

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parshat Tazria-Metzorah
Rosh Chodesh Iyar
April 22, 2023 *** 1 Iyar, 5783

Tazria-Metzorah in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2879/jewish/Tazria-Metzora-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Tazria," means "conceives" and it is found in Leviticus 12:2. The name of the Parshah, "Metzora," is often translated as "leper" and it is found in Leviticus 14:2.

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.

As outlined at the start of the portion of Metzora, when the metzora ("leper") heals, he or she is purified by the kohen with a special procedure involving two birds, spring water in an earthen vessel, a piece of cedar wood, a scarlet thread and a bundle of hyssop.

When a home is afflicted with tzaraat, in a process lasting as long as nineteen days, a kohen determines if the house can be purified, or whether it must be demolished.

Ritual impurity is also engendered through a seminal or other discharge in a man, and menstruation or other discharge of blood in a woman, necessitating purification through immersion in a mikvah.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 66:1-24

[habad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572702/jewish/Shabbat-Rosh-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572702/jewish/Shabbat-Rosh-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

This haftorah, read whenever Shabbat coincides with Rosh Chodesh, mentions how in the messianic era, every Shabbat and every Rosh Chodesh everyone will come to the Temple to worship G-d.

In this prophecy Isaiah tells us how G-d (who is too great to be fully contained in physical space, even in the Temple) pays attention to the humble G-d-fearing person, and rejects a person who does (or even intends) evil.

The prophet continues to foretell the fortune that will come upon Jerusalem (and the Jewish nation) in the time to come, and how even non-Jews will come to recognize G-d and assist in restoring the Jewish people to their land and their Temple.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Plague of Evil Speech by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/the-plague-of-evil-speech/>

The Rabbis moralised the condition of tzara'at – often translated as leprosy – the subject that dominates both Tazria and Metzora. It was, they said, a punishment rather than a medical condition. Their interpretation was based on the internal evidence of the Mosaic books themselves. Moses' hand became leprous when he expressed doubt about the willingness of the people to believe in his mission (Ex. 4:6-7). Miriam was struck by leprosy when she spoke against Moses (Num. 12:1-15). The metzora (leper) was a motzi shem ra: a person who spoke slightly about others.

Evil speech, lashon hara, was considered by the Sages to be one of the worst sins of all. Here is how Maimonides summarises it:

The Sages said: there are three transgressions for which a person is punished in this world and has no share in the world come – idolatry, illicit sex, and bloodshed – and evil speech is as bad as all three combined. They also said: whoever speaks with an evil tongue is as if he denied God . . . Evil speech kills three people – the one who says it, the one who accepts it, and the one about whom it is said.

Hilchot Deot 7:3

Is it so? Consider just two of many examples. In the early 13th century, a bitter dispute broke out between devotees and critics of Maimonides. For the former, he was one of the greatest Jewish minds of all time. For the latter, he was a dangerous thinker whose works contained heresy and whose influence led people to abandon the commandments.

There were ferocious exchanges. Each side issued condemnations and excommunications against the other. There were pamphlets and counter-pamphlets, sermons and counter-sermons, and for while French and Spanish Jewry were convulsed by the controversy. Then, in 1232, Maimonides' books were burned by the Dominicans. The shock brought a brief respite; then extremists desecrated Maimonides' tomb in Tiberias. In the early 1240s, following the Disputation of Paris, Christians burned all the copies of the Talmud they could find. It was one of the great tragedies of the Middle Ages.

What was the connection between the internal Jewish struggle and the Christian burning of Jewish books? Did the Dominicans take advantage of Jewish accusations of heresy against Maimonides, to level their own charges? Was it simply that they were able to take advantage of the internal split within Jewry, to proceed with their own persecutions without fear of concerted Jewish reprisals? One way or another, throughout the Middle Ages, many of the worst Christian persecutions of Jews were either incited by converted Jews, or exploited internal weaknesses of the Jewish community.

Moving to the modern age, one of the most brilliant exponents of Orthodoxy was R. Meir Loeb ben Yechiel Michal Malbim (1809-1879), Chief Rabbi of Rumania. An outstanding scholar, whose commentary to Tanach is one of the glories of the nineteenth century, he was at first welcomed by all groups in the Jewish community as a man of learning and religious integrity. Soon, however, the more 'enlightened' Jews discovered to their dismay that he was a vigorous traditionalist, and they began to incite the civil authorities against him. In posters and pamphlets they portrayed him as a benighted relic of the Middle Ages, a man opposed to progress and the spirit of the age.

One Purim, they sent him a gift of a parcel of food which included pork and crabs, with an accompanying message: 'We, the local progressives, are honoured to present these delicacies and tasty dishes from our table as a gift to our luminary.' Eventually, in response to the campaign, the government withdrew its official recognition of the Jewish community, and of Malbim as its Chief Rabbi, and banned him from delivering sermons in the Great Synagogue. On Friday, 18 March 1864, policemen surrounded his house early in the morning, arrested and imprisoned him. After the Sabbath, he was placed on a ship and taken to the Bulgarian border, where he was released on condition that he never return to Rumania. This is how the Encyclopaedia Judaica describes the campaign:

M. Rosen has published various documents which disclose the false accusations and calumnies Malbim's Jewish-assimilationist enemies wrote against him to the Rumanian government. They accused him of disloyalty and of impeding social assimilation between Jews and non-

Jews by insisting on adherence to the dietary laws, and said, 'This Rabbi by his conduct and prohibitions wishes to impede our progress.' As a result of this, the Prime Minister of Rumania issued a proclamation against the 'ignorant and insolent' Rabbi... In consequence the minister refused to grant rights to the Jews of Bucharest, on the grounds that the Rabbi of the community was 'the sworn enemy of progress'.

Similar stories could be told about several other outstanding scholars – among them, R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, R. Azriel Hildesheimer, R. Yitzhak Reines, and even the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of blessed memory, who was brought to court in Boston in 1941 to face trumped-up charges by the local Jewish community. Even these shameful episodes were only a continuation of the vicious war waged against the Hassidic movement by their opponents, the mitnagdim, which saw many Hassidic leaders (among them the first Rebbe of Habad, R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi) imprisoned on false testimony given to the local authorities by other Jews.

For a people of history, we can be bewilderingly obtuse to the lessons of history. Time and again, unable to resolve their own conflicts civilly and graciously, Jews slandered their opponents to the civil authorities, with results that were disastrous to the Jewish community as a whole. Despite the fact that the whole of rabbinic Judaism is a culture of argument; despite the fact that the Talmud explicitly says that the school of Hillel had its views accepted because they were 'gentle, modest, taught the views of their opponents as well as their own, and taught their opponents' views before their own' (Eruvin 13b) – despite this, Jews have continued to excoriate, denounce, even excommunicate those whose views they did not understand, even when the objects of their scorn (Maimonides, Malbim, and the rest) were among the greatest-ever defenders of Orthodoxy against the intellectual challenges of their age.

Of what were the accusers guilty? Only evil speech. And what, after all, is evil speech? Mere words. Yet words have consequences. Diminishing their opponents, the self-proclaimed defenders of the faith diminished themselves and their faith. They managed to convey the impression that Judaism is simple-minded, narrow, incapable of handling complexity, helpless in the face of challenge, a religion of anathemas instead of arguments, excommunication instead of reasoned debate. Maimonides and Malbim took their fate philosophically. Yet one weeps to see a great tradition brought so low.

What an astonishing insight it was to see leprosy – that disfiguring disease – as a symbol and symptom of evil speech. For we truly are disfigured when we use words to condemn, not communicate; to close rather than open minds; when we use language as a weapon and wield it brutally. The message of Metzora remains.

Linguistic violence is no less savage than physical violence, and those who afflict others are themselves afflicted. Words wound. Insults injure. Evil speech destroys communities. Language is God's greatest gift to humankind and it must be guarded if it is to heal, not harm.

[Tazria-Metzorah: Tweet Others as You Would Want to be Tweeted by Dvir Cahana](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-tazria-metzora-yom-hashoah-dvir-cahana-moraltorah2023/)
<https://truah.org/resources/parshat-tazria-metzora-yom-hashoah-dvir-cahana-moraltorah2023/>

I've been holding my breath for the last six months waiting to see what comes of the Elon Musk-Twitter saga. It has been like watching a car crash in slow motion, and I can't look away. Perhaps some billionaire Schadenfreude motivates my intrigue.

Amidst all the current controversy, though, let's not lose sight of the very real social good that Twitter has also enabled. Twitter is the unsung hero that catalyzed the effectiveness of the Arab spring in 2012. It is thanks to the breakneck speed of hashtag adoption that North Africa saw the most political upheaval since the decolonization wave of the 1950s. Twitter gave rise to grassroots efficacy like never before.

Sometimes Twitter can be ugly. When people find themselves behind a screen, the outside world may be warped. A negative feedback loop can detach us from reality and can cause one to defang a non-existent oppressor. It is unhealthy to stay in our own social media echo chambers. Twitter is therefore most effective when it exposes us to a wide set of perspectives. Only then do we reap the benefits of a flattened hierarchy, where power is given to the people and when people are truly seen in their full three-dimensionality.

In this week's parshah, we read about the Metzora, the individual afflicted with the skin disease *tzara'at* for (according to later rabbinic interpretation) slandering another individual. **Rashi asks** why the Metzora is healed by a sacrifice of two wild, pure birds. Usually the levitical procedures are specifically delineated with very little room for variance. In this instance, however, the Torah does not specify which bird to use in the purification ritual for the Metzora, the Torah instead employs the general language of "*tzipor*," bird.

Rashi responds by saying that it is because birds "tweet," and the person who perpetrated a slanderous rumor did so in the manner of a bird (perhaps, it is fitting then that the modern equivalent is met with a Twitter suspension). The implied answer is that, by speaking about birds as a class instead of specifying a type of bird, the Torah is directing our attention to their general "blabbermouth" nature.

Rashi's response seems to evoke the historic understanding of the relationship between a sovereign and their constituents. In ages past, mobs could be controlled through game theory tactics. The individual's voice was muted; what mattered was overcoming that activation energy to engage or coerce the actions of the masses.

Social media sets forth a new dynamic in which eye witness accounts dictate the narrative. On Twitter the mob is no longer anonymous; it has a name and a face. It can be George Floyd, Malala Yousafzai, Tawakkol Karman. Sharing our perspectives returns the power to the people. When the boogeyman of the mob is demystified, we have the humanity to look even our enemy in the face as a real, breathing human soul.

Though Rashi's response fit the pre-Twitter era, I think it needs to be remodeled to fit the current world in which we live, to move from class back into case. The paradigmatic case of lashon hara [slanderous or evil speech] found in the Torah is when Miriam describes Moses' wife derogatorily as a Black woman, an *Isha Kushit*. (**Numbers 12:1**) God punishes Miriam with *tzara'at*, ironically making her own skin white. This is no hypothetical. The rabbis rationalize Miriam's choice to speak *lashon hara* and use it as an opportunity to unpack her relationship with her brother Moses. But meanwhile, what do we make of the treatment of this woman who is not even given a name? This woman who is the subject of racial abuse and caught in the crossfire of a larger point Miriam is trying to make? This woman does have a name. Her name is Tzipora. She has two sons, Eliezer and Gershom. She grew up in Midian in the limelight in her priestly household. This is why the healing for the Metzora uses the term *Tziporim*, birds. It is in fact not because we are speaking in vague terms at all; it is precisely to give a face and a name to the victim of lashon hara itself.

Today we commemorate the six million faceless casualties of the Holocaust. Let us use our Twitter platforms to honor at least one. Today I remember my great grandmother Teri Lok, whose life was taken in the flames of Auschwitz.

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[It Passes and We Stay: Metzora-Tazria/Shabbat Rosh Chodesh by Jan Uhrbach](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/it-passes-and-we-stay-2/)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/it-passes-and-we-stay-2/>

*A Light exists in Spring
Not present on the Year
At any other period—
When March is scarcely here*

*A Color stands abroad
On Solitary Fields
That Science cannot overtake
But Human Nature feels.*

*It waits upon the Lawn,
It shows the furthest Tree
Upon the furthest Slope you know
It almost speaks to thee.*

*Then as Horizons step
Or Noons report away
Without the Formula of sound
It passes and we stay—*

*A quality of loss
Affecting our Content
As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.*

Emily Dickinson

The double parashiyot of Tazria and Metzora are devoted in their entirety to the Biblical notion of tumah, usually translated as “impurity.” In them, we learn three of the major sources of tumah: childbirth (Lev. 12); a condition known as tzara’at, which can manifest on skin, clothing, or the walls of one’s house (Lev. 13–14); and bodily secretions (Lev. 15). The two other primary sources of tumah are touching or carrying the carcasses of certain animals (Lev. 11) and contact with a human corpse (Num. 19).

But what is the essential nature of tumah, and what does it have to do with Emily Dickinson’s poem? The great Hasidic master Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Kotzk (1787–1859) offers an especially beautiful reading.

The Kotzker’s teaching is based on a Talmudic passage, from the beginning of masekhet Ta’anit (2a), identifying three phenomena which God attends to “personally,” without resort to an intermediary:

Rabbi Yohanan said: Three keys remain in the Holy Blessed One’s own hand, and have not been entrusted to any messenger, namely, the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of the revival of the dead . . .

Seizing upon this notion, the Kotzker says that at the moment when a woman is giving birth, God is present in an intensified, heightened way—in the Kotzker’s

language, “higher holiness rests there.” He continues:

But afterwards, when the infant emerges into the atmosphere of the world, automatically the Shekhinah and incumbent holiness withdraw. And therefore, in this place, tumah “is born.” Because everywhere where there is a withdrawal of holiness, tumah is born in its place, as in the tumah associated with death, which arises for the same reason. (Ohel Torah, Parashat Tazria)

Here, the forms of tumah associated with human birth and death are a spiritual condition arising in the aftermath of a particularly intense encounter with the Divine. Note that this is not a state of unusual distance from God (and certainly not a complete absence of God, as no place is devoid of the Divine); rather, it’s an experience of relative distance, a reduction to “normal” levels of holiness and Godliness. Tumah is the psycho-spiritual let-down after a heightened experience of holiness, which in turn creates a vulnerability— perhaps to negativity or sin, or disaffection or doubt.

This magnificent reading points well beyond literal birth and death and the biblical category of tumah. Liminal moments of many kinds are often accompanied by an intensified experience of God’s presence, or a heightened sense of vitality and meaning. This is true whether the moment is predominantly joyful or sad (as births and deaths often are), or—like most profound, transformative changes—a combination of joy, sadness, excitement, anxiety, and gratitude. The intensity of such moments inevitably fades, creating a kind of grief that leaves us vulnerable. We may be vulnerable to disillusionment, demoralization, or cynicism. Perhaps we’ll never experience that closeness to God again; perhaps it wasn’t even real. We may feel a loss of vitality, even a collapse of meaning. We may feel foolish for having believed. Or our vague sense of disappointment might manifest as retrenchment or fear. What if the transformative moment I felt was only momentary, and proves unsustainable? Perhaps nothing really changes at all. Things may feel too alien, or not different enough, or not different in the ways we’d hoped. Or the return of (or increase in) our quotidian responsibilities may feel like an affront to the holy: a moment ago I witnessed someone’s first or last breath, I witnessed the sacredness and preciousness of life, how can I now just go back to work?

A quality of loss

Affecting our Content

*As Trade had suddenly encroached
Upon a Sacrament.*

The narrative of the Exodus from Egypt is a prime example. The Hasidic masters understood the exile in Egypt to be an experience of tumah —not necessarily

sin per se, but lifelessness, hopelessness, a culture of death and sameness. Our redemption from Egypt was an act of tehiyat hemetim, the raising of the dead, one of the three “keys” that the Talmud said God reserves for God’s self. “Then Adonai took us out of Mitzrayim. Not by an angel. Nor by a seraph. Nor by a messenger. Rather, the Holy Blessed One, God’s self, in God’s glory,” our Haggadah reads. But the sense of the immediacy of God’s presence fades. Immediately after they cross the sea, they grumble and complain—resentful, anxious, unsure—“Is Adonai among us or not” (Exod. 17:7). Tumah manifests again.

What are the consequences of this loss, this tumah? Among other things, when the Tabernacle or Temple stood, one who was tamei (impure) could not enter the holy precincts, until he or she was again purified. Perhaps this debarment was an external manifestation of the internal state: the exclusion from the Temple representing the loss of prior closeness with the Divine. Or perhaps there was a risk that in the wake of the immediacy of God’s presence at a moment such as childbirth, even the holiness of the Temple service would pale in comparison. Today, tumah has no practical consequence, but the Kotzker’s insight serves as both warning and comfort for the life of the spirit.

The warning: the Kotzker’s understanding of “impurity” doesn’t entail immorality, but it does involve a vulnerability to error and sin. So in the let-down after intense moments, we would do well to be extra careful. We might be inclined to be self-indulgent, to shake off religious constraints, to succumb to laziness or carelessness. Alternatively, we might seek to recapture the lost “thrill” through behavior that is morally or physically dangerous.

The comfort: this kind of tumah isn’t something to be avoided at all costs, and it’s not a sign that something is wrong. On the contrary, the particular contexts the Kotzker singles out—giving birth and contact with a corpse—are instances of tumah arising inevitably from a life of mitzvot. So too, vague disappointment or malaise are a natural part of the life of the spirit—hard to bear, but normal. May we be blessed from time to time with the immediacy of God’s presence—with that light that “exists in Spring.” And when “it passes and we stay,” may we bear the resultant “quality of loss” with renewed commitment. *(Jan Uhrbach is Director of The Block/Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts at JTS. This commentary was originally published in 2018.)*

[Those Who Choose What God Doesn't Want by Vered Hollander-Goldfarb](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q-VIERD9Dp081FvU9mq_RMINDFGniU0R/view)

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The Rosh Hodesh haftarah, taken from the last chapter of the book of Isaiah, brings back to the fore the criticism of the people’s worship. In the first two chapters of the book, Isaiah rails against those who practice religious practices

vainly. In this haftarah Isaiah (according to scholars a different Isaiah, who may have prophesied as late as the Second Temple era) points to two types of people: Those to whom the word of God is a driving force, and those to whom the appearance of the worship is the significant factor.

The haftarah opens from the grand vantage point of God *"the heavens are My throne, and the earth is My footstool"* (Isa. 66:1). From that observation point God sees people for what they truly are. Some are *"the poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."* (V.2) It would take a humble spirit to make space for God in one's self-perception, to put God's word first.

The other group, those who fail this Godly test, appear pious: They sacrifice, bring offerings, and burn incense. But their methods of getting close to God (standard practice in the cultic culture of the ancient world), are lacking:

He who kills a bull - he slays a man.

He who sacrifices a lamb, - he breaks a dog's neck;

He who offers a grain offering, - swine's blood;

He who burns incense, - he blesses an idol. (v.3)

Isaiah's words are somewhat unclear, leaving an open field for the commentators and translators. Many add the words "as if" turning the text into metaphors. The person who kills a bull is considered by God as if he slayed a man. This reading, found in many medieval commentators (see Rashi and Radak) criticizes the cultic practices of the people for lack of proper intent, turning them into acts equivalent to murder and idol worship.

Shadal (Luzzato) reads the text literally: He who kills a bull (presumably for sacrificing to God) may also slay a man. A person's religious practice is not an indication of his commitment to God's word. Shadal understands the words of Isaiah as criticizing the people for believing that in religious practice one can manipulate God: acting abhorrently elsewhere, and in the Temple placating God by bringing a sacrifice. Isaiah is trying to tell the people that serving God while acting hideously is seen by God for what it is: Hypocrisy and haughtiness. This allegation was introduced by Isaiah in chapters 1-2. Now the book comes full circle.

The editor of the book chooses to close with a warning: God seeks those who are committed to God's word, not those who give the appearance of worship but whose practice is void of true content, or worse - covers up horrific acts. Outward appearance of sacrifices might fool society, and perhaps even allow the person to lie to himself, but God knows who is truly concerned about God's word.

(Vered Hollander-Goldfarb teaches Tanach and Medieval Commentators at the Conservative Yeshiva and is a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly message on the weekly Torah portion. She received her M.A. in Judaic Studies and Tanach from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and studied at Bar-Ilan University and the Jewish

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Yahrtzeits

Motti Benisty remembers his father Rabbi Shimon David Benisty on Mon. April 24

Al Gottlieb remembers his mother Gertrude Gottlieb on Fri. April 28

Merna Most remembers her father Henry Handleman on Fri. April 28