

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

I.

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 head¹, 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 mourner, 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, with discrepancies of both lenient and stringent varieties?

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?

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 speech², 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 human agency, given

¹ Based on the verse, ועל שפם יעטה. This is no longer practiced.

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

that we make decisions with spiritual consequences, a person who chooses evil should ‘weep and mourn the evil which he has done to himself.’³ 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 offering 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, must 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 mourning 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

³ Rambam Hilchot Teshuvah, Chapter 5.

Metzora has already been removed from the community. As such, 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. 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 Rambam⁴ formulated in such inimitable language, the Metzora is given the opportunity of teshuva *par excellance*, 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 and reintegration.

In this sense, his period of ostracization is not merely punitive, but rehabilitating, ensuring that his “rebirth” from the quasi-death experience of tzara’at reflects a reconstructed halakhic persona.

⁴ Ibid, Tumat Tzara’at.