

Unclean! Unclean!

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April 24, 2020 – Tazria/Metzora

I spent the summer of 1996 in Israel, where I got some very itchy and annoying bug bites. Other than scratching constantly, I didn't think much about it and assumed they would just go away. At the end of the summer I moved to Brooklyn and had to pick a new primary care doctor. I was young and healthy and picked someone totally randomly.

As the weeks went by and the area around the bug bites grew more and more agitated, until a few months later, I was covered in a full blown rash all over my body, and I knew I couldn't ignore it any longer. So I took the two subway trains necessary to get to my doctor's office in Williamsburg, and when I got off the train I discovered not only was I on the other side of Brooklyn, but it appeared as though I had travelled back a hundred and fifty years to a very large shtetl in Eastern Europe.

Ironically, that week we were studying the double portion of Tazria-Metzora in my Bible class. These two portions go into detail about what needs to be done if there is a plague on your house or an infectious disease or rash on your body.

And as I walked into the doctor's waiting room and saw that it was filled with black hats and wigs, it became very apparent to me that I was the only non-ultra Orthodox Jew there, and I became very self-conscious about my rash. I just wanted to raise my arms and call out "Unclean! Unclean!" - so that people knew not to sit near me. Instead I pulled my sleeves down and my collar up so no one would see my skin.

After the doctor carefully examined me, I discovered that while I did not have the highly contagious disease of tza'ra'at – the leprosy like condition described in this week's Torah portion, but rather what I had was a very serious blood infection.

And the doctor told me that because I had ignored it, the rash had gotten more and more severe as a way of my body trying to tell me to pay attention and to do something about it. He said that had I waited much longer, it could have killed me. Thankfully it was treatable with antibiotics, and a lot of oatmeal baths. And before too long, I was back to normal, and resumed my life as though nothing had happened. But the memory of being in that office, of feeling not only different but unclean in some way, has never left me.

And it's something I've thought a lot about in recent weeks. Social distancing, putting on masks and gloves in order to go to the store, sheltering at home – the need for all of these activities are reflected in this weeks double portion of Tazria-Metzora.

Parashat Tazria deals specifically with what happens if an individual gets tza'ra'at, some strange rash on their body. And Parashat Metzora addresses what happens when this tza'ra'at like plague runs rampant and affects the entire society and becomes an invisible and airborne pollution, attaching itself to houses, and even causing the Holy Sanctuary to become defiled.

This portion goes into detail about what activities or body conditions can render a person ritually impure, thereby banning them from communal spaces, and holy areas.

After a person has been thoroughly examined and it is determined that they have it, they are supposed to tear their clothing, leave their hair uncovered, cover their face, and call out “Unclean! Unclean!” – and as long as the illness lasts, that person has to dwell in isolation, outside the encampment.

I have to say, I much preferred reading this portion when it felt like a quaint ancient ritual, rather than a possible treatment for our current pandemic.

But it’s important to note that the portion also includes detailed purification rituals – a process that allows a person to be declared “tahor” – or ritually clean, thus enabling them to fully rejoin society again once the mysterious illness clears up.

Because as serious as the illness is, it’s not supposed to permanently disrupt society. Once the individual has healed there is a process to allow them to return.

The ritual occurred in two stages, the first was outside the camp, and the second occurred in front of the Sanctuary, eight days later.

The first stage can be understood as a psychological treatment. The priest goes out of the camp to the one who has been in isolation. He would bring two birds, and the defilement from the person who had been afflicted was symbolically transferred to one of the birds, and then the bird was allowed to fly away, taking the defilement with it.

Imagine how good it would feel to see your troubles, your pain, or your illness fly away from you, not to be seen again.

The person who had been sick then washes their clothing, shaves off all of their hair and is bathed, and if all looks good, then they are declared clean and allowed to return into the camp. Seven days later, he shaves off all of his hair again, washes his clothing and body, and is again declared clean.

Then on the 8th day, the person makes an offering to God at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, along with the priest who had performed the cleansing ritual.

The Tent of Meeting, or Sanctuary, was a public spot, it was a place where the offering could be witnessed by the community. It was a public ritual so that it was clear to the community that it was now safe to interact with this person.

It would be hard not to see a striking relevance between this portion and what we are going through today, where not only individuals have been rendered “tamei” – or impure – but the house that we live in, the world that we live in, has been rendered impure. And how desperate we all feel as we seek a way for the authorities to declare “Tahor! Clean!” – so that we as a society know that we can resume our public lives without putting ourselves, or

others, in danger.

As our ancestors knew, returning to a sense of normal was not a simple thing. This process of declaring the person safe took several steps over a period of weeks. This enabled the priests to see if there was a relapse of the illness. And the treatment included multiple detailed physical examinations, as well as a psychological healing treatment for the patient, and a public ritual to calm the fears of the society.

In other words, there had to be a process of reentering normalcy in order to ensure the safety of the society, as well as the successful repatriation of the individual.

This process must have given some measure of comfort to both the person who was afflicted and the larger community. They knew that the exile, or quarantine outside the camp wasn't permanent. That there would be an end to the isolation and separation, even though they didn't know how long that would last. And they knew that when it was safe, they could go back to the way life was.

But things were more complicated if tza'ra'at infected houses. In that situation, the house and the contents would be dismantled, bit by bit, making sure the infection was gone, even if it meant tearing the house down to the foundation. The place was then purified, and rebuilt.

This pandemic has revealed that it is not only individuals that are being affected, but rather, the house that we share, our country and our world, have problems built into its very structure.

The great medieval French Rabbi known as Rashi, taught that we should look at this situation not as a curse, but as a potential blessing. As he writes that it is possible that treasure might be found hidden in the walls of the houses we tear down.

Right now it is important for us to look at our situation and ask ourselves what treasures of wisdom might be found hiding in the walls of our communal house?

The plagues of poverty, racial inequality, lack of adequate health services throughout our country, and the profound impact we have on our environment, have all been sharply and painfully revealed to us.

Just as our ancestors knew that plagues eventually come to an end, we must remember that this time we are going through will eventually come to an end as well, and when it does, there will be a process, that helps us all return to each other.

And, God willing, sooner rather than later, we will be able to reopen society, and rebuild. And as we prepare to do both, we must ask ourselves and our politicians, how can we rebuild our shared house in a better, more just and equitable way? Because we should not be satisfied with going back to normal.

Normal wasn't good enough.

Rather, let us strive to to build something new, something better, than what was here before. Let us work to build a society where we care about each other as much as we care about ourselves. A society that not only behaves as though its success depended on every individual's well being, but knows that this is true.

When I got those bug bites so many years ago, I tried to pretend that there wasn't a problem, I made excuses; I didn't have the time to go to the doctor, I couldn't afford the co-pay, that it wasn't a big deal...just an annoying itch. I let things get so bad that it almost killed me, and my body had to scream out to get my attention.

This pandemic feels as though the earth is screaming out to us now, to pay attention, to act before things are too late to repair.

But it's not too late yet. There is a lot that will need to be done. But it is possible to remake this world better than it was, as long as we are willing to work together.

But until then, let's turn our thoughts towards the process of healing, and pray that each of us, and all who are in need, and the communities that we dwell in, be blessed with a r'fu'at ha-nefesh and a r'fu'at ha-guf – a healing of body and a healing of spirit. And may the time not be too distant when we can all return to being together, feeling safe, and offering words of thanksgiving for a world that has been healed.