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Metzora: On Solitude and Solidarity

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Parshat Metzora continues the Torah's discussion of *tzaraat ha'guf*, an infection of the body commonly understood to be leprosy, that began in last week's *parsha,* Tazria. Our *parsha* describes a series of purification rituals for one suffering from that form of *tzaraat*, as well as from *tzaraat ha'beged* (an affliction of garments) and *tzaraat ha'bayit* (an affliction of homes). It also describes the restrictions that apply to the *metzora* (the afflicted one) in the week between being declared free of *tzaraat* and undergoing the final purification ritual. After an initial purification ritual, the *metzora* must bathe, shave off all hair, and remain outside of his tent for seven days before he can be fully reintegrated into the community.

In these restrictions, we see that the *metzora* is utterly alone in his suffering. While he can re-enter the camp once his condition has cleared up, his status as a *metzora* prohibits him from having human connection. The Gemara in Chullin 141a reads the line "*v'yashav mi'chutz l'ohalo*—and he shall dwell outside of his tent" (Vayikra 14:8), as indication that he cannot even participate in family life. In almost all ways, recovering from *tzaraat* is a lonely experience.

There is one group of people who are not only permitted, but in fact required, to come into contact with the *metzora*: the priests. When a *metzora* recovers from *tzaraat* and is ready to begin the purification process, it is the priests who are responsible for going outside of the camp to confirm that the *metzora* is healed and then to perform the initial purification ritual, a *korban*, sacrifice. It seems odd that, in a case where someone is prohibited from living in their own home and having contact with their family due to *tumah* (impurity), that the priests would then be in frequent, close contact with them. After all, so much of the focus of the book of Vayikra is avoiding *tumah,* including the laws for the priests in particular.

What's even more strange is that in last week's *parsha,* Tazria, we learned that Aharon, the high priest himself, can examine and diagnose a potential case of *tzaraat*. If, like me, you've spent the last six months learning *hilchot aveilut*—the laws of mourning—you might be confused how it is that the high priest can be in close contact with someone suspected of carrying *tumat tzaraat*, when he is otherwise subject to extreme restrictions meant to avoid the possibility of contracting *tumah*.

In *parshat* Emor, Hashem tells Moshe the following:

> *V'hacohen ha'gadol me'ekhav asher yutzak al rosh'o shemen ha'mishkha u'milei et yado lilbosh et ha'bigadim et ro'sho lo yifra, u bi'gadav lo yifram; v'al nafshot met lo yavo l'aviv ul'emo lo yitamah.*
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> "The priest who is greater than his fellows, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the priestly garments, he shall not bare his head or tear his garments/he shall not come into where there is any dead body; he shall not become impure even for his father and mother" (Vayikra 21:10-11).

The prohibition against the high priest's contracting *tumat met*—the impurity contracted through contact with a dead body—is so strong that he is not even allowed to fulfill the *mitzvah* of burying his dead parents. How can it be, then, that he is permitted to have contact with the *metzora*?

The Gemara in Moed Katan expands upon this unexpected connection between the high priest and the *metzora* in its discussion of whether certain categories of individuals—mourners, those afflicted with *tzaraat*, and those who are ostracized from the community—are obligated in the positive *mitzvah* of rejoicing on the festivals. Rava brings the following:

> Rava said: "Come and hear [from a *Beraita*]: 'And the *metzora*'—this comes to include the high priest. And the status of the high priest year-round is like that of everyone else during the festival, as we learned in a mishna: The high priest sacrifices while in *aninut* but does not eat. Learn from this that the *metzora* observes all the restrictions during the festival" (Moed Katan 14b).

We learn that the high priest is still responsible for offering sacrifices during his period of *aninut*, the acute stage of mourning between death and burial during which the deceased's relatives are prohibited from observing *mitzvot.* In contrast to the *metzora*, who must withdraw from community life entirely to fulfill his personal obligations, the high priest instead must sublimate his filial obligations in order to serve the community. At the intersection of these undoubtedly painful and alienating experiences, the high priest and the *metzora* are able to connect with each other across their differences.

Weaving together themes of difference and connection, *parshat* Metzora reflects the opportunities and challenges of spiritual leadership. The high priest's obligations to the community take precedence over his own personal, individual obligations. With all of its power and prestige, the high priest's position is a profoundly lonely one. While he has the honor of serving his community in the highest position of leadership, that honor carries with it a strict prohibition against burying his own

parents, a final act of love and devotion that represents an important lifecycle touchstone for the rest of the Jewish people. In this way, his role as a community leader causes him to be alienated from his family and his wider community, paralleling the experience of the *metzora* who can only observe family and community life during his seven-day waiting period.

We could read the high priest's dilemma as an example for modern spiritual leaders of the challenges of balancing family and communal obligations. On the other hand, the high priest's isolation also creates opportunities to connect with marginalized figures like the *metzora*, who share the experience of being outside of the community in some way. While the burden of leadership can run the risk of alienating one from those closest to them, it also offers the possibility of bringing comfort and solidarity to those who may need it most.

Prior to studying at Maharat, Emily Bell spent several years in public relations, working with clients across a range of industries including nonprofits, higher education, legal services, and tech. Emily earned a BA in Comparative Literature and Jewish Studies from Smith College, where she focused on modern Yiddish literature. She has studied Yiddish at the Yiddish Book Center and Tel Aviv University. Emily's love of Jewish text eventually led her to Maharat, first in the Beit Midrash program and now as a Core Semikha student.