

**Sermon | Parshat Tazria**  
April 13, 2024 | ה' ניסן תשפ"ד  
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A few months ago, our bar mitzvah, Blake Tennen, asked me a good question after Kabbalat Shabbat services one Friday night. He asked, “Why did you *choose* Parshat Tazria for your rabbinical school senior sermon?” Considering that I could have chosen from almost all of the other *parshiyot* of the Torah, why choose one about *tzara’at*, a leprous-like affliction which spreads from the home, to clothing, to the body? I could have chosen Parshat Noach, which was the parsha I read at my bar mitzvah, a rich narrative that nearly everyone knows. Or I could have chosen from the early *parshiyot* of Shemot, recounting the plagues, the exodus, and our arrival at Mount Sinai. But instead I chose to speak about a white-scaly affliction that infects the walls of our homes, the fabric of our clothing, and the skin of our bodies. So, why did I choose this? Because I am intrigued and fascinated by this bizarre and mysterious parsha. That intrigue is what motivates me to search for new meaning and uncover new understandings of these complicated, ancient, sacred texts.

This week we also mark Teal Shabbat, so designated because April is Sexual Assault Awareness and Prevention month, and teal is its color. JCADA, the Jewish Coalition Against Domestic Abuse, is our local organization which supports victims of intimate partner violence, educates the community about IPV, and prevents others from experiencing it. IPV is obviously a difficult topic. I might wish I didn't have to speak about it in public; but I have to because it is very real. And pretending that something doesn't exist doesn't make it so. And I recognize that this sermon topic may not be what every family dreams of for a bar mitzvah celebration, but I

would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that Sara Tennen, the mother of our bar mitzvah, is a passionate expert on this subject, to which she has devoted her professional life.

The simple message I want to share is that we as a community are here to support survivors of IPV, stand with you, and prevent others from facing such trauma. We work closely with our partners at JCADA. There are signs in every bathroom stall at B'nai Israel with more information about JCADA, and your clergy are ready and trained to respect, listen, and assist anyone who comes to them. Today, I will begin with the bizarre and mysterious rituals of Parshat Tazria, and eventually I will connect one important lesson from this parsha with our observance of Teal Shabbat.

The Torah commands that someone afflicted with *tzara'at*, a leprous-like affliction, is banished from the camp until they are healed. First, the *kohen*, the priest, diagnoses them with this affliction after a series of examinations and waiting periods. If they are diagnosed, then they tear their clothing, shave their head, and leave the camp to dwell apart and alone for the duration of their illness. As they walk to the outskirts of the camp they cry out "*Tamei! Tamei! Impure! Impure!*"<sup>1</sup> This scene is terribly unfortunate. Here we have a person stricken with a skin affliction, which sounds terribly disgusting and I assume it must have also been terribly uncomfortable. Not only must they endure this ailment, but they are also required to quarantine outside of the camp, separated from everyone else. They are in pain, and they are alone. And still, they are subject to yet another indignity—walking through their neighborhood, disheveled and sickly, they cry out for all to hear, "I am impure! I am impure!"

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 13:45-46.

Commenting on this unfortunate situation, the Talmud offers an ancient aphorism: בתר עניא אזלא עניותא, “poverty pursues the poor.”<sup>2</sup> Suffering always seems to find those who already suffer. The aphorism suggests that there are some people for whom suffering is part of their identity. For them, suffering is inescapable and unavoidable. The Talmud offers us another case where the aphorism applies. According to the Mishnah in Tractate Bikkurim (3:8), the wealthy of ancient Israel brought their first fruits to the Temple priests in baskets of gold and silver, whereas the poor would bring their first fruits in wicker baskets. The wealthy only turned over the contents of their baskets and kept their gold and silver baskets. The baskets of the poor, however, were entirely given over to the priests—contents, wicker, and all. The wealthy were permitted to keep their wealth, whereas the poor gave up everything. Once again, בתר עניא אזלא עניותא, “poverty pursues the poor.” They suffer yet another indignity.

And that is why I take issue with this aphorism. It is defeatist. It is victim-blaming. It suggests that those who suffer do so because they are a misery-magnet, that they attract the very ills, sufferings, and misfortunes that befall them. Such a worldview is dangerous, because it perpetuates a sense of indifference to the suffering of others. It is an excuse for society to accept these indignities and simply say, “This is the way of the world.” It offers each of us a reason to turn away from those who suffer, rather than turning towards. But Judaism does not look at the present reality and deem it acceptable. Rather, Judaism teaches us to be aspirational, to engage in the difficult work of *tikkun olam*, to see injustices in our world and then, in response, offer corrective measures to repair these injustices. In Judaism, poverty is supposed to be a temporary state of being. In Deuteronomy we read, “There shall be no needy

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<sup>2</sup> Bavli Bava Kamma 92a-b.

among you—since your God Adonai will bless you in the land...If, however, there is a needy person among you...you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the need.”<sup>3</sup> When someone is in need, we are commanded to assist them and provide the resources that they need to survive and thrive. The resources are available, and we must ensure that they are properly distributed. Poverty is not part of someone’s identity, and thus the aphorism is not a truism, but a challenge. The Talmud challenges us: Will we turn away and simply say that there is nothing we can do because poverty pursues the poor? Or will we rise to the occasion and support those who are in need? I certainly hope that we will do the latter, and Teal Shabbat is our opportunity to affirm that we will.

Despite what we sometimes like to tell ourselves, IPV, intimate partner violence, is a problem in the Jewish community, too. Research shows that somewhere between 15 and 25% of Jewish households experience IPV, which is roughly the same as the percentage in the larger population. While victims are more likely to be women, we know that a significant number of men have also been victims of IPV. It can be physical, psychological, sexual, spiritual, technological, or financial. And when someone is a survivor of IPV, they may feel like the *metzora*—a victim of someone else’s abuse *and* a victim of societal stigma. To say that poverty pursues the poor is to exonerate ourselves as a community and ignore this very delicate issue. To say that poverty pursues the poor is to engage in victim-blaming. To say that poverty pursues the poor is to perpetuate dangerous cycles of violence within our community members’ homes. Therefore, it is our sacred obligation to raise awareness about this issue in

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 15:4-8.

our community, to support survivors, and prevent them from suffering the indignity of victim-blaming and social isolation.

As a Jewish community, we are aspirational in our pursuits. We look at the world around us and refuse to accept it as it is because we know that it can always be made better. Judaism invites us to recognize that we are partners with God in the ongoing Creation of the world, that we have the power to fashion a more just world. Nobody should have to feel alone or experience stigma, especially those who already have suffered so much. On Teal Shabbat we reaffirm this belief by offering strength and hope to survivors of IPV, and compassionate support to those who need it. We hear the echo of Parshat Tazria and rise to its challenge not to look away, not to turn aside, but rather to be willing to confront even the most challenging topics and to be present and supportive for all of our community members. Together we can shape a world in which poverty no longer pursues the poor, and suffering no longer pursues those who suffer.

Shabbat shalom.

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