

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora
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D'var Torah – Parshiot Tazria-Metzora

I have always wondered how the *Parshiot* of Tazria and Metzora found their way into the book of Vayikra at this time. Up until now, we have been dealing with the sacrifices that are to be brought in the newly constructed Mishkan (Tabernacle). How do the rules of *tuma* (impurity) and *tahara* (purity) fit in here? But in thinking about it more carefully, it occurred to me that there could not have been a more appropriate place for these *Parshiot* to have landed. *Sefer Vayikra* is, after all, *Torat Kohanim*, the Priestly Rulebook, as it were.

To try and sort things out, I went back to *Parshat Shmini*, which describes the highs and lows of the eighth and ultimate day of the dedication of the *Mishkan*. Front and center were, of course, Aharon and his sons, the original Jewish Priests, from whom all *Kohanim* are descended. The day is nearly ruined by the sudden and inexplicable deaths of Nadav and Avihu, Aharon's first and second son. But Moshe urges Aharon and Elazar and Itamar to continue their work of making ready the sacrifices which are to be presented to the Almighty on behalf of the people – and eating their share, which is also part of the ritual. Aharon explains his family's hesitation to eat the sin-offering in the face of their grief and Moshe listens, approves and accepts Aharon's position.

Next, also seemingly out of place, G-d speaks to Moshe and Aharon about what animals the Jewish people may eat. *Parshat Shmini* concludes with the following (summarized) explanation: I brought you out of Egypt, and you should be holy because I am holy. You must therefore distinguish between the animals that are impure and that are pure and only eat those that are pure – so that you may remain holy. Then we move to *Parshiot Tazria* and *Metzora* which deal with impurity caused by childbirth, leprosy, wounds, inflammations, burns, facial afflictions, leprosy in clothing and later in houses, and finally those impurities brought on by certain discharges.

There is one constant in dealing with all the impurities described in these two *Parshiot* – the role of the *Kohanim* in identifying the impurity, treating the impurity and bringing the person or object back within the fold of the Jewish people. It is as if the Torah is saying to the Priests, yes, you are very important in performing certain rituals in the Temple – but do not forget that your job has a critical pastoral element to it. You are responsible for the purity of the Jewish people. You must minister to them when they face significant challenges and you must do so in a manner that is in keeping with your other role as the face of the people when they approach G-d.

It is G-d's message to the priests that they cannot solely be active in the Tabernacle, but they must also treat people with kindness and concern when those individuals are stricken with, and must deal with, impurity. In some way, the *Kohanim* were the first Jewish doctors and therapists.

Once G-d has imparted that message to the *Kohanim* and the Jewish people, about how it is the responsibility of all of the people – but most importantly the Priest – we can return to the narrative in the next *Parsha*, which takes place immediately after the death of Nadav and Avihu. That narrative returns to the discussion of sacrifices and rituals, specifically those which are to take place on Yom Kippur to atone for the sins of the *Kohen* performing the ritual, along with his family and the entire Jewish nation.

Shabbat Shalom.