My next response was, "Where will my dog and I live for three days?" Then I read the instructions: "Remove all living things, including plants and pets. Remove all opened food. Store all unopened food in the bags provided. Be sure to seal the bags tightly so that no air gets inside."

What a time-consuming, annoying nuisance! But I had no choice: The building would be tented, closed off, and fumigated regardless of my wishes. I was at the will of my landlord. So I arranged to stay with friends. I packed up all the listed items to store in my car trunk and in the industrial-size freezers at work, and I filled my suitcase with everything I thought I'd need during my expulsion from my plagued home.

I speak from experience in saying that it is no easy task to

accomplish what *Parashat Metzora* requires of those living in a house with *tzara-at*, an eruptive plague that manifests itself on the walls of a house. In Leviticus 14:33-53 we read about the process of identifying, vacating, cleansing, and reinhabiting a diseased home. Learning that your house is unclean and being ordered to have it cleared is upsetting in many ways. Today we can often identify the source of such uncleanliness as a climatic or geographic issue. We can then hire an exterminator to rid our homes of the evil. *Parashat Metzora*, however, assumes that it is precisely the unholy doings *within* the walls that produce the slimy plague on the walls: The *tzara-at* of a house is merely the reflection of what happens inside its walls. A house's return to cleanliness is accomplished through a detailed procedure performed by a priest and, as the commentators suggest, through the changed behavior of its inhabitants.

According to a talmudic statement in *Tosefta Nega'im* 6:1, the actual case of a house with *tzara-at* never really happened. These verses from *Parashat Metzora* are included in the Torah so that we can learn from their teaching. What can we learn? We can learn to think about the holiness of our homes, the ones in which we live, pray, and study. We can learn to evaluate our behavior in those places so that reflections of our holiness are apparent inside and outside their walls. We can learn that it is sometimes necessary to clear out our clutter in our search for holiness.

Rabbi Bossov suggests that we use the lessons of *Parashat Metzora* to examine how to create and express holiness within our congregations. His interpretation encourages us to think about how to make changes within our walls in real, true, and lasting ways. During this week of *Parashat Metzora*, let us resolve to clear our spaces, examine our plagues, and reflect on the holiness within our walls.

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The Body or the Soul? by Robert E. Tornberg

I recently completed a fascinating course on Catholic theology as part of my Ph.D. program. One of the things that interested me most was the great struggle Christian theologians have had over whether body and soul are a unified whole or two separate states of human existence. While there is not unanimity among the writers, the bulk of the thinkers seem to be influenced by the Greek view of the division of body and soul.

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Similarly, Jewish texts present a variety of opinions about this issue. Maimonides held that there was a separation between body and soul, but much of our tradition regards the human being as an integrated whole. In fact, while the Rabbis state that body and soul separate at death, they also teach that the soul will again join with the body when resurrection occurs. One text that touches on this (worth reading in-full) ends with the words, “[God] will bring the soul and force it into the body, and judge both as one” Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 91a–b).

And so, we arrive at this text in *Parashat M'tzora*: “This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he is to be cleansed. When it has been reported to the priest, the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection. . . .”. *M'tzora* begins with a detailed description of the rituals that must take place in order for the person suffering from *tzaraat*, “affliction,” to return to the community. Sometimes translated as “leprosy,” *tzaraat* is not necessarily what we think of as leprosy today.

In trying to make sense of the whole idea of *tzaraat* as it appears in last week's and this week's Torah readings, the Rabbis go to great lengths to show that the text does not see the priest as a doctor. They argue that his responsibility is definitely not that of healing a physical ailment. They suggest instead that this disease is a punishment of the soul for committing the sin of *l'shon hara* (gossiping, talebearing, and so on).

This traditional approach to these texts presents a wonderful teaching opportunity, and I don't necessarily disagree with it. Who am I to disagree with the Rabbis? However, it is also possible to read the *M'tzora* text according to its *p'shat*, or “simple,” meaning, as referring to either a physical or a spiritual malady—or even to a sickness of both body and soul. There is absolutely nothing in the language of the text that limits us to only one of these possibilities. This then brings us back to the rabbinic belief that body and soul are a unified whole that should not be seen as separate from each other.

As an educator, I worry a great deal about the implications of the way young people view this body-soul dichotomy, although they don't realize they are doing so. For many teens you are either a “jock” or a “nerd” (read “brain”). Many young teens are preoccupied so much with their bodies that they forget about the life of the soul and mind. Similarly, all too often those who are studious often forget to exercise and take care of their bodies. Unfortunately, the same attitudes and lifestyles can also be seen in the lives of the parents of these students.

Each year, when it is time for us to read and study *Tazria* and *M'tzora*, we brush by these texts quickly. After all, they have so little to do with our lives today. And yet, I would

argue that these *parashiyot* give us an opportunity to raise important, life-affirming issues with young people and adults—issues of health of the body and the soul, issues of moderation and control of ourselves—our whole selves—and issues of identity.

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Slander and Sliding Scales: The Legacy of Parashat M'tzora by Lewis M. Barth

Parashat M'tzora is one of those Torah portions that—at first glance—contains subject matter that doesn't seem to speak to the religious strivings or spiritual sensibilities of contemporary Reform Jewry. Its topics include purification rites for people with leprosy or other skin eruptions and for houses in which mold appears. Leviticus 14 begins by discussing the end of the illness, when the leper has healed and the priest starts the purification process. It includes a list of the offerings made by the priest, the process of cleansing of the leper, and then, on the eighth day, the sacrifices that the healed leper must bring (Leviticus 14:1–20). This is followed by a list of the sacrifices and the process for a poor person who has healed (Leviticus 14:21–32). Leviticus 14:33–57 describes the parallel priestly ritual to purify a house with mold on its walls, what happens to the removed stones—or all of the building materials if the house has to be destroyed—and the containment of ritual impurity for those who live in the home. Chapter 15 continues the same themes of purification and sacrifice, this time for men and women who experience a variety of skin or body problems in which there is an emission or flow. Excellent discussions of the details of this Torah portion can be found in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (rev. ed., ed. W. Gunther Plaut [New York: URJ Press, 2005]) and in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi [New York: URJ Press, 2008]). Although the *parashah* is of great interest to scholars whose focus is on matters of sacrifice, ritual purity and impurity, and disease in the biblical period, it would seem a stretch to connect its content with contemporary religious or spiritual themes. Yet that is just what our Rabbinic ancestors did, and their example can offer us a model for interpretation. In a comment on the importance of Torah, "For this is not a trifling [lit., 'empty'] thing for you" (Deuteronomy 32:47), Rabbi Akiva (or Rabbi Yishmael) said, "If the Torah is an empty thing, it is because of you, because you don't know how to expound it" (*B'reishit Rabbah* 1:14)! So let's try to expound this *parashah* in relation to

topics both ancient and modern: slander and sliding scales.

I. In a sermon on our *parashah* found in *Vayikra Rabbah* 16 (fifth century c.e.), the ancient Sages took their topic from a play on the word (*m'tzora*, "leprosy"). They used it as an acronym for the Hebrew phrase *motzi [sheim] ra*, which means "slander" or "spreading false rumors" because of the shared letters, *mem, tzadi, vav, reish, ayin*. Their theme was that slander is a terrible and certainly dangerous action: the slanderer is punished and becomes a leper. *Midrash Tanchuma, M'tzora*, par. 4 (ed. S. Buber [New York: Sefer, 1946], pp. 22b–23a) expresses the view that an act of slander has the potential to kill three people: the one who utters it, the one about whom it is uttered, and the one who listens to it. Regarding the first view, although we might balk at the simplistic notion of verbal sin and physical punishment, the field of psychoanalysis, from Freud's time to the present, has helped us understand the profound impact of psychological states on physical well-being. On the second view, one need only recall the tragic end of the life of Princess Diana to recognize that the public's passion to see a celebrity disgrace celebrated in the media caused paparazzi to hound and chase her to death. (I'm grateful to my pilates instructor, Susan Lonergan, for suggesting this example.)

II. *Parashat M'tzora* distinguishes among the kinds of sacrifice to be brought by the leper, based on the leper's economic position. The (presumably) wealthy person brings "two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering, and one *log* of oil" (Leviticus 14:10). The poor man brings only "one male lamb for a reparation offering, to be elevated in expiation, one-tenth of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering, and a *log* of oil; and two turtledoves or two pigeons—depending on that person's means . . ." (Leviticus 14:21–22).

In Rabbinic literature, the sacrifices in which there is a distinction between wealthy and poor are called (*korban oleh v'yored*). This has been translated variously as "an offering of higher or lesser value" (Babylonian Talmud, *Kerithoth* 10b [London: Soncino Press, 1989], p. 21) or "a Rising and Falling Sin-Offering" (*Mishnah K'ritot* 2:4, trans. Herbert Danby [London: Oxford University Press, 1933], pp. 565ff.). The translation "sliding-scale sacrifice" gives this phrase a more contemporary sense, similar to "proportional dues," a concept that recognizes the relative economic positions of various members of a congregation. The *Mishnah* (the earliest postbiblical code of Rabbinic law, ca. 200 C.E.) and the corresponding *Gemara* detail the five persons whose relative wealth or poverty has an impact on the value of the sacrifice that is brought:

The following persons bring an offering of higher or lesser

value: one who refuses to give evidence, one who has broken the word of his lips [supported by an oath], one who while unclean has entered the sanctuary or has partaken of holy things, a woman after confinement and a leper. (Babylonian Talmud, *K'ritot* 10b)

The Babylonian Talmud discusses the various kinds of offerings and relative quantity or monetary value of the offering of the poor in comparison to the rich. Although it is difficult to find a common thread that would unite these five different types of persons, the fact of the obligation for rich *and* poor, irrespective of sin or situation, emphasizes a value based in biblical literature, expanded by the Rabbis and needing to be emphasized in our own time. That is, there are obligations that fall on every member of society that ought to be apportioned on a sliding scale and in ways that are fair to everyone. The great philosopher, halachist, and doctor Maimonides (1138–1204), paraphrasing the Babylonian Talmud (*Gittin* 7b), stated: "Even a poor person who is sustained by charity is required to give charity to another" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Gifts of Poor 7:5). If this is a good principle regarding the poor, it certainly applies regarding the rich. The economic gap between poor and rich in American society is now as bad as it was in 1913, nearly a century ago—and the U.S. tax code works to benefit only one side. A similar economic gap has developed in the State of Israel in the last few decades. It is reasonable and a deeply embedded concept in Jewish tradition that responsibility for the common good in civil society needs to be apportioned based on the economic capacities of members of society. Perhaps *Parashat M'tzora* does have a contemporary message for Reform Judaism!

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More than One Concern by Henry Bamberger

Rabbi Barth points out the importance of the Torah's provision for the person of limited means to bring a less expensive sacrifice than is expected of the wealthy (or even fairly well-to-do) person. This same sensitivity is shown in a number of other places, for example, Leviticus 5:7ff.

However, what is the perception, or the self-perception, of the person who offers this lesser sacrifice? There is a real danger that such a person may be seen as less important, less worthy, or even somewhat less human than the one who "pays the full shot." It's bad enough that he or she doesn't live in the same neighborhood, wear the same clothes, or "drive" the same donkey as the rich. Even at the Temple (or the temple) the difference in socioeconomic status appears. The very legislation that protects the poor and makes it possible for them to rejoin the community can single them out in a negative manner.

Perhaps this is why another passage that is read both as part of its *parashah* in the course of the Torah cycle and a month before Passover gives us a very different command. It tells that when a census is taken, everyone is to give exactly a half-shekel of silver. We are warned that "the rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than half a shekel when giving the Eternal's offering as expiation for your persons" (Exodus 30:15). The word translated here as "person" is *nefesh*, which is sometimes translated as "soul" but can also mean a person's innermost essence. We must show consideration for the poor. We must also remember that all people, by virtue of their humanity, share a basic equality.

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