

## Service of the Heart (עבודת הלב): Exploring Prayer

This week's column was written by Rabbi Samuel Barth, Senior Lecturer in Liturgy and Worship, JTS

### Israel: Memory and Dreams (Part 1)

Yom Ha'atzma'ut, State of Israel Independence Day, is observed on Tuesday, April 16. It is not only a political and national celebration for the citizens of Israel and their supporters around the world, it is also a festival of the Jewish calendar. The Psalms of *Hallel* are recited, there is a special Torah reading, and there is an additional paragraph in the *'Amidah* of the Conservative Movement, in a style similar to Hanukkah and Purim (see the Rabbinical Assembly's *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays*, 42, 50, 343). So this day is not simply the Israeli equivalent of July 4—it is rooted, as is the State of Israel, in the ancient Jewish dream for the perfection of the world. The haftarah proclaims the towering vision of Isaiah (chapters 10–12) with images of peace and the renewal of our People in Zion: “the wolf shall lie down with the lamb . . . they shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain” (Isa. 11:6, 9); “let them draw water in joy from the wellsprings of salvation!” (Isa. 12:3).

Within Israel, the celebrations with prayers, parades, and dancing in the streets—along with serious reflection—give depth and power to the day. Somehow, in the United States, the vibrant celebrations have become reduced to a little music, a long speech, and a few pieces of falafel. I believe that Jewish wisdom and experience calls for—even demands of us—a deeper and more symbolically powerful engagement with Yom Ha'atzma'ut. The Pesah seder is one of our most powerful and effective rituals, and I am delighted that this year a “seder for Yom Ha'atzma'ut” will be held at JTS, offering participants a ritual with four cups, varying strands of Aggadah (story/narrative), psalms and songs, a meal, and the ending words *LeShanah Haba'ah Biy'rushalayim* (“Next Year in Jerusalem”).

Perhaps most important of all is the day before Yom Ha'atzma'ut, known as Yom Hazikkaron (State of Israel Memorial Day). There is barely a family without a grave to visit, without a child or parent to recall who fell in the establishment or defense of Israel. In the United States, Memorial Day is observed mainly with shopping, grilling barbecue, and visiting the beach (with perhaps a quick parade of veterans). In Israel, the country comes to a standstill for two minutes when the siren blasts, and all sectors of Israeli society meet at Mount Herzl and other military cemeteries throughout the country.

We struggle to find ways to connect with Israel, a country inspired by dreams but wrestling with politics and challenges both internal and external. These two days invite us to rise above challenges of the day into visions for the future.

May our music and psalms, our poets and artists give wings to our hopes.

As always, I am interested to hear comments and reflections on these thoughts about prayer and liturgy. You may reach me at [sabarath@jtsa.edu](mailto:sabarath@jtsa.edu).

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# Torah from JTS

## Parashat Tazri-a-Metzora

### Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Dr. Alan Cooper, Elaine Ravich Professor of Jewish Studies and Provost, JTS.

### The Torah's Prescription for Healing

WebMD, a commonly consulted Internet source of medical information, devotes three pages to “[Common Skin Rashes](#).” The site takes up the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of eczema, granuloma annulare, lichen planus, and pityriasis rosea, respectively. Should verbal descriptions be insufficient, the [Mayo Clinic](#) has posted a slide show, characterizing these and other disagreeable outbreaks as “not usually serious,” although they “may cause discomfort or pain, as well as embarrassment.” As for the etiology of the conditions, WebMD states in each case that “the cause . . . is unknown.”

Given the discomfort, disfigurement, and uncertainty that even mild skin eruptions can cause us nowadays, it should come as no surprise that they were a source of anxiety in ancient times. In this week's parashah, that anxiety finds expression amidst an array of concerns about the human body and its functions. The purity laws in Leviticus 11 through 15, which digress from the narrative flow of the book<sup>1</sup>, are concerned with diet (chapter 11), reproduction (chapter 12), and bodily integrity (chapters 13 to 15, including property as an extension of the person).

In the context of the biblical cult, impurity arises out of perceived deviation from a “normal” state, skin eruptions and bodily emissions serving as obvious cases in point. Rituals of purification either signify or effectuate a return from “deviant” to “normal.” The destruction of the Temple and the concomitant end of Temple sacrifice eliminated both the need to remain in a state of ritual purity and the means of attaining that state. The biblical conceptions of normalcy and deviance, moreover, became increasingly obscure or alien to post-biblical sensibilities. As a result, alternative interpretations of the purity laws arose early in the history of interpretation.

At a glance, the opening chapters of Parashat Metzora seem like a biblical antecedent of WebMD. Leviticus 13 describes the disfiguring symptoms of *tzara'at*, starting with “a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration” that “develops into a scaly affection” (Lev. 13:1). The text then goes into specific manifestations, instructing the priest as to the proper diagnosis in each case.

Whatever condition is designated by the term *tzara'at*, it is *not* “leprosy” or Hansen's disease—a misunderstanding that may be traced to the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Torah). In any case, the priest's responsibility is not to identify the condition per se, but to determine whether or not it imparts impurity. In contrast to

WebMD, Leviticus 14 prescribes a course of *ritual* action rather than medical treatment. The diagnostician is not a physician, after all, but a priest, and the rituals are to be undertaken only *after* the sores of the afflicted individual have healed (14:3). The purpose of the rituals is cultic purification (14:2), not medical treatment.

Isaac Caro (1458–1535) addresses this point in his *Toledot Yitzhaq* on Leviticus 14:2, where he writes that interest in the medical aspect of *tzara`at* “is inappropriate for our Holy Torah, which is concerned with spiritual ailments and not physical ones. Skin eruptions are the province of medicine, which is concerned with bodily health (*beri`ut ha-guf*), whereas the Torah’s concern is with spiritual benefit (*to`elet ha-nefesh*).” After an aside on the physical causes of skin diseases, Caro reiterates that they are not the Torah’s subject matter: “The Torah addresses *tzara`at* to teach that human ailments have two causes, one material (*mi-tzad ha-homer*) and the other spiritual (*mi-tzad ha-nefesh*),” and the Torah speaks only to the latter. A person of sound constitution whose affliction is spiritual “does not have to go to a medical doctor, but to a healer of the spirit.”

Today’s physicians are attentive to possible nonphysical causes of disease such as stress, anxiety, and depression, and many dermatological disorders have a psychosomatic component. According to the [American Dermatological Association](#), “Studies link factors that affect our emotional well-being . . . to an increase in skin, hair or nail problems.” Or, as a practitioner puts it, “A dermatologist’s work would be incomplete if he/she did not consider and examine the whole patient, not only the physical body . . . but also the individual’s mind (the psyche or the psychologic aspects, ‘the soul’).”<sup>2</sup> Lacking the resources and terminology of modern psychiatry to pinpoint the cause and potential cure of the “spiritual” malaise, Caro relies on the longstanding rabbinic notion that “it is brought on by evil speech.”<sup>3</sup> He subdivides “evil speech” into three categories: statements that are malicious even if true (*lashon ha-ra*); second-hand gossip (*rekhilut*); and outright slander (*dibbah*). Then he argues with considerable ingenuity that three of the items designated for the rituals of purification in Leviticus 14:4 are intended to provide reparation for the three forms of evil speech: the slaughtered bird for *lashon ha-ra*; the live bird for *dibbah*; and the crimson stuff for *rekhilut*.

Other texts offer broader and more general etiologies of *tzara`at*. *Leviticus Rabba* 17:3 enumerates 10, possibly corresponding to the number of afflictions (*nega`im*) described in the parashah. The 10 causes are idolatry, illicit sex, bloodshed, profanation, blasphemy, embezzlement, theft of personal property, arrogance, evil speech, and casting the evil eye—each one of which the midrash exemplifies with a biblical story. The author of Midrash Tadshe (chapter 16)<sup>4</sup> boils them down to three: envy (referring to Miriam in Numbers 12), greed (Gehazi in 2 Kings 5), and arrogance (Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26).

Modern medicine is attentive to the relationship of mind and body: our psychological state unquestionably affects our physical condition. As the [American Psychological Association](#) admonishes us, “Pay attention to what your body is telling you about the state of your mind.” This week’s parashah offers a similar lesson with respect to spiritual well-being: we must be attentive to what our bodies are telling us about the condition of our souls. The author of Midrash Tadshe (chapter 17) asks why the priest is commanded to take *two* birds for the ritual of purification, slaughtering one and setting the other free (Lev. 14:5–7). He asserts that the slaughtered bird, dead and buried in the ground, symbolizes an infirmity that is gone for good. The live bird, on the other hand, serves as a reminder that reverting to the behavior that brought on the ailment in the first place could engender a relapse: just as the bird might return from the open country, so the affliction might recur. It therefore makes good sense to avoid thoughts, words, and actions that can trigger ill effects—sound advice that is conveyed

in an odd and intriguing way in Parashat Metzora as refracted through the lens of traditional commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> The narrative resumes in Leviticus 16:1, harking back to chapter 10.

<sup>2</sup> Quotation from [Emiliano Panconesi](#), “[Psychosomatic Factors in Dermatology: Special Perspectives for Application in Clinical Practice](#).” See also [Philip D. Shenefelt](#), “[Management of Psychodermatologic Disorders](#).”

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent introduction to the concept of “evil speech” (*lashon ha-ra*) and its consequences, see [David Golinkin](#), “[Death and Life Are in the Hand of the Tongue](#).”

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Tadshe, also known as Midrash Pinhas ben Yair, is a fascinating and unusual work, probably composed in Southern France sometime before 1000 CE. A copy of the Hebrew text may be downloaded [here](#).

## A Taste of Torah

### A Commentary by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, Director of Israel Programs, JTS.

#### Land, Language, and Leprosy

The second of this week’s parashiyot, Metzora, is an enigma on so many levels. The Torah reading is obsessed with leprous afflictions on one’s skin, clothing, and home. While each of these afflictions is deeply troubling, it is the plague of the home that speaks most vividly to chaos. Torah teaches, “When you come into the Land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I put a plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession, then the one that owns the house will come and inform the priest . . . The priest will then command that they clear out the house” (Lev. 14:34–35). Chaos ensues as the house is quarantined for seven days. The family, which considered their domicile their refuge, must now evacuate. How are we to understand the enigma of this plague and its consequences?

Rashi, in his commentary at the beginning of Parashat Metzora, writes that leprosy strikes as a result of the moral shortcoming of *lashon ha-ra* (gossip). In addition, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes that the plague of domestic leprosy “applies only to houses in the Land of Israel. Moreover, it takes effect only after the Land has been completely divided up into individual holdings so that every home had its own permanent inhabitant” (*Commentary on Leviticus*, 386).

Rashi and Hirsch’s insights are compelling. First of all, the centrality of the Land of Israel is at the heart of Hirsch’s exegesis. There is something special, wholly unique, and sensitive about living in the Land of Israel. Second, there needs to be a sense of rootedness and permanence in one’s domicile. The plague of domestic leprosy does not strike a home in which the residents are sojourners. In this sense, Hirsch underscores the extent to which people influence their surroundings. While today, we rightfully wrestle with the notion of connecting a domestic leprous outbreak with moral shortcomings (as Rashi suggests), the allusion is instructive. We have the ability to diminish or enrich our surroundings—whether they be our literal homes, countries, or the world. More than that, when we return to our *permanent* home (whether it be our private homes, synagogues, or the Land of Israel), we have greater responsibility to those around us. Home demands that we act with a greater sense of ethics, morals, and responsibility. As we conclude this week in which we have commemorated Yom Hasho’ah, Holocaust Memorial Day, let us never take the concept of home for granted; and may we always care deeply for those within our homes and beyond.

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