

Shabbat Tazria-Metsora 5780
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Shabbat Shalom!

This is the Shabbat of the famous Torah portion...the one we come to each year, make the requisite comment about how challenging it is to read several chapters filled with descriptions of skin disease and other afflictions, and then continue on with the expected and inevitable comments about the concept of purity.

This year, in the days and weeks leading up to this Shabbat, I've seen many many comments online talking about how easy it is this year of all years to read and preach on the Leviticus Torah portions. The general stance seems to be that since we are living with overwhelming disruption caused by disease, that somehow there is a strong and meaningful connection to this part of the Torah, which describes the community response to impurity of different kinds.

I don't agree. First, I think that even though we have been thrust into this new reality, there is a lot more to think about beyond just how we live with these threats. We can still sustain a broad range of interests, passions, concerns and pursuits.

In the early weeks of this pandemic, I framed our congregational response in terms of the biblical poem Hine Ma Tov, searching for figurative and literal ways that we could remain close together as a community.

Yes, this can be seen in the teachings of Leviticus, since one of the dominant themes there is the ultimate consequence of sending someone "outside the camp". There is a power and an importance to being together, being part of a community.

However, when I began to read Tazria and Metsora this week, I didn't focus on the possible thread of connection from those afflictions to the affliction of covid. After all, these Torah portions are principally about the people trying to understand why one gets sick...and the answer first and foremost is that the ill person must somehow not have been faithful in their observance.

I reject this stance in every way, and certainly during this current reality. If anything, the overwhelming nature of this virus is a lesson that everyone is affected...everyone is vulnerable. It is a reminder that we are fragile, and of course mortal.

My question, then, is how we respond to the awareness of fragility, and how we can support one another in living with vulnerability.

Several weeks ago, when reading the book of Exodus, we came to the description of the second tablets. We actually repeated this chapter as part of the Passover Torah reading. The moment is this: after the episode of the Golden Calf, when the 10 commandments were shattered, Moses receives a new set of tablets inscribed with the commandments. The portion gives us vivid detail

that both sets of tablets...the whole ones and the broken ones, are kept inside the Holy Ark in a place of honor.

It is a powerful image that provides us with an important lesson: we need to include and embrace and honor all the members of the community. Our greatest effort should be in recognizing and responding to the brokenness that we all have.

Dan Nichols, one of my favorite Jewish singer-songwriters, has a special song, based on the morning prayer for creation. He says there, "I thank You for my body and soul, Help me realize I am beautiful and whole...I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too. I will live each day as a gift I give to You."

I'm perfect the way I am and a little broken too. To me, this could be an anthem for what we are living with right now, and what I pray will remain with us.

We know that things aren't going to just "go back to normal". Yes, the day will come when things will open up and we can resume many of our daily activities. Yet, inevitably, there will be lingering and perhaps even permanent changes to the way we gather and interact.

What I offer today, though, is the thought that we have been exposed to something truly important during this time: the recognition that we are fragile. Our friends and neighbors and fellow community members are fragile.

There's no blame to this. There's no causality based on our faithfulness.

Rather, it is just part of being human.

And it's scary. And frustrating. And stressful and draining. And it hurts.

Sometimes, we're just not ok. We can be eager to show how well we are coping, but that isn't always the case. And that's a natural and important part of bringing our full authentic selves into our community.

Today, I acknowledge this, and I also offer up a couple of hopes.

I hope that we emerge from this experience and make choices that bring us closer to those who are in need.

I hope that we work to strengthen the fabric of our community, working to ensure that the actions we take not only celebrate the good, but honor the difficulties we all face.

In Danny's expression: let us live each day as a gift, thankful for what we have and working to respond to those who are challenged. When we do this, we will truly honor our Brit Kodesh, our sacred obligation that binds us together.