

## *The Unique Halakhic Persona of the Metzora: Of Death and Life Reborn*

### I.

Indubitably, our reading of Tazria-Metzora this year, with its nearly singular focus on the isolated and quarantined persona of the Metzora, is fundamentally different than in any previous year.

Indeed, the figure of the Metzora is something of a halakhic anomaly. He clearly shares features with the standard mourner, isolated for seven days, unable to engage in regular conversation, obligated to tear his clothes, wrap his head<sup>1</sup>, prohibited from laundering, and mandated to allow his hair to grow in a wild, unkempt manner.

In some ways, the Metzora's mourning surpasses the typical *avel*, as he is required to observe these practices even on Shabbat and Yom Tov, and to isolate not in his home, but completely outside the camp. In addition, he must cry out "Tamei, Tamei", that he is impure, warding off anyone from coming into his sphere, unlike the mourner, who receives visitors and consolation.

In other respects, however, the persona of the Metzora does not align with the standard mourner. Unlike the latter, he is indeed allowed to study Torah, and to attend to his personal hygiene: he may wash, anoint himself, and engage in intimate relations.

How can we make sense of this nuanced relationship between the Metzora and the *Avel*?

### II.

It seems to me that gaining insight into this question requires asking a more fundamental question. With respect to the typical *Avel*, we understand quite clearly the source of his mourning: the loss of an immediate relative. Who, exactly, is the Metzora mourning? In the more literal sense of the more idiomatic expression, *habeas corpus*?

It would appear, as noted by Chazal (Nedarim 64b), which compares a *metzora* to someone deceased, that the *metzora*, tantalizingly, is in fact mourning *himself*. The *metzora* has brought about his own spiritual demise by engaging in a variety of asocial behaviors. Most prominently, it was his evil, divisive, destructive speech<sup>2</sup>, but *tzara'at* is equally associated with murder, infidelity, theft, arrogance, and *tzarut ha-ayin*, having a jaundiced, non-charitable perspective on others (Erchin 16a).

He is mourning the person he might have been, had it not been for his insensitivity towards others, which resulted, *middah k'negged middah*, in the Torah's insistence that he be utterly removed from the community. As Rambam writes in his celebrated endorsement of unfettered

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the verse, ועל שפם יעטה. This is no longer practiced.

<sup>2</sup> See Rambam's peroration to Tumat Tzara'at (Chapter 13) where he focuses exclusively on the pathology of *lashon hara*.

human agency, given that we make decisions with spiritual consequences, a person who chooses evil should 'weep and mourn the evil which he has done to himself.'<sup>3</sup> In fact, Chizkuni explicitly endorses this concept, noting that the mourner's tearing of his clothes is an act of mourning his wicked, asocial actions.

It is perhaps for this reason, that the Metzora is actually engaged in self mourning for his own spiritual death, that the purification of the Metzora so clearly resembles a rebirth. Having shaved all the hair from his body, and immersed in a mikvah, the clear image is of a baby emerging anew from the womb. The Korban of the Metzora, involving two identical birds, one of which is slaughtered, the other of which is dipped in the blood of the first but set free, further amplifies the image of a new lease on life, emerging from the blood and death of the previous state.

### III.

We might now better grasp why the Torah allowed for certain discrepancies between the Metzora and the standard mourner. With respect to all matters involving his interaction with others, the Metzora both equals and surpasses the standard mourner. His clothes, seen by others, must be unlaundered and in tatters, and his hair, equally visible, but but be unkempt. He cannot conduct normal conversation. As noted, he is removed much further from the community than the standard mourner, who can and should have the comfort of visitors. The Metzora, in contrast, must warn others to stay away.

Conversely, with respect to those aspects of mourning which the Torah prescribed to promote personal discomfort corresponding to the inner pain one feels upon the passing of a relative, the Metzora was exempted. As such, he may have intimate relations, wash his body, and study Torah. After all, the Metzora is mourning himself, and not someone else.

Perhaps most strikingly, the aveilut of the Metzora is not suspended by Yom Tov nor does it recede into privacy on Shabbat. This can be best understood in light of the reason that a Yom Tov suspends mourning. As the Talmud explains, the mitzvah of Simchat Yom Tov, a mitzvah which applies to the community, must supersede the private mitzvah of aveilut. However, the Metzora is not a member of the community, the rabim, and thus his aveilut continues into Yom Tov. Likewise, while it would be inappropriate for a mourner to publicly mourn on Shabbat, disturbing the special sanctity of the day in the community, and thus, his aveilut is restricted to the private sphere, the Metzora, already removed from the community, and his aveilut has no impact upon the community from which he was already excised.

### IV.

The Metzora, of course, is given the ultimate second chance.

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<sup>3</sup> Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 5.

While anyone who has known of standard aveilut would do anything to be able to bring back the person for whom they mourn, the Metzora actually has precisely that opportunity.

As Rambam<sup>4</sup> spoke about in such inimitable language, the Metzora is given the opportunity of teshuva *par excellence*, to redeem himself, and to emerge, a new person altogether, prepared to assist and contribute meaningfully to the community from which he was removed altogether.

In fact, the Talmud (Moed Kattan 5a) offers an alternative explanation as to why the Metzora must cry out his impurity. It is not only to ward off any human contact, but to ensure that people know of his plight, so that they will pray for him. It seems to me that this is a lynchpin halacha of Metzora. He is being trained to recognize the importance of community, his dependency on it, so that he will properly value it upon his return.

## V.

While our community surely cannot be described as having done anything to deserve the isolation suffered by the Metzora, I believe our response has been precisely what the Torah would have wanted from this fascinating halakhic figure.

It has been simply overwhelming to be a part of a community that has, day in and day out, exerted so much effort in chessed, in taking care of one another, and especially those who are most vulnerable in our community.

It has been deeply inspiring to see the ongoing collective commitment to Talmud Torah, through our virtual shiurim, and Tefillah, while not in a minyan, still together, through Zoom.

I am now asking the community to take matters to the next level. As I communicated earlier today, we have started an interest free loan program to allow those who have not been able to work to meet basic needs, and a committee of attorneys, accountants, financial professionals, and business people to guide others looking for assistance and career transition. To contribute to the discretionary fund to maximize our lending ability, please click here.

The Torah responsibility for those who have suffered isolation from the community, as we all have, is to rededicate oneself to caring for those who have suffered the most economic hardship in this time.

I write with a sense of profound sense of gratitude and an equal measure of confidence in a congregation that understands its responsibilities so intuitively, and which has never failed to rise to the occasion.

Chodesh Tov and Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Tumat Tzara'at.

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