

Boundaries and Holiness in the Torah
Or
What's a Jew To Do To Be Holy Today?
Parashot Tazria and Metzora
April 29, 2017
Leah Abrahams, member Rosh Hodesh Women's Group

These days we are overwrought, distraught and caught in a debate about walls, borders, barriers and boundaries. But this is nothing new. The Torah is full of discussions on this topic and a perfect example is found in the two *parashot* we read this week, *Tazria* and *Metzora* – not to mention the whole book of Leviticus.

Do you know who said these words?

"I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element. I want to know his thoughts. The rest are details."

The quote comes from someone familiar to all of us, Albert Einstein. And I know what he meant. When I don't understand something, I try to conceptualize it by defining categories that encompass what I'm analyzing so that I get a sense of the big picture.

Sometimes when we read and study the Torah, there is an urge to say to oneself – there are so many **unnecessary** details – what is this really about? Take this week's content as an example – the subject matter is, in brief, how to tell the difference between ritual purity (*tahor*) and ritual impurity (*tamae*) – and what to do about it.

- What is a woman's religious purity status after childbirth – *tahor* or *tamae*?
- What is a *Kohein* or priest's religious purity after sacrificing an animal – *tahor* or *tamae*?
- What is a person's status if white scales appear on his skin or a white patch with at least two white hairs, or pink and green scales on the walls of his house – *tahor* or *tamae*?
- What is the status of anyone who has contact with a dead person – etc. etc. etc.

If you stand back from these details, you have to ask--what was God thinking?

What has begun to make sense to me (as I try to gage God's thoughts as articulated by God's messengers and my own human logic) is that many of the laws and prohibitions listed in these chapters relate to the concept of **boundaries** between God's holy space and humans.

There are two components to this idea:

- 1) Ensuring **individual** Israelites were ritually pure to have a relationship with God.
- 2) Ensuring boundaries of ritual purity among the Israelite **community** as a whole.

Let's begin with the first category: **Boundaries between God and God's chosen people.**

On the one hand, we start out with the idea that we are created in God's image, which eliminates some distance between humankind and the Almighty. We are also told that we are a holy nation (*am kadosh*) – another sign of closeness to God. We are promised wonderful and full lives, rain for our crops, good harvests, our own land and eventually even an idyllic peace in Messianic times with the lion lying down with the lamb – in some ways a return to Eden and closeness to God.

On the other hand, we have a number of situations that show there are limits or barriers to that intimacy with God. One is the description of the incident of the Tower of Babel early in Genesis. What happened? People became arrogant in the generations after the flood and wanted to get closer to God by building a tower up to heaven. God thwarted them by having them speak different languages, thus keeping them from communicating with each other and rendering them unable to finish the tower. The message? Don't get too close to the boundary between us and God.

The *parashot* this week enumerate several additional potential barriers limiting intimacy between us and God. Eruptions on our skin, called *Tzaraat*. Disease (possibly mold or fungus) on our clothes and even the walls of our houses, also called *Tzaraat*. Discharges from our bodies. And by extension, according to some Rabbis, the discharges from our mouths known as words. The fact that the person deciding who is *tahor* and who is *tamae* in these instances is the *Kohein*, not a doctor or a house inspector, shows that this is about rules for ritual purity (not just physical purity) to enable acceptable interaction and access to God.

On a related note, scholars have also interpreted these rules as a way of maintaining the borders between life and death – and affirming life. Take, for example, the act of giving birth, an act that places the woman simultaneously close to the life/death boundary – the birth/creation brings her closer to God and the emissions afterwards to the boundary of death, making her *Tamae* or impure.

In short – the Torah tells us how to get close to God (reducing or eliminating some boundaries) but not too close!

Let's turn to the other perspective I mentioned, **Boundaries of holiness within the Israelite community.**

So far I have discussed ritual purity as it relates to barriers between Israel and God. The discussion now turns to the issue of contamination. If people exhibited skin eruptions (*Tzaraat*) or even if *tzaraat* appeared on the walls of their houses, they were regarded as *tamae* (impure). Being afflicted with *tzaraat* was interpreted by some rabbis as a sign of having spoken Evil Speech (*Lashon Ha-rah*). That is, even if the words spoken were true, to speak evil was a form of aggression against another person and brings one to the border of death or decay. Do you remember when Miriam spoke against her brother Moses and then her skin showed a white coating (*Tzaraat*)? To protect the other members of the community from being contaminated by *tzaraat*, a physical boundary was established – and the afflicted were sent outside the city walls – as was Miriam. In

this instance borders or city walls historically had a positive function, protecting the rest of the community from ritual impurity.

The Torah also instructs us that contact with a dead person makes us ritually impure (*tamae*). The same principle is applied to the Kohanim who performed the sacrificial slaughtering on the Temple altar. The reading today offers rituals to convert a person who has had contact with death to *tahor* status by washing one's body and clothes and offering certain sacrifices.

There is a second meaning related to bodily discharges. Some scholars say the priests used the definition of impurity (*tamae*) to exert control over sexual relations. In contrast to other societies of that era in which sex was often part of their worship, sexual purity was critical for having relations with one's spouse. If a woman was defined at certain times as "unclean" *tamae*, she was to be avoided by her husband – a temporary barrier. (Remember the Red Tent?)

On a more positive note, marriage is known as "kiddushim" or sanctification. And Nachmanides, a famous Jewish scholar, wrote that the ceremony of marriage and the state of being married sanctified the act of procreation – involving the husband and his wife in a holy act (*tahor*) while bringing them closer to God (because they are *tahor* during that act).

Before we go any further, it might be a good idea to consider the purpose of the two chapters from a different point of view. These rules of purity and impurity are not just for us – or the historical Israelites; scholars think the details were probably inserted by a group representing the priesthood to be used as instructions for the priests. In other words, consider Leviticus a textbook "Kohanut 101," for priests who had to be sure that people were ritually pure enough to be part of religious observance. They also were responsible to ensure that impurities did not contaminate the rest of the community. The writing style in these chapters and the rhythmic repetition of phrases made it easier for priests to memorize the rules. And then they had to be instructed further in detail on how to purify the afflicted person or object; how to make them *tahor* or ritually pure – even to scraping the walls and re-plastering a house that had mold – and always a subsequent sacrifice when they are again *tahor*.

Now that we begin to understand the "big picture," it brings me back full circle to the original question in the title of this talk: **What's a Jew to do to be holy today?** We don't go to a Kohein or high priest to check out our itchy skin patches and other rashes. We hire a contractor to get rid of the mold. We throw out our daughter's disgusting mildewed socks when we find them in the back of the closet, and are not likely to attribute the problem to the gossip she repeats about others.

So, what *is* a way to be holy today? I think the answer lies in the concept of **our relationship to "the other."**

But first, we have to acknowledge that holiness is mostly defined in these *parashot* by differentiating the Israelites from "the other." The *parasha Tazria* begins with the

reminder of the obligation to perform male circumcision when a baby is eight days old. This physical sign of our covenant with God (permeating the barrier between male individuals and God) at the same time creates a wall between Jews and gentiles, and at the very same time unifies the Jewish community within that wall, according to Maimonides. One never forgets who one is.

Just as circumcision creates boundaries between Jews and others, there are additional rules reinforcing the same boundaries. The Israelites were instructed not to inter-marry. Even Samson, when he told his parents to bring him a certain Philistine girl that he had taken a liking to, had to hear them say, “Can’t you find a nice Jewish girl?” As we learned last week, we have our unique rules about what we can and can’t eat – not the same menu our gentile neighbors eat. All of this defines holiness – and to some extent creates walls between the Israelites (and us) and “the other.”

But, doesn’t it say “*V’ahavta l’re-acha k’mocha?* Aren’t we are required to “love our neighbors as ourselves,” and to treat the stranger as well as we treat each other?

Today, more than ever, we have to find ways to follow these injunctions which break down walls, reduce boundaries – all the while trying to maintain our identity as a people.

How? We know what to do because the teachings of the Torah repeat more than once how to satisfy God’s expectations of us, making us ritually pure and closer to God: Among other injunctions we are told to clothe the naked, help the poor, feed the hungry and protect those who need it. Considering the type of people attracted to join TBZ – which also attracted me, I would say that most of you here today have at least one (if not more) cause to which you are dedicated – criminal justice, the environment, election reform, social justice, hunger, Israel’s survival, refugee protection and more – a cause that requires you to work with people outside the Jewish community. You don’t need me to tell you the opportunities that exist.

Therefore, I will conclude by affirming my admiration for all of you. Not only do you know how to reduce borders and eliminate boundaries, you do it. And I want to congratulate TBZ, along with two other synagogues and three churches that recently joined together and made the decision to co-sponsor two refugee families, who are now housed in an apartment in Brookline. We needed to raise \$30,000 from the six congregations to help these refugees and we did even better--\$32,000. Based on my previous analysis of walls, borders, barriers and boundaries, we accomplished a three-fold mitzvah:

- Demolishing a barrier between us and “the other”
- Creating a feeling of solidarity within the Jewish community for a job well done
- And last but not least, bringing ourselves a little closer to Hashem’s definition of *Am Kodosh* “a holy nation.”

Shabbat Shalom.