

Torah Thoughts Metzora

5779:

In parshat Metzora this week we read about the ceremony for reintegrating an individual who has been shunned back into the camp. The Torah commands that when someone suffers a skin affliction that they be sent outside the camp – quarantined in a sense – until they were examined by a priest, declared clean of their disease and readmitted. The affected person would bathe, cut off their hair and have sacrificial blood daubed on their ear, thumb and big toe, after which they would return to their former status and resume normal activities.

We would do well to ponder that model and consider whether it has value in our own time. I'm not talking about sprinkling sacrificial blood on our congregants, but rather the case of someone leaving a synagogue community, either of their own volition or because they have been shunned. When the relationship between an individual and the community is impaired, how do we bring them back? Do we even want to? To what extent is it healthy, for both the individual and for the group, to normalize the re-admittance of a former deviant through ritual words and deeds? Is 'Welcome back' enough? If they become current with their dues, is it enough? Are there some actions that permanently estrange us from former members of the community?

In my experience, re-admittance to the synagogue community usually takes place in situations where members have left because of a particular interaction between themselves and someone else, or because of a disagreement over policy. After time has passed, and the interaction is forgotten, the parties involved are no longer here, or the policy issue is no longer a source of conflict, space opens up for a return to the community. It can happen years or even decades later, and is typically less painful than we imagine it to be. Having recovered from the interpersonal afflictions of the past, families return to rebuild their Jewish lives and social ties. In those circumstances it might be helpful to have a 'welcome back' ceremony with a special aliyah on a Shabbat morning or other such recognition. When someone can summon the courage to overcome the emotional disabilities of the past, then they, like those who suffered physical disabilities in the parsha, should be given the chance to put their pains in the past and re-enter our midst, and we should have the graciousness to welcome them without conditions, and with words of love and forgiveness.