

Tazria/M'tzora, **Leviticus 12:1–15:33**

SUMMARY

This week's Torah portions are *Tazria* and *M'tzora*. *Tazria* relates to the ritual cleanliness of a woman after giving birth. A certain amount of time is proscribed for her to stay away from the *mikdash* (holy sanctuary) depending on whether she gave birth to a male (33 days) or a female (66 days). At the conclusion of the time period, she is to bring a sacrifice to the *kohain* (priest). The parasha goes on to describe the diagnosis and treatment by the *kohanim* of a skin disease called *tzara'at*, which is commonly translated as leprosy. Treatment included isolation from the community. Once the skin condition healed, the formerly afflicted person offered sacrifices before being declared ritually pure again. The second *parshah*, *M'tzora*, deals with treatment for a type of *tzara'at* which appeared occasionally on houses. *M'tzora* also mentions ritual immersion for the first time - bathing in water in a certain manner to purify a person, cleansing him or her from a physical impurity.

COMMENTARY

The sages taught that *tzara'at* was not a bodily disease, but a physical manifestation of a spiritual disease. They believed that it was a punishment for saying bad or untrue things about others. They said that the Hebrew word *M'tzora* is a contraction of the words *motzi rah* which means "one who spreads slander". The "treatment" or punishment for the *m'tzora* (the one afflicted with *tzara'at*) was being outcast for a period of time. During this time of isolation, the *m'tzora* could reflect on the damage done by his/her words. Once his/her condition had been cured, the *metzora* offered a sacrifice including two birds - one to slaughter and one to set free. Rashi says that God wanted the *m'tzora* to sacrifice birds in order to remind the person about the sin of chattering like a bird. The Midrash *Shocher Tov* says "The damage done by evil talk is compared to the piercing, irreparable destruction of an arrow. Why is the tongue compared to an arrow? An arrow cannot be called back once it has been shot, even if the marksman wishes to do so. Just as the victim does not know about it until it actually reaches him, so the effects of evil talk are not felt until the arrows of a wicked person pierce him."

***Parashah* Overview**

God describes the rituals of purification for a woman after childbirth. (12:1-8)

God sets forth the methods for diagnosing and treating a variety of skin diseases, including *tzara-at* (a leprous affection), as well as those for purifying clothing. (13:1-59)

Priestly rituals to cure *tzara-at* when it afflicts humans are described. (14:1-32)

Rituals to rid dwelling places of *tzara-at* are presented. (14:33-57)

The *parashah* denotes male impurities resulting from a penile discharge or seminal emission. (15:1-18)

The *parashah* concludes with accounts of female impurities caused by a discharge of blood. (15:19-33)

Focal Point

When you enter the land of Canaan, which I gave you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house." The priest shall order the house cleared before the priest enters to examine the plague so that nothing in the house may become unclean; after that, the priest shall enter to examine the house. If, when he examines the plague, the plague in the walls of the house is found to consist of greenish or reddish streaks, which appear to go deep into the wall, the priest shall come out of the house to the entrance of the house and close up the house for seven days. (Leviticus 14:34-38)

Your Guide

1. Why is the owner of the house tentative about describing what he or she sees, as demonstrated by his or her saying "Something like a plague..." in Leviticus 14:35?
2. Why must the house be cleared and quarantined before the priest enters it?
3. Why is it important to determine if the plague is invasive, appearing "to go deep into the wall"?
4. Why is the priest called in to make the diagnosis?

By the Way...

- Our Rabbis... stated in the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 71a): "The house affected by the plague never existed and is not destined to exist. It was stated for the purpose of edification." Alshikh follows this view, but adds that the plague teaches us that society should take notice of the first sign of misconduct, however small. Just the same as a disease begins with hardly noticeable symptoms and can be stopped if detected in time, so a moral disease in society can be prevented from spreading if immediate steps are taken. Otherwise, it will spread throughout the community. (Nehama Leibowitz,

Studies in Leviticus, pp. 137-8)

- That is the thing about toxic mold: Many of its symptoms are documented and real, but it can also be spread by suggestion and word of mouth. And lately, the slimy black growth seems to be everywhere—in stately homes and housing projects, courthouses and libraries, factories and schools. One California lawyer alone is handling mold complaints for 1,000 clients. ("Haunted by Mold" by Lisa Belkin in *The New York Times Magazine*, August 12, 2001)
- [Similarly, leprosy of houses is no natural phenomenon at all] and existed nowhere else in the world [outside Israel]. But so long as the Israelites were in harmony with God, *Adonai's* spirit was always upon them, to preserve the healthy appearance of their bodies, garments, and houses. Whenever one of them committed a sin, he would suffer a discoloration of his skin, garments, and house, indicating that *Adonai* had departed from him. This is the meaning of the text "When you enter the land of Canaan, which I gave you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess..." [Leviticus 14:34]. It was then a plague inflicted by *Adonai* upon that house. (Nachmanides on Leviticus 13:47)
- Pinchas Peli also links the sin of *lashon hara* to the skin infections and fungus mentioned in our Torah portion. He defines *lashon hara* as "slander, gossip, talebearing, and all the other forms of damage to the individual and society that may be caused by words." The result of such wrongdoing, says Peli, is a "justly deserved punishment—leprosy, an illness that cannot be hidden." (Harvey Fields, *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, p. 125)
- When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it. (Deuteronomy 22:8)
- The appearance of *tzara-at* in the stones of a house was a mysterious event. Some Sages doubted it ever happened, and others consigned it to a distant past. Commentators consider the afflicted house (*habayit ham'nugga*) to be a moral warning rather than a natural occurrence even more emphatically than they consider cases of skin disease to be a moral warning. They fasten on the words "I inflict" [Leviticus 14:34] to deduce that this was a plague sent by God. A home is a family's private refuge. Thus a home afflicted by plague represents the breakdown of the social values

that kept a family safe and united. It was a cause for concern if the problems of society-at-large had come to infect the home. Most commentators suggest that the antisocial behavior that brought the plague to the house was selfishness, a blindness to the needs of others. (*Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*, The Rabbinical Assembly, 2001, p. 664)

- The changes from the normal appearance has no parallel in nature but constitutes a sign and wonder that existed in Israel in order to warn them away from evil talk. He who indulges in evil talk finds that the walls of his house change color. (Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, N'gaim* 12:5)
- A plague o' both your houses! They have made worms' meat of me. (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act III, Scene 1, l. 112)
- "Something like a plague has appeared upon my house." [Leviticus 14:35]. Even if he is an expert and knows for certain that it is a plague, he should not dogmatically state that he definitely noticed a plague but rather state, "There seems to me to be a plague." (Rashi on Leviticus 14:35)

Your Guide

- If, as our Sages suggest, the house affected by the plague "was stated for the purpose of edification," what does this passage teach us?
- What are the plagues in our homes today? In addition to the literal understanding of mold as described by Lisa Belkin, how can we interpret the metaphor of plagues (e.g., slander and moral decay) in our homes?
- How would Nachmanides and Peli suggest that we "purify" our own homes?
- Deuteronomy 22:8 states that building a parapet prevents bringing bloodguilt on a house. Can houses, like people, carry responsibility or become infected?
- Many modern-day plagues affect our society. How can we address and overcome afflictions such as homelessness and poverty in our own communities?

D'var Torah

Some present-day readers will find contemporary relevance in the section about *tzara'at* of houses (Leviticus 14:34-38), relating it to molds that we find today in many homes, regardless of economic level. Since early rabbinic times, however, Jewish commentators have understood this passage as a metaphor. Some of our homes may be afflicted with malicious gossip or baseless hatred. Other homes may show signs of sickness or affliction within families. As Rashi points out, we must be cautious when using

these descriptions since the words themselves carry great weight.

Sometimes a house, representing the household, can bear an affliction and itself carry responsibility. This is not unlike the bloodguilt that can fall upon a house the construction of which is unsafe. (see Deuteronomy 22:8).

"House" can also refer to the community, as in "House of Israel." How many of our communities are afflicted with poverty and homelessness? How many homes in our communities need repair and attention for them to be safely inhabitable again and become centers of life instead of centers of blight?

Our responsibility as Jews requires us to purge our own homes of the plagues that might affect them, to assume responsibility for the guilt we may carry into our houses, and to repair and restore all the dwelling places in our own communities.

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**LIVING "OUTSIDE THE CAMP"
FEAR AND ISOLATION
Richard F. Address**

FOCAL POINT

As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his hair shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45–46)

D'VAR TORAH

This week's Torah portion, *Tazria*, has challenged generations of commentators as well as legions of *b'nei mitzvah* students. The discussion about purification after childbirth and the ensuing detailed descriptions of *tzara-at*—defilements of the skin, clothing, and dwelling—present interesting opportunities for bringing the ancient into the contemporary. There is a motif of exclusion that runs throughout this portion: A key verse reads, "He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46).

What does a person's "dwelling outside the camp" when sickness strikes mean? Illness can, of course, provide us as individuals and communities with powerful moments of personal and spiritual growth. But illness can also create a barrier to communication and healing that has tragic

consequences. We have all had experience dealing with friends and the families of people who were ill and, as a result, were placed "outside the camp."

Paula was a beautiful young woman in the prime of her life. Having just moved to a new home with her two young children and devoted husband, she was involved in the community and synagogue life until she was diagnosed with cancer. Over the course of a year of treatment, her condition worsened. Finally, she chose to end the treatments and spend her last months in the home she loved, assisted by hospice care. Before her illness, she had been surrounded by a close group of friends. Afterward, as if a wall had been erected around her, she was alone. In some unstated but very real way, she had been placed outside the normal flow of life at the very moment when her needs were the greatest.

This scenario, I suggest, is not a random one. Despite our best attempts, many of us deal poorly with congregants who have become isolated from their friends and family because of their illnesses. How many times have we spoken about our obligation to be present at a bedside or the need to provide a healing touch in times of illness? How many times have we seen individuals who have dealt with serious illnesses still isolated from normal contact and communication even after healing has taken place? Another person's illness is a stigma that infects us and sometimes inhibits us from reaching out. The long-lasting effect of this stigma is echoed in a statement about Leviticus 13:46 found in *JPS: Torah Commentary: Leviticus*, commentary by Baruch A. Levine, Philadelphia: JPS, 1991, pp. 82–83. About the verse "He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him," the commentator states, "The upshot of this provision is that an individual suffering from an acute *tzara-at* may be permanently banished; in II Kings 15:5, a Judean king afflicted with acute *tzara-at* remained all his life in a place called *beit hachoshit*, 'house of quarantine.'"

Fear often contributes to a society's excluding sick people from normal human contact. Consider the way in which communities deal with people who have mental health issues. The stigma of mental illness is present in many families and communities, yet it remains one of the last taboos, so often placing people who struggle with this illness "outside the camp."

There are certainly discussions of mental illness in Jewish sacred texts. A soon-to-be published study guide for congregations on raising awareness about and reducing the stigma regarding mental health issues titled *Caring for the Soul: R'fuat HaNefesh* (New York: UAHC Press, April 2003) discusses many of these textual sources. Talmud, *Chagigah* 3b defines

the term *shoteh* as one who suffers from mental illness and discusses whether a *shoteh* is fit to be a witness at a *beit din*.

Traditional texts have also evolved terms that relate to contemporary conditions. *Marah sh'chorah* refers to a dark or black bile, which we understand to mean melancholia or depression. *Teifuf da-at* speaks to the idea of a person literally being torn or removed from a sense of reality. An additional concern is that an individual who is dealing with mental health issues may be *sakanat n'fashot*, a threat to life, both his own or someone else's (see Moshe Spero, *The Handbook of Psychotherapy and Jewish Ethics*, Nanuet, NY: Feldheim Press, 1986).

There is another group of people who are also placed "outside the camp." Visit our homes for the aged and you will too often see people who have been "left" outside life. The issues of caregiving and of honoring and respecting one's parents have never been more pressing. And as a result of increasing life spans and mobility, the challenges of our providing caregiving, especially for our aging parents, are ever present.

A good number of us have had the experience of dealing with older adults who live in isolation in some "facility," seemingly waiting to die. The sadness of this reality is that too many of these people yearn for human contact—a touch, a visit, a voice. Yet they have been isolated, and this isolation fuels the downward spiral of their life.

This week's portion, *Tazria*, can be viewed as a pathway into examining the ways in which some people have become isolated from others in our society. What remains a paradox is that in a world with so much interaction taking place, so many people remain isolated, either physically or psychologically, from others.

BY THE WAY

- The vast majority of sages and exegetes assume that the illness the Torah calls *tzara-at* was not a natural illness at all but a miraculous punishment for social wrongdoing, especially *l'shon hara*, "speaking ill of others." (Michael Rosenak, "The Tree of Life, The Tree of Knowledge: Conversations with the Torah," Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001)
- Regarding *tzara-at* as a plague, the expression of God's anger, it was natural to inquire what sin evokes this punishment. The biblical stories...suggest that it might be

brought on by several different sins; and a variety of opinions is recorded by the Rabbis. A favorite device of midrashic preachers was to pun *m'tzora*, "leper," and *motzi ra*, "slanderer." Thus they utilized the reading of these Torah sections as an occasion to preach against hostile talk and gossip—always an appropriate topic for a sermon. (*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, New York: UAHC Press, 1981, p. 829)

YOUR GUIDE

- How can a congregation begin to break down the sense of isolation and exclusion experienced by people who exist "outside the camp"?
- Is it a congregation's responsibility to bring the isolated into the community? If the formerly isolated person is mentally disturbed, is there a danger that he or she may act out in a way that will adversely affect the community? In that case, is it still possible to balance the needs of the community with those of the mentally disturbed person?

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**Disease and the Spirit
Stacy K. Offner**

FOCAL POINT

- When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall 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 it, he shall pronounce the person impure. But if it is a white discoloration on the skin of the body which does not appear to be deeper than the skin and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall isolate the affected person for seven days. (Leviticus 13:1–4)
- On the seventh day the priest shall again conduct an examination: and if the affection has faded and has not spread on the skin, the priest shall pronounce the person pure. (Leviticus 13:6)

D'VAR TORAH

The words of our Torah portion are most frightening.

They are frightening for the ways in which we identify: the experience is too familiar. They are also frightening precisely because we do not identify: the description of the scaly affections and the priests is archaic, foreign to our ears, and not to be understood.

First, the familiar: Who among us has not noticed something strange on his or her own body? Let's say that one day you are just brushing your teeth, daydreaming about work, when you glance in the mirror and see a spot, a patch, a quarter-inch square of skin that is just a shade darker than the rest. Or maybe you see a mole or a rash or a lump. You think the worst. Then you counsel yourself: "Don't be silly. It's probably been there all my life and I just never noticed it before."

Then you get scared again. You call the doctor. They take a biopsy. You wait. You pray. You share your anxiety with the rabbi, but ask that it be kept confidential because really, you are still hoping that it's nothing. You can taste the relief (tinged with a bit of embarrassment that you made such a big deal over nothing) when your doctor pronounces that miraculous word: "clean!" And you get dizzy at the prospect that a different scenario is emerging, one in which your doctor utters the horrid verdict: "unclean!"

Over the years of serving in my congregation, I have discovered that each of the *parashiyot* have reputations that have been given to them by our bar and bat mitzvah students. Every *parashah* is meaningful, I teach our thirteen-year-olds, and there is no such thing as a "better" or "worse" portion. But I must say that those *b'nei mitzvah* students who have *Parashat Tazria* feel that they are in a special club. Why is this so? They joke, that of all the Torah's portions, theirs is "the worst." Perhaps it is because of our societal discomfort with talking about the details of such personal matters. Bodily emissions and unusual discoloration of fluids do not seem, they say, to be topics appropriate for public discussion from the *bimah*. Perhaps it is because we continue, even in today's modern world, to be frightened of diseases that we don't understand.

In biblical days, the treatment for a variety of skin diseases was elaborate and complex. It was the priest who was called upon to assess the disease. Did the priest have a medical background or was he called upon strictly for his ritual expertise? W. Gunther Plaut, in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition* (New York: URJ Press, 2005), says, "As portrayed in Leviticus, the

Israelite priest is not a physician. His role is entirely ritualistic; he does not attempt to cure tzara-at" (p. 743). And yet Baruch Levine, editor of the *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), claims that the priest "combined medical and ritual procedures" (p. 75). Harvey Fields says, in *A Torah Commentary for Our Times* (New York: UAHC Press, 1991), that "the priest functions not only in his religious role but also as a kind of diagnostician" (p. 122).

These differences of opinion among biblical scholars shouldn't surprise us. Rather, they should remind us how our health is based on a closely interwoven web of medical and spiritual needs. It is not a coincidence that many of the great rabbis of our people, Moses Maimonides among them, were both rabbis and physicians. Those who were priests and those who were doctors were both, rightly, referred to as healers.

When we are ill, we want to use all our resources to aid us in healing. We want the best medical care. At the same time, the *Mi Shebeirach* that is recited for us in the synagogue goes a long way to bolster the spirit and help us on a path toward wellness.

The verdict can be horrifying. Whether the pronouncement is "clean!" or "unclean!" is not in our hands. And yet we are guided. Like the priests of old who had careful prescriptions for those who were ill, we are helped by our doctors, our rabbis, and our communities as we move forward in a continual dance between sickness and health.

BY THE WAY

- One may not live in a town without a physician. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Kiddushin* 4:1)
- [Rachel Naomi Remen, the noted physician who has published about the import of the intersection between mind and body and between spirit and science, is herself the granddaughter of a rabbi, and her childhood dream was to be a rabbi. She well describes the interplay between body and spirit as she writes the following:]
- At first, I was surprised that people with the same disease had such very different stories. Later I became deeply moved by these stories, by the people and the meaning they found in their problems, by the unsuspected strengths, the depths of love and devotion, the rich and human tapestry initiated by the pathology I was studying and treating. Eventually, these stories would become far more compelling to me than the disease process. I would come to feel more personally enriched by them than by making the correct diagnosis. They would make me proud to be a human being. (Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen*)

Table Wisdom [New York: Riverhead Trade, 1997], p. xxiv)

- [The English words “clean” and “unclean” are incomplete translations of the far more complicated Hebrew words *tahur* and *tamei*. Rachel Adler explores the frightfulness and the relationship between the two concepts when she observes the following:]
- *Tumah* is the result of our confrontation with the fact of our own mortality. It is the going down into darkness. *Taharah* is the result of our reaffirmation of our own immortality. It is the reentry into light. *Tumah* is devil or frightening only when there is no further life. Otherwise, *tumah* is simply part of the human cycle. To be *tameh* is not wrong or bad. Often it is necessary and sometimes it is mandatory. (Rachel Adler, "Tumah and Taharah: Ends and Beginnings," in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun [New York: Schocken Books, 1990], p. 64)

YOUR GUIDE

1. Why do human beings so often react with hatred to that which they fear? 2. Is quarantine ever an appropriate response to contagious disease? 3. How might our prayers for health impact our healing?

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The Plagues of Our Time Rifat Sonsino

The Issue

No society is perfect. Each has some accomplishments and a number of deficiencies. The question is how to deal with the problems affecting its well-being at any given time. In this *d'var Torah*, as suggested to me by a friend of mine, I would like to raise the issue of the major plagues of our time, and our responsibility to our fellow human beings.

The Torah portion of this week, *Tazria/M'tzora*, has always presented preachers and youngsters celebrating their b'nei mitzvah with tremendous challenges, primarily because it deals with ritual impurities and bodily discharges that are mostly irrelevant in the post-Temple period. Besides, it covers a subject that is highly obscure. During my tenure as a congregational rabbi, I often used Deuteronomy 12:28–13:5 as an alternative reading instead of *Tazria/M'tzora*, as suggested in *Gates of the House* (ed. Chaim Stern [New York: CCAR, 1977], p. 288).

Meaning of *Tzara-at*

The bulk of our Torah portion deals with something called *tzara-at*. When the Bible was translated into Greek in the third century b.c.e., this Hebrew word was rendered as *lepra*, meaning "a scaly affection." In medieval times, *lepra* was identified with "leprosy," namely Hansen's disease. We now know that this definition is not correct for this reason: whatever *tzara-at* is, the text describes it as appearing not only on the body, but also in cloth and fabric (Leviticus 13:47) as well as on the walls of houses (Leviticus 14:34). On the body it could be psoriasis, eczema, or leucoderma; in cloth, fabric, and houses it could be some kind of mildew or mold.

When such a condition was discovered in a person, cloth, fabric, or house, the "priest who performs the purification" (Leviticus 14:11), whose concern was spiritual rather than medical, declared the afflicted either ritually pure or ritually unclean. In the first case, the priest resorted to some purification rituals in the sanctuary. When *tzara-at* was found to be permanent, the results were as follows: an afflicted individual was banned from the community (Leviticus 13:45–46), an impure cloth or fabric was burned (Leviticus 13:52), and a compromised house was torn down (Leviticus 14:45).

The rabbis who inherited the text, which they deemed to be of Sinaitic origin, interpreted these injunctions midrashically because the Temple rituals no longer existed in their day. So, using a play on words, they argued, for example, that a person afflicted with *tzara-at*, namely a *m'tzora*, is really a *motzi ra*, a "slanderer." This may have made for a nice sermon, but it did not reflect the true meaning of the text.

The Concept of *Tum'ah*

The Book of Leviticus deals with the idea of *tum'ah*, usually translated as "impurity." In the text, corpses, dead animals, bodily fluids, and *tzara-at* produce defilement. The role of the priest was to eliminate ritual impurities from the sacred Sanctuary. As *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, and Michael Fishbane [London: Oxford University Press, 2004], p. 232) puts it, ritual impurity is "not created by or connected with evil spirits or malicious deities. Neither is it the same as modern notions of dirt or filth, or of infection. Rather, it is a simple fact of life, a part of nature." It can spread anywhere, and when it affects the Temple's sanctity it needs to be eliminated through some rituals. It is here that we can find a message for our time.

Toward the end of our Torah portion we find a remarkable statement: "You shall put the Israelites on guard against their impurity, lest they die through their impurity by defiling My Tabernacle which is among

them" (Leviticus 15:31). Baruch Levine comments: "It is not the condition of impurity per se that evokes God's punishment, but the failure to rectify that condition so as to restore a state of purity" (*The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], p. 98).

What I learn from this text and Levine's observation is this: *Tzara-at* is basically a *nega*, namely, a "plague" (Leviticus 13:2). But society's ills must not be taken as given just because humanity is imperfect. On the contrary, most modern plagues are of human origin, and it is up to us to look for means to eliminate them.

The Plagues of Our Times

For me, the most important plagues of our time are the following: the global warming that will inevitably create major changes in our lifestyle in the next few decades; the fundamentalism of religious fanatics that makes dialogue and mutual respect impossible; the inequality between the rich and the poor that pits one against the other; the curse of racism and discrimination against minorities that devalues human beings everywhere; the quick jump to military war over patience and long-term diplomacy as a way to solve problems; and above all, the lack of respect for the sanctity of human life that often ends with violence and criminal acts.

This is my list. What is yours?

These and other major problems are certainly not new and cannot be solved by one individual. Yet, as Rabbi Tarfon taught, "It is not our job to complete the work, but neither are we free to walk away from it" (*Pirkei Avot* 2:16). This holds even if our participation is on a limited and local basis. Our Torah portion reminds us that the priest who investigates an affliction does not close his eyes to the problem at hand, but tries to find a way of eliminating it. His methods are not ours, but his intentions ought to be.

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How Is Your Eyesight? Joe Rooks Rapport

Tazria/M'tzora and I are old friends. She ushered me into manhood when I was thirteen years old, and thirteen years later was assigned to me for my senior sermon at Hebrew Union College. Now, she has returned to me like a bad penny—every thirteen years of my life without fail.

The problems of her text are so obscure, her subject matter is so distasteful, that her few secrets are not proper topics for polite Shabbat conversation. But amidst the quagmire of ooze and slime, Rashi unearths a tiny gem, still sparkling despite its unpleasant surroundings.

In Leviticus 13:12–13 we read: "If the eruption spreads out over the skin, so that it covers all the skin of the affected person from head to foot, wherever the priest can see . . . he shall pronounce as pure the affected person. . . ."

I can almost see Rashi's mind reeling, "If it's leprosy, then it's unclean, but if it covers the entire body it's clean? What can this mean?"

In desperation Rashi turns to the midrash. He pulls his *Sifra* off its shelf and there he finds this gem. The text says: "Wherever the priest can see. . . ." And the *Sifra* provides: "[This] excludes a priest whose sight has dimmed." That is Rashi's comment on the verse.

Consider now Rabbi Sonsino's list of modern plagues as lessons on our own failures of vision: the short-sided myopia that allows us to reek havoc on our environment without recognizing the costs not so far in the distance; the tunnel vision that allows us to look past the pain that lies right before us in the eyes of the homeless, to be blind to people of color, to ignore the plight of AIDS in Africa or genocide in Darfur.

We who are commanded to be a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6) and a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6) must commit ourselves in every age to be the clear-sighted visionaries of a better world. So let me ask you, how's your eyesight?

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From Aaron the Priest to Marcus Welby, MD: Jewish Medical Ethics Michael A. White

FOCAL POINT

- When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall 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. (Leviticus 13:2–3)
- The Eternal One spoke to Moses, saying: This shall be the ritual for the leper at the time of

being purified. 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 the scaly affectation, the priest shall order two live pure birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop to be brought for the one to be purified. (Leviticus 14:1–4)

D'VAR TORAH

I remember watching *Marcus Welby, MD* as a kid. Dr. Welby and the nurses were the image of propriety; they were dressed in spotless white, always smiling. Their patients always seemed calm, trusting, and on their way to recovery. Today's popular television shows like *House*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *ER* bear little resemblance to the hospital shows of yesteryear. In the new shows, the doctors are disheveled, frantic, and overworked. And the camera shows everything from splattered blood to disemboweled organs to scalpels slicing flesh.

Why are we now attracted to such bloody images, so drawn to such gory drama? And how is it that we pay so much attention to the intricacies of surgeries performed, medicines prescribed, and diagnoses rendered by our television doctors when we pay so little attention to the state of medical care in the real world today? According to the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, eighteen thousand people die each year in this country because they lack basic health insurance. While movies about fictitious pandemic plagues and worldwide health disasters are all the rage, 6.5 million real people in Africa suffer with AIDS and only a fraction of them receive the medicines they require.

In the *parashiyot Tazria* and *M'tzora*, we encounter a description of the treatment of critical disease layered with compassion. The priests respond with great sensitivity and patience; they balance the need to protect the community from contagion with the ultimate command to treat the ill with dignity and tender care. But the Torah pulls no punches. The priestly procedure of examination is outlined in full without any attempt to hide its unpleasant details. The priests protected both the community from the spread of disease and the individuals afflicted with illness. Tenderness, wisdom, and courage were required, and the Torah suggests that the priests employed each in their work. Diagnosing illness and determining whether a scab meant leprosy were considered a sacred vocation.

I can well imagine the fear that leprosy evoked

among our ancient ancestors. Its spread was so vicious, its consequences so devastating. And yet the priests went forth and ministered. If the diagnosis was positive and the individual quarantined, the priest returned to see if there was any improvement. If the sores and scabs healed, an offering of purification was made, and the person was brought back into the camp. There was no discussion of insurance coverage, no talk of funding; no one was denied the attention and care that the priests were commanded to give.

Contemporary American public policy eschews responsibility for health care. Instead we are basically on our own. If we are fortunate to have good jobs with good benefits, or we are independently wealthy, we don't have to worry about paying to see doctors and fill prescriptions. But 43 million of our fellow citizens, including 10 million children, go without. Jewish ethical teachings, including *Tazria/M'tzora*, create an ethos of communal responsibility for the ill. Judaism knows nothing of rationing medical care. The Torah commands: "You shall not stand aside while your fellow's blood is shed" (Leviticus 19:16, in *The Chumash: The Stone Edition* [Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1994], p. 661). The Talmud teaches that if you save a single life, it is as if you save the world (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Batra* 11a).

I'm a fan of *ER* and *House*. I marvel at the television doctors' dedication, at their willingness to do whatever it takes to heal, sometimes even risking their own lives. In this way they are authentic inheritors of the priestly vocation. But we can't place all responsibility for healing with them. Every time a pregnant woman in rural America suffers because there are no OB/GYN physicians practicing in her county, every time a child goes without medicine because his family can't afford it, every time a child dies of AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, it is an affront to our moral heritage. We have a sacred obligation to work for the day when we prohibit our political leaders from denying the sick appropriate and dignified care by claiming that we can't afford it.

BY THE WAY

- Providing health care was not just an obligation for the patient and the doctor, but for the society as well. It is for this reason that health care is listed first by Maimonides on his list of the ten most important communal services that had to be offered by a city to its residents. (Mishneh Torah, Sefer Hamadda IV:23). During the long history of the self-governing Jewish community, almost all such communities set up societies to ensure that all their citizens had access to health care. Doctors were required to reduce their rates for poor patients and, where that was not sufficient, communal subsidies were

established (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 249:16; Responsa Ramat Rahel of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg sections 24–25). (From a resolution adopted at the Sixty-second General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, October 1993, San Francisco, CA)

- We cannot merely pray to you, O God, to end starvation; for You have already given us the resources with which to feed the entire world, if we would only use them wisely. We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to root out prejudice; for You have already given us eyes with which to see the good in all people, if we would only use them rightly. We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end despair; for You have already given us the power to clear away slums and to give hope, if only we would use our power justly. We cannot merely pray to You, O God, to end disease; for You have already given us great minds with which to search out cures and healings, if we would only use them constructively. Therefore, we pray to You instead, O God, for strength, determination, and willpower—to do as well as to pray, to become as well as to wish. (Rabbi Jack Riemer, quoted in *Likrat Shabbat*, by Sidney Greenberg [Bridgeport: Media Judaica, 1985], p. 123)
- See also the Web site of the National Coalition on Health Care, www.nchc.org.

YOUR GUIDE

- Is the role the priests perform in *Tazria/M'tzora* reflected in the contemporary practice of medicine?
- How does Rabbi Riemer's prayer relate to a discussion regarding the distribution of medical resources? Do you agree or disagree with his theme?
- How do you believe Jewish tradition informs a discussion about universal medical insurance and foreign aid for AIDS relief?

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THE SKIN (DEEP) DISEASE Cathy Felix

Parashat Tazria/M'tzora is concerned with skin diseases and the procedures involved in checking for them, assessing them, declaring the sufferers healed, and reintegrating the latter into the

community. But when we think about *tzaraat*, the focus is strangely narrow. After all, every organ and system in our body is susceptible to disease or injury. And many of these diseases manifest themselves in ugly, unpleasant ways. So why is our Torah reading restricted to skin diseases alone?

A modern commentator suggests that the Torah is talking about skin-deep disease, warning us against the sin of superficiality. In our affluent culture, it is so easy for us to compare the sizes of our houses or the makes of our cars and to feel superior to those we trump. On the other hand, in these days of multimillionaires, it is also easy to feel inferior to a person who possesses enormous riches. From messages in the media to the salary structures of our corporations, everything in our society communicates the notion that our worth is dependent on the size of our paychecks. If we are rich, the best restaurants are open to us, we pay for first-class lounges so that we don't have to sit in the crowded waiting rooms at the airport, and we are invited to sit on the boards of important Jewish communal organizations. Often all of this engenders a sense of entitlement: We get the best because we are the best. It also often gives us a false sense of self-sufficiency: I attained this all by myself. Conversely, those who have not reached this standard can't be worth our time. We are judged and so we pass judgment on others based on their balance sheets.

It is exactly these messages from our money-minded society that our Torah portion warns us against. Our tradition teaches us alternative values to those of a money-oriented society. It teaches us that the true worth of individuals is measured by the depth of their relationships, not the depth of their stock portfolio. It is measured by the number of *mitzvot* they strive to accomplish, not the number on their paycheck. It is measured by the times they try to cultivate a positive attitude, not the times they try to cultivate a potential client. The Torah tells us that our true accomplishments come from our depths, our guts, and our heart, not from the superficial level of our finances.

Now we can understand how relevant our Torah portion is today. Jews in ancient times were afraid of skin disease and had an elaborate system to deal with it. So, too, we should be afraid of the skin-deep disease that is the lure of superficiality. Just as our forebears had an elaborate system to guard against skin disease and to heal those who had succumbed to it, so, too, we must support and promote those institutional systems that will guard against society's pressures to succumb to superficiality, namely, our Jewish schools, camps, youth groups, and adult *Kallot*. It is this system of institutions that will strengthen us and our children as we measure ourselves by the

yardsticks of spiritual and emotional growth and not merely by the growth of our bank accounts.

Our Torah portion challenges us to reevaluate our accomplishments. It asks us to consider the following: How can we move beyond the externals to value every individual? How can we grow as Jews? How do we guard against the disease of superficiality? And it teaches us that building our character, not our finances, should be our ultimate concern.

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THE "MAGIC" OF RITUAL

Kim S. Geringer

In this week's double parashah, *Tazria/M'tzora*, we learn more than anybody would ever want to know about a skin condition called *tzaraat*, an apparently serious collection of skin diseases prevalent in the biblical period and bearing some relationship to the conditions we know today as eczema and psoriasis. Priests would inspect individuals afflicted with this condition and if the latter were found to be *tamei*, "unclean," then they were barred from all human contact. The text contains a heartbreaking description of what life was like for those with *tzaraat*: "As for the person with an...affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall be made to call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'... His dwelling shall be outside the camp." (Leviticus 13:45-46) Once the infection healed, the priest examined the patient again and conducted an elaborate ritual involving sacrifices and offerings. Then the formerly afflicted one was pronounced *tahor*, "clean," and he or she was readmitted to the community.

Although the priests were the ones who declared someone to be "clean" or "unclean," it does not appear that their role was a medical one. Nowhere does the text say that the priests attempted to treat the condition or that they were in any way functioning as modern-day public health officers. In addition, it was possible to delay the pronouncement of *tzaraat* for a variety of reasons, such as a pilgrimage festival or a wedding. Had the priests been primarily concerned about safeguarding public health, then surely these quarantine regulations would have been enforced even more strictly when large groups of people were scheduled to congregate together in one place. Then what did this ritual of declaring a person to be "clean" again mean? The ritual itself was more than just an announcement by the priests

that the patient was now disease-free: It had the power to reinstate the despised, the rejected, and the outcast as a full community member. By means of the priestly ritual, an outsider's social status was transformed. The ritual made something happen by declaring it to be so.

Until quite recently, if you asked a group of average liberal Jews what they thought about ritual, the less tactful among them might have referred to ritual as "superstition," "magic," or some equally dismissive term. Others would likely have responded that religion is essentially about ethics and that rituals are just the outer (and, therefore, dispensable) husk around an inner moral core. Certainly, this was the position of many of the early Reformers. But what increasing numbers of us now understand is that when individuals and communities give rituals power, they can transform people, space, and time. The anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote, "When we honestly reflect on our busy scrubbing and cleanings,...we know that we are not mainly trying to avoid disease. We are separating, placing boundaries, making visible statements about the home that we are intending to create out of the material house." In other words, all of our actions-and our rituals-carry meaning beyond the obvious and the literal. Even the ethical impulse needs ritual to concretize and carry it. Our rituals remind us of what we believe and what we need to do. Our rituals are our metaphors for expressing what we cannot adequately say in words. Ritual is what we use symbolically to say what we think about the world. And more, ritual is the way in which we interpret and then go on to make that world.

Rituals are magic, and because of their power, they deserve respect, not dismissal. Friday evening becomes Shabbat when we perform rituals that have the power to transform the ordinary into the holy. In the ritual of marriage, two unrelated people are joined and become something different-a family. And in biblical times, the priestly ritual took marginal, excluded members of the community and brought them back in to it. The *tzaraat* ritual created a change in social status, a transformative leap from one state of being to a better, richer one. For me, the message of *Tazria/M'tzora* is that we can all be like those priests. Through the rituals that we perform, we make statements about how we view the world, and then we can attempt to create the world that we see in our minds and in our hearts. Through the "magic" of ritual, we can transform others, and we can also transform ourselves.

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ALL OF US MATTER

Nancy H. Wiener

The double portion Tazria/Metzora gives us a glimpse of how our ancestors dealt with mysterious diseases. In many ways, this double portion reminds us of how similar we are to our ancestors in ways we do not usually consider. They, too, had universally dreaded contagions whose cause and duration were uncertain. They, too, established rigidly enforced and long-remembered rules regarding the exclusion and reintegration of the afflicted individual. The bulk of this week's portion provides us with those rules.

In this double portion we learn that an individual with *tzara'at* or an oozing wound was placed outside the camp for seven days. (Leviticus 13:4) At the end of that period, the priest was instructed to go and check the afflicted. If the affliction was gone, the person could return to the camp. (Leviticus 13:6) If not, the priest would return in a week's time and repeat the inspection. (Leviticus 13:5) The priest, whose status would not be changed through contact with the afflicted, could interact equally with those inside and outside the camp. It is fascinating to realize that for our ancestors and for us, the separation from the community was seen as a necessary corrective for broken societal norms. In biblical times, illness was understood as a divine punishment for a breach in conduct. Imagine the dread with which one discovered a skin disease or oozing wound in the world of the Bible. The whole community assumed that the skin eruption signified a breach in communal norms, the breaking of a commandment, that warranted a seven-day minimum separation from the community. We learn that everyone, from the lowliest member of the community to Miriam the Prophetess, is capable of doing something that would put him or her in jeopardy of being placed outside the world of personal and social intimacy and support.

But aside from enduring fears and lingering memories, what is the impact of the presence of *tzara'at* on the community? When a person is suffering, can the rest of us go on with the tasks of daily living? Or does the knowledge that someone is outside the camp impede our ability as a group to function as a healthy organism? In one account of a specific individual afflicted with *tzara'at* and the impact of that event on the community at large, we learn a great deal. As the Israelites wander in the desert, Miriam is afflicted with *tzara'at*, and the entire community comes to a standstill. Everyone's journey comes to a halt for the period in which she

is placed outside the camp. Only when she returns can the group members all move forward again.

What a remarkable model our ancestors provide for us! The community is comprised of all of its individual members. The life of the community is compromised when someone is outside the camp, when someone is on the margin. Forward movement is impossible for everyone as long as one individual is outside the camp. Perhaps that is because everyone knows that departing from that place would mean certain death for the person on the outside.

This portion reminds us of essential questions we must ask ourselves as individuals and as a community: Is the progress we perceive real if it is predicated on removing individuals from our midst? Are we truly moving forward if we can walk past those along the wayside and not extend a hand to them? Are we able to act so callously because we believe that they are radically different from us? As Reform Jews, we affirm the importance of inclusion. Our communities are open to those who would like to join us. Our communities have extended a welcome to individuals and groups who were once permanently outside the camp: intermarried couples, gay men and lesbians, and children born to Jewish fathers but not Jewish mothers. Our efforts toward inclusion are a reflection of our ongoing commitment to *tikkun olam*, repairing the less than perfect world that is ours. We are responsible for affirming that those who stand on the margins of our society are important members of it. We are responsible for declaring their readiness to be brought back into the camp so that they are not left, forgotten, as the rest of the world presses forward. Like the priest in this week's portion, each of us can be the embodiment of holiness. We can move from within the community of which we are a part and reach out to those who are on the periphery, knowing that our personal status will not be negatively affected and that the status of the entire community will be thereby elevated. Like our ancestors in the desert, we must remember and be responsible for reminding others that none of us makes progress unless all of us participate, unless all of us matter.

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IF YOU DON'T HAVE ANYTHING NICE TO SAY...

Jeffrey Kahn

Like a twelve-year-old preparing for becoming bar or bat mitzvah, I looked forward to receiving my Torah portion with great anticipation. When the assignment to write for *Torat Hayim* arrived and I discovered that I had been assigned the double portion of Tazria/Metzora, my excitement immediately dissipated. How does one approach a Torah portion (actually two *parashiyot*) that seem to be devoid of spiritual enrichment, that seem to defy practical application, that seem to make no common sense?

Perhaps even more than most other portions of Torah, Tazria/Metzora calls on us to dig deeper, to ask more probing questions. What is this affliction of the skin that, if unchecked, can spread so quickly to other people, our homes and possessions, our very communities? Many English-language translations of Scripture call this disease leprosy. Yet physicians tell us that we are not reading about Hansen's disease here. Then what is this contagion that the priestly quarantine officers are instructed to contain?

The twelfth chapter of the Book of Numbers helps us ferret out its meaning. When they were in Hazereth, Miriam and Aaron publicly chastised Moses for some unmentioned aspect of his relationship with a Cushite woman. As a result of that public rebuke, Miriam broke out in the skin affliction described in Tazria/Metzora, (Numbers 12:10) and she was treated in the manner prescribed in these parashiyot. The condemnation that Moses' siblings uttered may have been appropriate. But public censure would have only led to gossip, slander, defamation, and injury. In the end, Moses would have been diminished and the Cushite woman's grievances would never have been addressed.

In an attempt to understand these passages of Torah, the rabbis often employ a play on words, likening the Hebrew word *metzora* to the words *motzi ra* -- "one who brings forth evil": An attempt to correct a miscarriage of justice in an inappropriate manner can lead to a far greater evil. How often we see that in our own society! The way in which we attempt to right the wrongs committed by those we love, by our society in general, by our political leaders, and by the peoples of the world can so easily lead to greater harm. In a noble attempt to make things better, we can so easily bring evil upon ourselves.

This is the dire warning that Tazria/Metzora

presents: We must be vigilant in keeping gossip and slander out of our lives, our homes, and our communities. When we don't, the infection escalates into an epidemic-a plague that becomes a rash on society and cannot be contained. Since the Temple was destroyed, all of Israel has taken on the responsibility of the priesthood. As a nation of priests, we all then have become holy quarantine officers, spending our lives fueling an affliction as well as attempting to control the disease. Yet all the while, we all have the power to eradicate slander and malicious gossip because our tongues always remain within our control.

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