

Parshat Tazria-Metzora
Reluctant and Visionary Encounters
Rabbanit Tanya Farber - Class of 2021

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי בערל בן בנימין יחיאל ואסתר חיה ז"ל, יארצייט ר"ח אייר

This Dvar Torah is in honor of my beloved father, Dr. Bernard Farber z"l, whose yahrzeit is Rosh Chodesh Iyyar.

A *metzora* (one afflicted with *tzaaras* skin leprosy) and a *kohen* are polar opposites on the spiritual compass of existence. The *metzora* represents death and decay, whereas the *kohen*, barred from contact with death, is charged with the life-giving rites of atonement, spiritual rectification and revival. Unlike polar forces that repel one another, the Torah brings them together, despite the extreme degradation of the *metzora* on one hand, and the elevation of the *kohen* on the other. Whether initiated by the *kohen* or the repentant *metzora*--as we shall see two contrasting reads of one verse--through the nexus of their encounter, the *metzora* can transform so completely to symbolically become a *kohen*, even, an embodied *mizbaech*, altar.

Let us begin by defining *tzaaras*, and how the *metzora* embodies death. The life-generative role of the *kohen* is explicit throughout *Sefer Vayikra*.

Over the course of this long pandemic year, we have become familiar with quarantine and isolation, and may find relevance in the *metzora*'s experience. *Tzaaras* is understood by the Rabbis, though, as an affliction attributed to inner moral decay and social sins, not an indiscriminate virus infecting righteous and not-yet righteous alike. According to tradition, the *tzaaras* malady is most associated with slander, *lashon hara*, as both Moshe (***Shemot* 4:6**) and Miriam (***Bamidbar* 12:9**) are stricken with *tzaaras* after their negative speech. The full banishment of the *metzora* from communal life, reflecting the social damage caused by speech that denigrates, mocks and turns fellow against one another, unraveling the fabric of society. The *metzora* resides outside the settlement, with torn clothes, overgrown hair, covered lip, calling out to all who encounter him "טמא, טמא/ defiled, defiled!" The *metzora*, whose hair and dress resemble a mourner, is compared to one who is dead. As Aaron said to Moshe regarding Miriam stricken with *tzaaras*: "אֶל-נָא תְהִי כַמֵּת, *Do not let her be like a corpse...*" (***Bamidbar* 12:12**) Not only is the skin blotch, white, the pallor of death, but also the *metzora* transmits her ritual *tumah*, defilement, like a corpse, to all contents of a roofed tent, according to the ancient Torah laws of impurity. The *metzora*'s sick soul extinguished her potential and her body is now scarred by her inner shame.

Unlike other ritually impure people, only the *metzora* is expelled חוץ לשלש מחנות, outside all three *machenot*, camps of the Israelite encampment. Alone and shunned, the *metzora* can contemplate his moral failings which alienate him from the holy community, structured around the sacred center: the camp of the *Shechina*, Divine Presence, surrounded by the *machaneh* of the Levites and which was encircled by the Israelites. The confirmed *metzora*--who may have already endured a seven day pre-diagnostic quarantine as well--remains outside of society for a seven day period or as long as his malady persists.

And then at the end of his period of isolation and banishment, the Torah tells us that the *metzora* is brought to the *kohen*, which is both a technical and existential impossibility!

זאת תהיה תורת המצרע ביום טהרתו והובא אל-הכהן:

This shall be the procedure for the metzora on the day of his purification: he shall be brought to the kohen. (Leviticus 14:2, ויקרא י"ד: ב)

The *metzora* can not be brought into any of the concentric encampments, but is confined to the outskirts of community. The *kohen* is at the epi-center of society. How could the *metzora* come to the *kohen*? As we said, the *metzora* and *kohen* are not only opposites in their station within and without the encampment, but represent opposing forces of death and life, respectively. The next verse seems to ignore the implication of the preceding one, and tells us that the *kohen* did in fact come out to the *metzora*, "And the *kohen* goes out to the outside of the camp, ויצא הכהן אל-מחוץ למחנה (Leviticus 14:3)!"

The *Ibn Ezra*, the 12th century Spanish Biblical commentator, claims that the *metzora* is even dragged to meet the *kohen* against his will, thus explaining what is meant by והובא אל הכהן and *he is brought to the kohen*. Wouldn't the banished *metzora* be eager to begin the purification process? Tersely, the *Ibn Ezra* merely claims that לא ירצה להביא מה לא שמחיוב, that "he does not want to bring the [ritual birds/animal sacrifices, etc] that he is obligated [to bring]." There must be more to the *Ibn Ezra* words than what his brief commentary conveys, depicting the *metzora* as a cheapskate avoiding the expense of purification.¹

The *Ibn Ezra* notes that the locution, והובא אל הכהן and *he is brought to the kohen*, appears twice in the prior **Leviticus** chapter in regards to the as-of-yet-undiagnosed, but suspected *metzora* who apparently resists the *kohen*'s initial examination and diagnosis in the first place, presumably to avoid quarantine. And yet, the *metzora* after serving his sentence in protracted isolation, at the end of it, perhaps fears rehabilitation and reentry into society. In our own context of pandemic lockdowns, we might relate to both the dread of quarantining in our homes and at the same time, after this long year of tragedy and loss, a deep anxiety and reticence to return to our former lives even as we are hopeful about the efficacy of the vaccines.

The *metzora*, once afflicted with spiritual defilement, even after her skin lesions heal, might have given up hope and no longer sees herself as redeemable and capable of rehabilitation. So often, we offer excuses of expense, logistics and inconvenience--as *Ibn Ezra* hints regarding the *metzora*'s reluctance for purification --to explain away why we are not pursuing our dreams and highest calling. Not only for our own transformation, but we give up on others and on the world, hiding behind practical reasons. The *metzora* might despair, but according to the *Ibn Ezra*, she is forced to begin the process even against her will. Thus, the *metzora* discovers redemption beyond what she might have believed

¹ Granted *chazal*, in **Berachot** 61b acknowledge the idiosyncratic priorities of some that value their money over their own bodies, יש לך אדם שממונו חביב עליו מגופו.

possible. Even if the Torah standardizes the rituals and protocols for purification, one can still deny her own potential for transformation and *kedusha*, sanctity.

Whereas the *Ibn Ezra*, reads the words והובא אל הכהן and *he is brought to the kohen* as an external push, a chasidic interpretation locates that initial step towards purification within the human heart and imagination. The ***Shem Mishmuel***, by the second Sochatchover Rebbe, in the early 20th century, describes the spiritual awakening of the *metzora* awaiting purification, as one who initiates his own recovery and directs his heart toward *tahara*, purity. Even as an outcast, he imagines himself integrated within the מחנה, camp, as if he is already there.

For the *Shem Mishmuel*, the *metzora* initiates the encounter; not only by coming out of his tent; for the *kohen* does not enter the dwelling of the *metzora*, but more significantly, when the *metzora* imagines himself restored, socially and spiritually rehabilitated, only then, can the *kohen* come out to meet him for the *metzora* has already returned in mind and spirit.²

The three-stage purification process that follows is quite involved and intricate, in which slowly the *metzora* is reintegrated, granted gradual access to the camps, through rituals, body-shaving, immersions, an additional seven day waiting period, and elaborate sacrifices. It begins with a ritual involving two birds, one slaughtered, one sent off, reminiscent of part of the Yom Kippur service and concludes in the final stage of his purification with animal offerings. For the *Ibn Ezra*, the rituals transform him regardless of his inner state; for the *Shem Mishmuel* it was that initial human yearning at the inception that awakens the possibility for heavenly purification.

This heavenly purification orchestrated by the *kohen* involves a familiar and unusual ritual, familiar and unique to the consecration of the *kohanim*. In *parshat Tezave and parshat Tzav*, the Torah describes the inauguration of the *kohanim* into their priestly service. As part of their ordination, blood from the inaugural ram, איל המלאים was placed on the right ridge of the ear, right-hand thumb, right big toe of Aharon and his sons. Similarly, in the last stage of the *metzora's* purification, blood from the *asham* guilt-offering, and a measure of oil are placed on the right ridge of the ear, right-hand thumb and right big toe of the *mitaher*, the one being purified, as the Torah now refers to the former *metzora*. The remaining oil is placed on the *mitaher's* head. Blood and oil are usually placed on the altar, and here, they are being placed on the *mitaher*, himself.

² The *Shem Mishmuel* cites his father's teaching on a seemingly technical mishna regarding shabbos travel restrictions outside city boundaries, *techumim*. The mishna in ***Eruvin***, 4:7 teaches that if one is walking beyond the city limits as shabbos comes in, one can extend the shabbos *techum*, boundary in order to return to his actual home, by declaring part of a specific tree trunk, that he is familiar with, yonder, at a distance of 2000 *amos* from one's present location to be his residence. The first Sochatchover Rebbe, cited here by his son, explains that this is not a technical trick, but it is considered as if the traveler is already there, because in his thoughts he has established his residence beyond his current physical location. By grounding this concept--that we are wherever our thoughts, yearnings and dreams are--in a technical halachic source, the Sochatchover Rebbe emphasizes that spiritual aspirations create reality.

The *Sforno*, 16th century Italian Torah commentator, identifies that the *asham* guilt-offering in general, atones for when one is מעל בקדוש, that is, desecrates the sacred for a profane use. For the *Sforno*, the former *metzora* now anointed with blood from this *asham* offering, had been מעל בקדוש, profaned the sacred; misused his Divine capacities for desecration through לשון הרע, slander and גסות הרוח, haughtiness. And now, like a *kohen* who is dedicated to holy service, these capacities are consecrated toward Godliness.

The ear ridge, big toe and thumb are our outermost extremities. These anointed points define our personal space and contact with the world. It is the *metzora's* skin that becomes afflicted; skin, exposed to everyone. Whether he has done the inner work to arrive at this point, or not (*Ibn Ezra* versus *Shem Mishmuel*), the recovering *metzora* recovers her identity in relationship to others and marking those boundaries becomes her consecration. The *metzora*, once ejected from the entire community is now anchored at the centermost orb, becoming like a *kohen* or even a *mizbeach/altar*, anointed to become a vehicle for holiness that will radiate outward into all his human interactions.

At times we may need to be dragged towards healing, like the *kohen* forcing the reluctant *metzora*. At times we can aspire and envision beyond our current reality, אתערותא דליתתא, and even drag others toward that initial encounter with transformational possibility. Even when our world seems sick and unredeemable and our own souls so lost, we can allow our ears, our hands and feet to be anointed to serve for greater good.



Rabbanit Tanya Farber served as a Jewish educator in yeshiva high schools in NY and NJ, coordinated a high school beit midrash, and taught her own 4th grade curriculum. Her teaching integrates text study with improv and other creative modalities, and Tefillah (prayer liturgy) with mindfulness and movement. Tanya also worked for a decade with adults with developmental disabilities, and remains committed to accessibility and inclusion in religious communities. Tanya studied Torah in charedi seminaries, batei midrash, study halls (Drisha, Hadar) and completed social justice internships. Her teaching fuses Torah and spiritual relevance with the ethical call to action and service.