

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Tazria/ Shabbat HaChodesh
April 2, 2022 ***1 Nissan, 5782

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We **welcome all** to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

Tazria in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/1545/jewish/Tazria-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The Parshah of Tazria continues the discussion of the laws of tumah v'taharah, ritual impurity and purity.

A woman giving birth should undergo a process of purification, which includes immersing in a mikvah (a naturally gathered pool of water) and bringing offerings to the Holy Temple. All male infants are to be circumcised on the eighth day of life. Tzaraat (often mistranslated as leprosy) is a supra-natural plague, which can afflict people as well as garments or homes. If white or pink patches appear on a person's skin (dark red or green in garments), a kohen is summoned. Judging by various signs, such as an increase in size of the afflicted area after a seven-day quarantine, the kohen pronounces it tamei (impure) or tahor (pure).

A person afflicted with tzaraat must dwell alone outside of the camp (or city) until he is healed. The afflicted area in a garment or home must be removed; if the tzaraat recurs, the entire garment or home must be destroyed.

Hachodesh in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/74477/jewish/Hachodesh-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This being the **Shabbat** that falls on or before the first of **Nissan**, we also read the section of **Hachodesh** (Exodus 12:1–20), which relates **G-d's** words to **Moses** in Egypt two weeks before the **Exodus**, instructing us to set the **Jewish calendar** by the monthly **new moon**, and to regard Nissan as the “head of months.” G-d also instructs to bring the **Passover** offering, to eat it with **matzah** and **bitter herbs**, and to abstain from **leaven** for seven days

Haftorah - Hachodesh in a Nutshell: Ezekiel 45:18 – 46:15

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/659336/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This special *haftorah* is a prophecy regarding the Paschal Offering that will be brought during the Messianic Era, reflecting the theme of the *Hachodesh* Torah reading—Moses' command to the Israelites in Egypt to prepare and bring the Paschal lamb.

This *haftorah* is part of Ezekiel's prophecy regarding the third Holy Temple—its structure, inauguration and some of the practices that will be observed therein. The *haftorah* begins with a description of the various sacrifices that will be offered during the Temple's seven-day inauguration ceremony, and then mentions that on

the 14th of Nissan we shall bring the Paschal offering.

Much of the rest of the *haftorah* is devoted to the sacrifices that will be brought by the "leader," and prescribes his entry and exit from the Temple.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[The Circumcision of Desire: Tazria by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/the-circumcision-of-desire/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/the-circumcision-of-desire/>

It is hard to trace with any precision the moment when a new idea makes its first appearance on the human scene, especially one as amorphous as that of love. But love has a history.[1] There is the contrast we find in Greek, and then Christian, thought between eros and agape: sexual desire and a highly abstract love for humanity in general.

There is the concept of chivalry that makes its appearance in the age of the Crusades, the code of conduct that prized gallantry and feats of bravery to “win the heart of a lady”. There is the romantic love presented in the novels of Jane Austen, hedged with the proviso that the young or not-so-young man destined for the heroine must have the right income and country estate, so as to exemplify the “truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.”[2] And there is the moment in *Fiddler on the Roof* where, exposed by their children to the new ideas in pre-revolutionary Russia, Tevye turns to his wife Golde, and the following conversation ensues:

Tevye: Do you love me?

Golde: I'm your wife!

Tevye: I know! But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. Twenty-five years, my bed is his...

Tevye: Shh!

Golde: If that's not love, what is?

Tevye: Then you love me!

Golde: I suppose I do!

The inner history of humanity is in part the history of the idea of love. And at some stage a new idea makes its appearance in biblical Israel. We can trace it best in a highly suggestive passage in the book of one of the great Prophets of the Bible, Hosea.

Hosea lived in the eighth century BCE. The kingdom had been divided since the death of Solomon. The northern kingdom in particular, where Hosea lived, had lapsed after a period of peace and prosperity into lawlessness, idolatry, and chaos. Between 747 and 732 BCE there were no less than five Kings, the result of a series of intrigues and bloody struggles for power. The people, too, had become lax:

There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery; they break all

bounds and murder follows murder.

Hos. 4:1-2

Like other Prophets, Hosea knew that Israel's destiny depended on its sense of mission. Faithful to God, it was able to do extraordinary things: survive in the face of empires, and generate a society unique in the ancient world, of the equal dignity of all as fellow citizens under the sovereignty of the Creator of Heaven and Earth. Faithless, however, it was just one more minor power in the ancient Near East, whose chances of survival against larger political predators were minimal.

What makes the book of Hosea remarkable is the episode with which it begins. God tells the Prophet to marry a prostitute, and see what it feels like to have a love betrayed. Only then will Hosea have a glimpse into God's sense of betrayal by the people of Israel. Having liberated them from slavery and brought them into their land, God saw them forget the past, forsake the covenant, and worship strange gods. Yet He cannot abandon them, despite the fact that they have abandoned Him. It is a powerful passage, conveying the astonishing assertion that more than the Jewish people love God, God loves the Jewish people. The history of Israel is a love story between the faithful God and His often faithless people. Though God is sometimes angry, He cannot but forgive. He will take them on a kind of second honeymoon, and they will renew their marriage vows:

“Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the desert
and speak tenderly to her . . .
I will betroth you to Me forever;
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,
in love and compassion.
I will betroth you in faithfulness,
and you will know the Lord.”

Hos 2:16-22

It is this last sentence – with its explicit comparison between the covenant and a marriage – that Jewish men say when they put on the hand-tefillin, winding its strap around the finger like a wedding-ring.

One verse in the midst of this prophecy deserves the closest scrutiny. It contains two complex metaphors that must be unraveled strand by strand:

“On that day,” declares the Lord,
“You will call Me ‘my Husband’ [ishi];
Hos. 2:18

This is a double pun. Baal, in biblical Hebrew, meant ‘a husband’, but in a highly specific sense – namely, ‘master, owner, possessor, controller.’ It signalled physical, legal, and economic dominance. It was also the name of the Canaanite god – whose prophets Elijah challenged in the famous confrontation at Mount Carmel. Baal (often portrayed as a bull) was the god of the storm, who defeated

Mot, the god of sterility and death. Baal was the rain that impregnated the earth and made it fertile. The religion of Baal is the worship of god as power. Hosea contrasts this kind of relationship with the other Hebrew word for husband, ish. Here he is recalling the words of the first man to the first woman:

This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called “woman” [ishah],
Because she was taken from man [ish].

Gen. 2:23

Here the male-female relationship is predicated on something quite other than power and dominance, ownership and control. Man and woman confront one another in sameness and difference. Each is an image of the other, yet each is separate and distinct. The only relationship able to bind them together without the use of force is marriage-as-covenant – a bond of mutual loyalty and love in which each makes a pledge to the other to serve one another.

Not only is this a radical way of reconceptualising the relationship between man and woman. It is also, implies Hosea, the way we should think of the relationship between human beings and God. God reaches out to humanity not as power – the storm, the thunder, the rain – but as love, and not an abstract, philosophical love but a deep and abiding passion that survives all the disappointments and betrayals. Israel may not always behave lovingly toward God, says Hosea, but God loves Israel and will never cease to do so.

How we relate to God affects how we relate to other people. That is Hosea’s message – and vice versa: how we relate to other people affects the way we think of God. Israel’s political chaos in the eighth century BCE was intimately connected to its religious waywardness. A society built on corruption and exploitation is one where might prevails over right. That is not Judaism but idolatry, Baal-worship.

Now we understand why the sign of the covenant is circumcision, the commandment given in this week’s parsha of Tazria. For faith to be more than the worship of power, it must affect the most intimate relationship between men and women. In a society founded on covenant, male-female relationships are built on something other and gentler than male dominance, masculine power, sexual desire and the drive to own, control and possess. Baal must become ish. The alpha male must become the caring husband. Sex must be sanctified and tempered by mutual respect. The sexual drive must be circumcised and circumscribed so that it no longer seeks to possess and is instead content to love. There is thus more than an accidental connection

between monotheism and monogamy. Although biblical law does not command monogamy, it nonetheless depicts it as the normative state from the start of the human story: Adam and Eve, one man, one woman. Whenever in Genesis a patriarch marries more than one woman there is tension and anguish. The

commitment to one God is mirrored in the commitment to one person. The Hebrew word *emunah*, often translated as “faith,” in fact means faithfulness, fidelity, precisely the commitment one undertakes in making a marriage. Conversely, for the prophets there is a connection between idolatry and adultery. That is how God describes Israel to Hosea. God married the Israelites but they, in serving idols, acted the part of a promiscuous woman (Hos. 1-2). The love of husband and wife – a love at once personal and moral, passionate and responsible – is as close as we come to understanding God’s love for us and our ideal love for Him. When Hosea says, “You will know the Lord,” he does not mean knowledge in an abstract sense. He means the knowledge of intimacy and relationship, the touch of two selves across the metaphysical abyss that separates one consciousness from another. That is the theme of *The Song of Songs*, that deeply human yet deeply mystical expression of eros, the love between humanity and God. It is also the meaning of one of the definitive sentences in Judaism:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

Deut. 6:5

Judaism from the beginning made a connection between sexuality and violence on the one hand, marital faithfulness and social order on the other. Not by chance is marriage called *kiddushin*, “sanctification.” Like covenant itself, marriage is a pledge of loyalty between two parties, each recognising the other’s integrity, honouring their differences even as they come together to bring new life into being. Marriage is to society what covenant is to religious faith: a decision to make love – not power, wealth or force majeure – the generative principle of life.

Just as spirituality is the most intimate relationship between us and God, so sex is the most intimate relationship between us and another person. Circumcision is the eternal sign of Jewish faith because it unites the life of the soul with the passions of the body, reminding us that both must be governed by humility, self-restraint, and love.

Brit milah helps transform the male from *baal* to *ish*, from dominant partner to loving husband, just as God tells Hosea that this is what He seeks in His relationship with the people of the covenant. Circumcision turns biology into spirituality. The instinctive male urge to reproduce becomes instead a covenantal act of partnership and mutual affirmation. It was thus as decisive a turn in human civilisation as Abrahamic monotheism itself. Both are about abandoning power as the basis of relationship, and instead aligning ourselves with what Dante called “the love that moves the sun and other stars.”[3] Circumcision is the physical expression of the faith that lives in love. [1] See, e.g., C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960. Also Simon May’s, *Love: A History*, New Haven: Yale UP, 2011. [2] The famous first line of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. [3] *The Divine Comedy*, 33:143-45.

Tazria is a parashah that people often find more repelling than compelling. Why so many words dedicated to bodily emissions and the intricate appearance of skin diseases? This Torah of the body touches on the relationship between halakhah and individuals' embodied experiences. We might want to believe there could be a place for religious connection in these messy and vulnerable aspects of life, but we may also be wary. Why would I want to interface with a religious system that doesn't actually know me or my body? This week and next, our quest is for an approach to Torah and religious practice that offers the possibility of feeling seen for the reality of our own experience. Rather than compromising our sense of self, an embodied encounter with Torah and halakhah must strengthen our sense of dignity and agency.

A plain reading of Vayikra suggests that certain bodily emissions push us away from God's presence by creating a status of impurity. When a person has certain discharges, illnesses, or encounters with death, they cannot enter the mishkan (tabernacle). Elsewhere we see that some diseases result in exclusion from the camp entirely.¹ The fact that a sin offering must be brought after birth, certain bodily emissions, and illnesses also inflects these with a valence of disgust and guilt.

Yet, these apparently "gross" experiences take up a lot of verbiage in the Torah. Midrash wonders why God would spend so many words expounding upon these parts of life we might rather ignore, and arrives at a surprising conclusion: Vayikra Rabbah 19:3

R. Shmuel bar Yitzhak interpreted the verses² to be about [certain] sections of Torah. Even though they seem disgusting and dark³ to say them in public—such as the laws of emissions, skin afflictions, menstruation, and giving birth—said the Holy Blessed One, "These are pleasing to Me." As it is said, "The gift of Yehudah and Yerushalayim is pleasing to God" (Malakhi 3:4)...

The Torah seems to waste words in the many details of these "ugly" passages. In fact, midrash reframes our perspective and teaches that God finds these topics sweet and beautiful. That is why this is all elucidated at such length.⁴

This sentiment is not merely a local comment on a small section of the Torah: it becomes a primary justification for why God gave Torah to humanity. God wanted to give the Torah to us, in our very human bodies. A trope in midrash describes how the angels resisted this, and asserted that the pure and holy Torah should only be given to pure and holy angels. But God retorted that Torah is designed for humanity, highlighting specific embodied laws, such as: "This is the law of a metzora" (Leviticus 14:2), "When a woman gives birth" (12:2), "A woman who has a discharge" 15:25).⁵ Rather than being so gross they were barely fit to print,

the passages in Tazria about bodily emissions and illness form the bedrock for justifying why God gave us Torah. God wanted to be in relationship with beings who have unpredictable discharges, diseases and even death. Lest one conclude that this is meant derisively, that our imperfect human nature requires the remedial help that Torah offers, the midrash specifically frames this as humanity being “more perfect” than angels in our capacities to fulfill Torah. Those embodied and contingent aspects of ourselves that we might have thought of as impairing our relationship with God are actually assets.⁶

How do these two approaches sit side by side: our messy bodily experiences as a source of alienation and distance from God and religious community, and simultaneously the bedrock of our relationship with God and Torah?⁷ We can understand the ritual of the korban hattat as helping us navigate these opposing approaches. According to biblical scholar Jacob Milgrom, the korban hattat one brings after giving birth or after healing from tzara’at has nothing to do with sin or guilt, but is about reorienting after a destabilizing event.⁸ Birth and illness can be destabilizing, often leading to a sense of being cut off from the regular rhythms of community and can disrupt our relationship with God or prior theological conceptions. The korban hattat is a framework for re-entry, representing a path towards social and spiritual reintegration.

In a similar vein, Ramban explains that the korban hattat is about healing.⁹ The process of birth is a physical trauma, it is entirely destabilizing to usual bodily rhythms. He sees the korban as a “kofer nefesh (a redemption for one’s life), expressing our desire to be healed by God who “heals all flesh and acts wondrously.” For someone who has just given birth the korban is a prayer to regain nothing less than herself.

Today, we do not have the korban hattat as a means for weaving the experience of birth or illness into a reframed relationship with God, but we still need to do this work. What can help us notice and confront the destabilizing aspects of these intense bodily experiences that might make us feel distant from God and from others? The power of articulation—finding words for the twists and turns of these journeys, like God writing out all of these details in the Torah—is one important step to find our way from repulsion or anger towards acceptance, and even love. When I think of what it means to do this work of reintegration, I think back to Shabbat Tazria of 2014, when I had Shabbat lunch at the home of feminist scholar Bonna Haberman, z”l.¹⁰ To probe its depths, Bonna pulled out two books: first, the Torah, and second, her birth journal. The point wasn’t to discount the first with the second. The point was that the one invited and beckoned the other. Her narrative of birth was uncomfortable and bloody, while also deeply moving. It was a window into this time outside of time—the uncertainty and excited anticipation, fears and trust, and definitely strength. Parashat Tazria was an invitation to treat all of that as

Torah.

The messy parts of ourselves and our experiences can anchor a continually evolving, honest relationship with God, rather than push us away. Yes, we might encounter bumpiness—or even feel derailed—when the contingencies of embodied life interrupt our regular rhythms and relationships. But these raw narratives are beloved to God; they are literally the stuff of Torah.

Shabbat Shalom.

¹ See Bemidbar 5:2. ² Referring to Song of Songs 5:11: “his head is finest gold, his locks are curled and black as a raven (שחורות כעורב).” The midrash hinges on the phrase “black/dark becomes sweet or beloved (ערב).” which is reinterpreted to mean that what is apparently black/dark becomes sweet or beloved (ערב). The authors of the midrash assume that “black” is an undesirable color, an assumption that reflects a racist stance. As “black” and “white” continue to be used metaphorically to represent “bad” and “good,” respectively, it is important for us to be aware of how our own language can continue to participate in practices that have caused real harm to real people. ⁴ One part of midrash focuses on the extent to which the passage goes to great length to describe zav/zavah for male and female bodies separately, even though they could have in theory been described more concisely.

⁵ Midrash Tehillim (Buber) Mizmor 8:2: “כך אמר הקב"ה אין התורה מתקיימת אצלכם, לפי שאין פריה רביה ביניכם, ולא טומאה, ולא מיתה וחולי, אלא כלכם קדושים, ובתורה כתיב "אדם כי ימות באהל", "זאת תהיה תורת המצורע", "אשה כי תזריע", "ואשה כי יזוב", "את זה תאכלו", "את זה לא תאכלו", לכך נאמר ולא תמצא בארץ החיים.”

⁶ Midrash Tehillim continues: “ר' נחמיה בשם ר' יהודה אומר: משל לאדם שהיה לו בן, והיה חסר אצבע אחת, והולך אביו ללמדו סריקה שירקיריס וכל עיסקה של אומנות. אותה אומנות צריכה לכלן אצבעות. אחר ימים בא אביו אצלו, אמר לו: למה לא למדת לבני אומנות זו? אמר ליה: אומנות זו צריכה כל האצבעות, ובנך חסר אצבע אחת, ואתה מבקש שילמוד בנך אומנות סריקוס שירקיריס when it comes to practicing Torah: they are just not able to do it. Note that other versions of this midrash point to other features that distinguish humans from angels such as our emotions and passions or our possibility to doubt God. See Pesikta Rabbati Piska 25 and Talmud Bavli Shabbat 88b-89a. ⁷ The intuition that discharge and illness are a source of religious alienation continues to emerge in later halakhic sources. R. Moshe Isserles refers to a custom in Ashkenazic communities that prohibited being in the synagogue during menstruation and for the full period of purification after birth (OH 88, and Be'er Heteiv). Yet, there was also significant push back against this custom that treated these bodily experiences as a source of marginalization from sacred spaces. This shows the same dynamic in the first midrash we saw—an instinct that these parts of ourselves would be undesirable to God, and then a strong deflection of that stance.

⁸ Jacob Milgrom, “Sin-Offering or Purification-Offering?” *Vetus Testamentum* (1971), pp. 237-239. ⁹ Ramban on Leviticus 12:7: “והקריבו לפני ה' וכפר עליה וטהרה ממקור דמיה - יאמר שתקריב - כופר נפשה לפני ה' שתטהר ממקור דמיה, כי האשה בלדתה תהיה לה מעין נרפס ומקור משחת, ואחרי עמדה בימי הנקיון, או בימי יצירת הולד לזכר או לנקבה, תביא כופר נפשה שיעמוד מקורה ושתטהר, כי השם יתעלה רופא כל בשר ומפליא לעשות.”

¹⁰ Author of *Israeli Feminism Liberating Judaism: Blood and Ink* (2012).

[Parshat Tazria: Healing Ourselves, Healing Our Planet by Rabbi Natan Greenberg](https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/3/30-parshat-tazria-healing-ourselves-healing-our-planet)

<https://www.growtorah.org/vayikra/2022/3/30-parshat-tazria-healing-ourselves-healing-our-planet>

Parshat Tazria discusses the sickness and healing for a person who contracts tzara'at. Tzara'at is the Biblical skin condition sometimes referred to as leprosy in English (although it is not the same as the disease known as leprosy). What manifests as a physical symptom of the skin is in fact a spiritual condition at its core, healed both by medical practice (quarantine) and spiritual reflection and cleansing.[2]

The Talmud pinpoints seven spiritual sources of tzara'at, with one being a condition called "tzarut ayin," or narrowness of vision.[3] Narrowness of vision in this context means acting without consideration of the wider ramifications, guided by immediate gratification.[4] Unfortunately, this danger can present itself in varying domains of our lives - health, parenting, relationships, ethics, and more. In this sense, routinely acting with tzarut ayin is the opposite of acting with wisdom. As Pirkei Avot puts it, "Who is truly wise? One who foresees the result." [5]

The climate crisis is a prime example of tzarut ayin. For years, climate scientists, the government and even major corporations have had enough research available to guide their actions towards sustainable development, and yet we continue to emit more carbon than ever.[6] We have never been more aware of the ethical and environmental harm present in meat and dairy production, yet Americans are eating more meat and dairy than ever before.[7] Our ability to ignore the uncomfortable reality using our narrow field of vision has led us to rationalizing our continued use of disposables.[8] The waste that we have already created has made marks on our planet. The spiritual blemish of tzarut ayin characterizes many environmentally unsound practices today.

We frequently discuss humanity's responsibility in Gan Eden to till and tend it—to work and protect it. This mandate has individual applications - roles for the self and his immediate surroundings, but also communal and global applications. As Rabbi Yosef Albo put it, "Every person is a small world, and the world is a giant person." [9] The globe is a canvas for humanity's actions; we can produce an artistic masterpiece if we make the right choices. However, affecting the global community (or even your community) can seem daunting; but there are concrete, manageable steps we can take to affect change. Culture does not change overnight; it involves a slow shift in the perception of what is normative, followed by an integration of those normative practices into every-day routines. There is a publication available on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's website, authored by psychologist, Christie Manning, Ph.D., outlining some of these concrete steps individuals and communities can take to strive for a more sustainable way of living.[10] One such step is viewing a change in an environmental habit, not as a stand-alone change, but rather one that comes as a byproduct of another. As Manning puts it in her essay:

The context in which a habitual behavior occurs can be enough to trigger the habit, and, if the context doesn't change, then the habit tends to stay. However, a

relatively simple change in life circumstances can be enough to disrupt a habit (Wood, Witt, & Tam, 2005; Verplanken & Wood, 2006). Fortunately, there are many points in life when circumstances are disrupted for perfectly normal reasons: change points. Research shows that people are most able to handle new habits (sustainable ones!) when old habits are changing anyway. [11]

Perhaps a family you know moves into a new house. You can suggest separating their waste into compost now that they are starting anew. Offer to show them another household in the community who has implemented a successful composting strategy. Or say your friend just got a new job. Brainstorm carpooling possibilities to commute to the new office. When we identify the individual steps necessary to achieve our “wide-visioned” goals, it makes it infinitely more achievable.

A more expansive spiritual perspective sees harming the physical world as damaging to the spiritual world. Though the world is in a state of physical and spiritual imbalance, we have the power to grow and to change. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (Israel, 20th cent.), in teaching about prayer, mentioned that within a process, something is always imbalanced. At every stage of life, something is not in harmony. This is because imbalance leads to new growth.[12] The imbalance of global climate change requires us to come to a new awareness and take on new responsibility to change the way we live. Spiritual imbalance and global ecological imbalance are an opportunity for growth towards sustainability, spiritually as well as physically. [1] The author would like to acknowledge Sareet Benayahu for her involvement in this essay. [2] Vayikra 13:45 [3] Commentary of the Rif (R' Yitzhak Alfasi, Morocco 11th/12th cent.) Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, 14a. [4] Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (Ukraine, 18th cent.) mentions the connection between wisdom and seeing, for example in Likutei Moharan teaching 94 [5] Mishna Avot 2:9, for further discussion, see Talmud Bavli, Tamid, 32a, commentary on the words “ha’ro-eh et ha’nolad” [6] See the [IPCC reports](#), or this 2015 expose on [Exxon](#) for examples of our historical knowledge of climate change, and [Our World in Data for carbon emissions statistics](#). [7] See [here](#) for statistics about American meat consumption. [8] See, for example, the [Our World In Data statistics on plastic waste](#). [9] Rabbi Yosef Albo (Spain, 15th cent.), Sefer Ha’ikarim, Ma’amar Sheni, Chapter 31. [10] See [here](#) for further reading. [11] *Ibid*. [12] “Inyanei Tefilah” Olat Ra’ayah, Mossad

Harav Kook Press, Jerusalem, 1983, “Inyanei Tefilah,” p. 10-18

[Here I Am, Tzara’at and All by Rachel Rosenthal](#)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/tzaraat-and-all/>

When I was 12, a few weeks before my bat mitzvah I went in to meet with one of the rabbis of my synagogue. At the time, the synagogue newsletter included a “pasuk of the week,” a verse from that week’s Torah portion that was particularly interesting or thought provoking. However, as the rabbi confessed to me, the week of my bat mitzvah was to be the end of that custom. He just couldn’t find anything that fit the bill. That week’s parashah? Tazria.

In many ways, all of Leviticus is considered the flyover territory of the Torah,

something that one needs to get through as quickly as possible to get from the rich narratives of Genesis and Exodus to the wars and reminiscing of Numbers and Deuteronomy. And Tazria is seen as the worst of the worst, with its meditations and legal rulings on childbirth, impurity, and tzara'at, which is some sort of skin disease. In addition to being unappealing, it feels irrelevant, and even offensive, to our modern values and sensibilities. So what should we, as Jews living in 2016, make of Parashat Tazria?

I strongly believe that, despite the challenges involved, there is much for us to learn from Leviticus, and even from Tazria. So to choose a pasuk of the week, here is what I suggest.

The Torah requires that, if the priest who is inspecting the person with a skin condition finds that he has tzara'at, the priest declare him unclean. Then, “the person with tzara'at, who has the skin lesion, his clothing is torn and his head is uncovered, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Impure, impure!’” (Lev. 13:45).

At first glance, the insistence that the victim be forced to identify himself as impure seems cruel. It is bad enough to be sent out from the camp and exiled by the community at his moment of need. Does he really need to call further attention to himself? Must we add to his humiliation? However, there is another way to read this verse, one that presents a paradigm that applies even when concerns about tzara'at have fallen away.

To understand how tzara'at and its subsequent punishment might relate to the modern world, it is helpful to understand how the Rabbis regarded the condition, which was likely as mysterious to them as it is to us. The most common explanation of how tzara'at occurs frames it as a physical manifestation of our internal failings—specifically, the habit of lashon harah, or speaking badly about others. The Midrash makes a pun, connecting the metzora, the one who is afflicted with this skin disease, to the motzi shem ra, the one who ruins someone's reputation by spreading lies about that person (Lev. Rabbah Parashat Metzora par. 16:6). (This is a fairly typical example of rabbinic punning, one of the Rabbis' favorite exegetical tools.) According to this midrash, because there are five sections of the Torah that discuss the disease of tzara'at, one who is a motzi shem ra has transgressed the entire five books of the Torah.

Building on this assumption, a midrash in the Sifra explains that when Miriam is struck with tzara'at in Numbers 12, it is because she was criticizing Moshe behind his back. The Sifra assumes that evil speech not only causes tzara'at, but specifically causes it in the face, because “skin lesions do not appear except through evil speech” (par. 5:7). Following the line of reasoning in this framework, forcing the stricken to cry out that they are unclean becomes a type of karmic retribution. The stricken person had spoken in an inappropriate manner about others, and by declaring his or her own uncleanness, the person is opening the

door to being talked about in the same way. Speaking carelessly about others, without regard to the others' reputations, will cause one to be similarly excluded from the community.

But surely, forcing the victim to cry out "Impure, impure" cannot simply be about retribution. Generally, following mitzvot is meant to be restorative, rather than punitive, and surely the system would not be set up in a way that would cause others to sin by encouraging them to talk about the stricken. "Impure, impure," then, must be about something else.

Often, it is difficult to acknowledge our own weaknesses and failings. We excuse behaviors in ourselves that we condemn in others, justifying our actions even as we are uncomfortably aware that we do not really believe we are doing the right thing. Imagine if, every time we wronged ourselves and others, we were forced to stand up and admit it. Imagine if we were forced to declare ourselves impure every time we felt thus on the inside. Imagine if we had a physical sign of our sins and our failings. Would this not help us change—and improve—our behaviors?

So perhaps this is a lesson we can take from this strange parashah, Tazria. While it may be true that we are (thankfully!) not struck by this mysterious disease anymore, the process that one goes through to cleanse oneself can inform the way we think about our own process of self-improvement. If we created a space—an expectation for ourselves—wherein we had no choice but to be honest about our shortcomings, it seems likely that we would strive to improve ourselves and show more compassion for the weaknesses of others. Rather than hiding behind excuses, we would be forced to stand before the world and say, Look, this is who I am, both for good and for bad. And while this might cause us to be temporarily separated from our communities, ultimately it would have the potential to bring us back in, presenting a more honest and more righteous version of ourselves, scars and all.

Yahrtzeits

Bobbi Ostrowsky remembers her brother Stuart Edelman on Sat. April 2(Nisan 1)

Peter Greene remembers his father Stanley Greene on Sun. April 3 (Nisan 2)

Margie Freeman remembers her mother Regina Freeman on Wed. April 6 (Nisan 5)

Mel Zwillenberg and the entire Kol Rina congregation remember Susan Zwillenberg on Thurs. April 7 (Nisan 6)

Shari Mevorah remembers her brother Joel Leigh Kirstein on Fri. April 8 (Nisan 7)

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### Coming Up at Kol Rina

**Brunch-and-Learn on Zoom: Celebrating Passover in an Age of  
Mass Incarceration: Toward a Jewish Liberation Theology**

On Sunday, April 3, beginning at 10:30 am, join Rabbi Hilly Haber and the Rev. George Chochos as they examine the Exodus Story through the lens of mass incarceration and the liberation theology.

As Director of Social Justice Organizing and Education at Central Synagogue in New York City, Rabbi Hilly Haber advocates with Central community on systemic justice issues such as criminal justice reform, climate justice, and immigration, as well as on other areas of social justice programming.

The Rev. George T. Chochos is a senior program associate at the Vera Institute of Justice, where he helps build college-in-prison programs in the mid-Atlantic region. He joined Vera in 2020 as a senior federal policy associate to work on Pell reinstatement for incarcerated students.

Register via the following Eventbrite link (and read full CVs for our presenters) for what promises to be a fascinating and compelling pre-Passover program:

<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/how-can-we-celebrate-passover-in-an-age-of-mass-incarceration-tickets-296720167007>