Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Tazria - Metzora
April 18, 2026 *** I Iyar, 5786

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Tazria-Metzora 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: Shabbat Rosh Chodesh – Isaiah 66: 1-24

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

Holiness and Childbirth by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z'l (5767)

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/tazria/holiness-and-childbirth/

The sidrot of Tazria and Metzora contain laws which are among the most difficult to understand. They are about conditions of “impurity” arising from the fact that we are physical beings, embodied souls, and hence exposed to (in Hamlet’s words) “the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.”

Though we have immortal longings, mortality is the condition of human existence, as it is of all embodied life.

Rambam explains:

> We have already shown that, in accordance with the Divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species, the species themselves would not exist permanently... He who thinks that he can have

> flesh and bones without being subject to any external influence, or any of the accidents of matter, unconsciously wishes to reconcile two opposites, namely, to be at the same time subject and not subject to change.
> Maimonides, Guide for the Perplexed, III:12

Throughout history there have been two distinct and opposing ways of relating to this fact: hedonism (living for physical pleasure) and asceticism (relinquishing physical pleasure). The former worships the physical while denying the spiritual, the latter enthrones the spiritual at the cost of the physical.

The Jewish way has always been different: to sanctify the physical – eating, drinking, sex and rest – making the life of the body a vehicle for the Divine Presence. The reason is simple. We believe with perfect faith that the God of redemption is also the God of creation. The physical world we inhabit is the one God made and pronounced "very good." To be a hedonist is to deny God. To be an ascetic is to deny the goodness of God's world. To be a Jew is to celebrate both creation and Creator. That is the principle that explains many otherwise incomprehensible features of Jewish life.

The laws with which the Parsha begins are striking examples of this:

> When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy, she shall be teme'ah for seven days, just as she is during the time of separation when she has her period... Then, for thirty-three additional days she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean. Until this purification period is complete, she shall not touch anything holy and shall not enter the Sanctuary.
>
> If she gives birth to a girl, she shall have for two weeks the same teme'ah status as during her menstrual period. Then, for sixty-six days after that, she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean.

She then brings a burnt-offering and a sin-offering, after which she is restored to "ritual purity." What is the meaning of these laws? Why does childbirth render the mother teme'ah (usually translated as "ritually impure", better understood as "a condition which impedes or exempts from a direct encounter with holiness")? And why is the period after giving birth to a girl twice that for a boy?

There is a temptation to see these laws as inherently beyond the reach of human understanding. Several rabbinic statements seem to say just this. In fact, it is not so, as Maimonides explains at length in the Guide. To be sure, we can never know – specifically with respect to laws that have to do with kedushah (holiness) and teharah (purity) – whether our understanding is correct. But we are not thereby

forced to abandon our search for understanding, even though any explanation will be at best speculative and tentative.

The first principle essential to understanding the laws of ritual purity and impurity is that God is life. Judaism is a profound rejection of cults, ancient and modern, that glorify death. The great pyramids of Egypt were grandiose tombs. Arthur Koestler noted that without death "the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent." The English metaphysical poets turned to it constantly as a theme. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

> Webster was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin . . .
> Donne, I suppose, was such another . . .
> He knew the anguish of the marrow
> The ague of the skeleton . . . Whispers of Immortality, T. S. Eliot

Freud coined the word thanatos to describe the death-directed character of human life. Judaism is a protest against death-centred cultures. "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence" (Psalm 114) "What profit is there in my death, if I go down into the pit? Can the dust acknowledge You? Can it proclaim your truth?" (Psalm 30). As we open a Sefer Torah we say: "All of you who hold fast to the Lord your God are alive today" (Deut 4:4). The Torah is a tree of life. God is the God of life. As Moses put it in two memorable words: "Choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

It follows that kedushah (holiness) – a point in time or space where we stand in the unmediated presence of God – involves a supreme consciousness of life. That is why the paradigm case of tumah is contact with a corpse. Other cases of tumah include diseases or bodily emissions that remind us of our mortality. God's domain is life. Therefore it may not be associated in any way with intimations of death.

This is how Judah Halevi explains the purity laws:

> A dead body represents the highest degree of loss of life, and a leprous limb is as if it were dead. It is the same with the loss of seed, because it had been endowed with living power, capable of engendering a human being. Its loss therefore forms a contrast to the living and breathing. The Kuzari, II:60

The laws of purity apply exclusively to Israel, argues Halevi, precisely because Judaism is the supreme religion of life, and its adherents are therefore hyper-sensitive to even the most subtle distinctions between life and death.

A second principle, equally striking, is the acute sensitivity Judaism shows to the birth of a child. Nothing is more "natural" than procreation. Every living thing

engages in it. Sociobiologists go so far as to argue that a human being is a gene's way of creating another gene. By contrast, the Torah goes to great lengths to describe how many of the heroines of the Bible – among them Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah and the Shunamite woman – were infertile and had children only through a miracle.

Clearly the Torah intends a message here, and it is unmistakable. To be a Jew is to know that survival is not a matter of biology alone. What other cultures may take as natural is for us a miracle. Every Jewish child is a gift of God. No faith has taken children more seriously or devoted more of its efforts to raising the next generation. Childbirth is wondrous. To be a parent is the closest any of us come to God himself. That, incidentally, is why women are closer to God than men, because they, unlike men, know what it is to bring new life out of themselves, as God brings life out of himself. The idea is beautifully captured in the verse in which, leaving Eden, Adam turns to his wife and calls her Chava "for she is the mother of all life."

We can now speculate about the laws relating to childbirth. When a mother gives birth, she undergoes great risk. Throughout the centuries, childbirth has been a life-threatening danger to mother and baby alike, and even today there are ever-present risks for many. Furthermore, during the process of childbirth, a woman is separated from what until now had been part of her own body (a foetus, said the rabbis, "is like a limb of the mother") and which has now become an independent person. If that is so in the case of a boy, it is doubly so in the case of a girl – who, with God's help, will not merely live but may herself in later years become a source of new life. At one level, therefore, the laws signal the detachment of life from life.

At another level, they surely suggest something more profound. There is a halachic principle: "One who is engaged in a mitzva is exempt from other mitzvot." It is as if God were saying to the mother: for forty days in the case of a boy, and doubly so in the case of a girl (the mother-daughter bond is ontologically stronger than that between mother and son): I exempt you from coming before Me in the place of holiness because you are fully engaged in one of the holiest acts of all, nurturing and caring for your child. Unlike others you do not need to visit the Temple to be attached to life in all its sacred splendour. You are experiencing it yourself, directly and with every fibre of your being. Days, weeks, from now you will come and give thanks before Me (together with offerings for having come through a moment of danger). But for now, look upon your child with wonder. For you have been given a glimpse of the great secret, otherwise known only to God.

Childbirth exempts the new mother from attendance at the Temple because her bedside replicates the experience of the Temple. She now knows what it is for love to beget life, and - in the midst of mortality - to be touched by an intimation of immortality.

Gender Inside And Outside The Camp by Joy Ladin
https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/gender-inside-and-outside-the-camp-2/

Most benei mitzvah would do anything to avoid having to talk about Parashat Tazria-Metzora, a section of the Torah that focuses communal attention on intimate changes in human bodies. In Leviticus 13, God orders Israelites to notice and monitor intimate changes in one another's bodies—menstruation, discharges, eruptions, inflammations, hair growth, "swelling, rash, discoloration," and so on. For example, Leviticus 13:2 commands:

> When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of his body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests.

The idea that others would examine and report on intimate details of our bodies—that such things would be of communal concern, and subject us to institutional regulation—may seem archaic. But as transgender people know, when it comes to gender, this kind of surveillance is alive and well.

Every trans person has experienced gender surveillance—the ongoing scrutiny of bodies, clothing, voices, and gestures to determine if we are male or female. Gender surveillance happens in stores, on the street, in the work place; it is conducted by strangers and friends, bosses and employees, police and people who are homeless, doctors and accountants. Wherever we go, whomever we encounter, others, consciously or unconsciously, are looking at us to determine whether we are male or female—which is why the therapist who helped me through gender transition instructed me to always carry a letter, addressed "To whom it may concern," in which she assured whoever was reading it that I was not presenting myself as a woman in order to defraud or otherwise harm others.

I am not only an object of gender surveillance; I participate in the communal monitoring of gender. When I see someone, I immediately try to determine if they are male or female, because so many of my habits of understanding and relating to others are premised on determining who they are in terms of binary gender. I have lived my entire life engaging in gender surveillance, subjecting everyone—myself included—to that binary-enforcing gaze.

The spate of "bathroom bill" legislation in North Carolina, Texas, and elsewhere—laws designed to force trans people to use the restrooms that correspond to the sex on our birth certificates—has drawn national attention to gender surveillance. "Bathroom bills" require people whose bodies visibly vary from the norm to undergo intensive, intrusive examination and, if our differences are officially found

to be defiling, to be expelled from communal spaces and publicly stigmatized.

Leviticus 13 commands similar responses to bodies whose differences are officially deemed “leprous”:

> As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, “Impure! Impure!” He shall be impure as long as the disease is on him. Being impure, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp (vv. 45-46).

In Numbers 5, the Torah expands the range of bodies that are to be expelled because they are considered defiling:

> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Instruct the Israelites to remove from camp anyone with an eruption or a discharge… Remove male and female alike; put them outside the camp so they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell. The Israelites did so, putting them outside the camp (vv. 1-4).

The image of organized searches for those whose bodies may “defile” their society may seem like an outgrown relic of Iron Age notions of ritual purity. But as Jews found out during the Holocaust, and, as Latino communities in the U.S. targeted for immigration “sweeps” can attest to today, human beings have never left such practices behind.

To my knowledge, trans people have never been subjected to this sort of formal “removal” process. Until recently, most of us have lived in hiding or “below the radar”: too few and too scattered to inspire formal searches and “removals.” But many trans people know what it’s like to be seen as defiling our families, homes, workplaces, and communities, and forcibly removed as a consequence—expelled, sometimes violently, because the “eruptions” of our transgender identities are seen as a threat to communal health, harmony, religious life, or social order.

The removals of defiling bodies commanded by the Torah are in many ways less harsh than the removals many transgender people endure. The Torah’s commandments target temporary physical conditions that may affect anyone, rather than singling out a specific minority for discrimination. Unlike today’s gender-based removals, the Torah’s laws don’t stigmatize those who are removed from the camp, or suggest that they are guilty of moral failing, sin, or crime. (While leprosy was later interpreted and stigmatized as divine punishment, “eruptions and discharges” are common events.) And while the Torah allows those who have been removed to rejoin the community after completing rituals of purification, such as those detailed in Leviticus 15:13-31, many transgender people are exiled for years, decades—sometimes for the rest of our lives.

The Torah is often cited as the basis for religious communities to exclude, exile, and stigmatize transgender people—and even to deny us urgent medical care—but the Torah never commands, approves, or encourages such things. Even when Moses declares that those who cross-dress are “abhorrent” to God, he does not claim that God demands that they be “removed from camp.” Though there have always been people who do not fit into the categories of male and female, the Torah says nothing about us. It does not portray us as a threat or an abomination; it doesn’t declare us unclean or unfit to participate in communal worship or activities; it doesn’t demonize us, curse us, punish us, relegate us to the margins or the shadows, order gender surveillance to guard against our entry into the community or the Tabernacle, or organize searches to locate and expel us.

The Torah’s silence opened the door for the rabbis of the Talmud to adapt halakhah to enable intersex Jews to participate in Jewish communal life, and, more recently and locally, for Yeshiva University to tolerate my presence as an openly transgender professor. But because the Torah does not acknowledge that there are human beings who are not simply male or female, it shrouds us in silence and incomprehensibility.

The Torah’s detailing of defiling physical differences ensured that these differences could be recognized, spoken of, and understood by communities as part of being human. In order to fully include transgender people, Jewish communities have to follow the Torah’s example—to speak frankly about transgender identities, to recognize and pragmatically address our differences, and to face up to, and change, the communal policies, practices, and habits that, intentionally or not, lead so many of us to be removed, or to remove ourselves, from the camp.

When this d’var Torah was first published in 2017, so-called bathroom bills—laws criminalizing trans people’s use of public restrooms that fit the gender with which we identify—were relatively new and, to me, surprisingly unpopular. Now, nine years later, this kind of anti-trans legislation has metastasized. Thousands of trans people and their families have become internal refugees, moving from state to state in search of health care, equality, and safety; others, including me, have either fled or are preparing to flee the country. All of us are waiting to find out if we will be subject to the invasive processes described in Leviticus 13 and Numbers 5: inspecting our bodies, officially designating us as “unclean,” and forcibly removing us, as lepers and other “unclean” Israelites were, from American society.

(Joy Ladin is Past Adjunct Professor, JTS; David and Ruth Gottesman Chair in English, Yeshiva University (2003-2021)

Tazria-Metzora: “Sometimes Like a Plague”: Why Our Leaders Need Humility Above All by Rabbi Aaron Leven
https://truah.org/resources/aaron-leven-tazria-metzora-moraltorah_2026_/

Just days before Pesach, the Israeli Knesset passed a law that would enforce the death penalty by hanging for Palestinians convicted of deadly attacks. Legal experts believe that the law is written in such a way that it would make it nearly impossible to ever apply to Jewish extremists accused of similar crimes. Despite knowing for weeks that this government would likely succeed in passing this racist, discriminatory, and morally reprehensible legislation, when I received the news, I still found myself in a state of gutwrenching shock. For anyone to claim that such a law is representative of Judaism is not only disgraceful, it is a chillul Hashem — a desecration of the Divine.

This week in our double parshah of Tazria-Metzora, we read about tzara'at, a plague of leprosy that can affect one's body, clothing, or home. We read that when an Israelite encounters tzara'at in their home, they are to approach the Kohen (Hebrew priest) and say, "Something like a plague has appeared on my house." (Leviticus 14:35) The Or HaChaim asks,

> Why did the Torah not write that the owner says 'plague,' but rather as saying 'something like a plague'? The answer is that the letter kaf (meaning 'like') teaches that even if the owner is very learned, and he has no doubt that the symptoms he has found are those of the tzara'at plague, he must not take it upon himself to pronounce judgment.

This little kaf is there to remind us of the sanctity of humility — to recognize that as human beings we do not have the right to pass judgment; that is only reserved for the Divine.

As I read the Or HaChaim's commentary, I was reminded of our sages' discussion of the death penalty in Masekhet Makkot. Despite capital punishment's presence in the Torah, our rabbis felt deeply uncomfortable with carrying out any sentencing that did not, above all, preserve the sanctity of human life. In the opening chapter of Mishnah Makkot we read,

> The Sanhedrin (the supreme court of ancient Israel) that puts to death one person in seven years is termed tyrannical. Rabbi Eleazar Ben Azariah says, 'One person in 70 years.' Rabbi Tarffon and Rabbi Akiba say, 'If we had been in the Sanhedrin, no one would have ever been put to death.' (Mishnah Makkot 1:10)

Despite a halakhic system that in theory had space for capital punishment, our rabbis were unequivocally clear — the death penalty has no place in our Jewish tradition.

In her reflections on this parshah, my teacher Rav Aviva Richman has her own

thoughts about this letter kaf. She explains that the mitzvah around the tzara'at does not take place when the Kohen weighs in about how to eradicate it, but rather when the owner of the home reaches out to the Kohen in the first place. She explains that halakhah is an opportunity to create a bridge between our lives and Divine will. In order to do so, we must be able to identify when something "like" a plague has affected us, but also to recognize when there are limits to our own perspective. It is in these moments that we must trust that feeling in our kishkes that says, this is not the will of the Divine, this is not how we treat any human being created b'tzelem Elohim — in the Divine Image.

B'ezrat Hashem, with God's help, this disgraceful bill will be overturned by the Israeli Supreme Court. But as we continue on this seven-week journey toward celebrating revelation at Sinai, may we, and those who claim to represent us, have the humility to utilize that little kaf, and not declare anything in absolute terms. May we continue to fight to purify ourselves of this Kahanist tzara'at that is deeply afflicting the sanctity of our tradition. And may the divinity in all human beings be fought for, preserved, and maintained for all who live in the land, for all who are created in the image of G-d.

(Rabbi Aaron Leven is the associate rabbi at Nefesh in Los Angeles, CA. He is a proud alum of the Jewish Theological Seminary, the BJ Rabbinic Fellowship, Avodah's Service Corps, and the T'ruah Israel Fellowship.)

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Yahrtzeits

Motti Benisty remember his father Rabbi Shimon David Benisty on Monday April 20th

Albert Gottlieb remembers his mother Gertrude Gottlieb on Friday April 24th

Merna Most remembers her father Harry Handleman on Friday April 24th

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