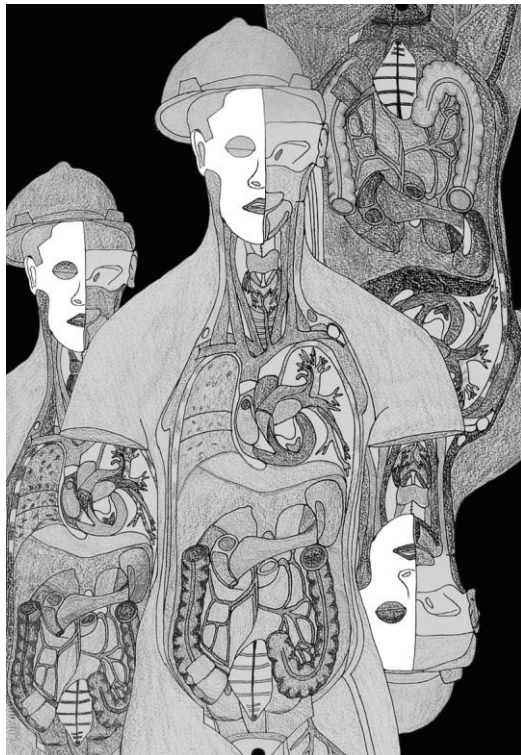


דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Inside Out

Ally Sterling, JTS Alumnus, LC '19



Inside Out (2015)
Pencil on paper

This week's parashah, Metzora, details the special procedures a *kohen* performs to purify the recovered *metzora* (a person suffering from some kind of skin condition), *tzara'at* in the home, and ritual impurity. Metzora is about the insides (childbirth and emissions) and outsides (skin afflictions) of the body. I created *Inside Out* as part of a series of biological drawings that explores the beauty and intricateness of the inner workings of the human body. When I made *Inside Out*, I wanted to explore the different functions and shapes of human anatomy and physiology, and also the way in which everything is connected.

Inside Out was created as part of JTS's Artist-in-Residence program. To see the artwork in color, visit www.jtsa.edu/inside-out

To receive *Torah from JTS* by email, visit jtsa.edu/torah



TORAH FROM JTS



Tazria-Metzora 5780

תזריע-מצרע תש"ף



Living Outside the Camp

Dr. Jason Rogoff, Academic Director of Israel Programs and Assistant Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS Israel Campus

For many of us, the Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora have never felt so relevant. While in years past there was a great sense of distance from the confusing descriptions of biblical skin afflictions, the quarantine of afflicted Israelites, and the complex post-illness purification process, it feels difficult to escape their prescience during our current global pandemic. (As a matter of fact, there was a recent essay published on thetorah.com exploring all of the parallels between COVID-19 and the treatment of Ancient Near Eastern contagious disease.) As we all struggle with the challenges of social distancing and the uncertainty of the future, I believe that insights into the details of our parshiyot can provide us with points of reflection for our present reality.

The biblical process of purification of skin diseases can be divided into three stages: 1) examination, 2) quarantine, and 3) purification. The priest is called upon to examine the severity of the *tzara'at* affliction. If the affliction is not severe, the person is permitted to return to the camp after a waiting period. If, however, the affliction is pronounced impure, the sufferer is banished from the settlement. They remain in banishment until the disease heals itself so as not to present a danger to others. Upon healing, the priest reexamines the afflicted individual and begins the two-step purification process. First, while still outside the camp, the priest slaughters one bird and lets a second bird fly free into the open country. The person is then let back into the camp but required to remain outside the home for an additional seven days. At the end of the seven days the person again purifies themselves and brings three animals as an offering to the Tabernacle. Only at the conclusion of this process are they declared pure and allowed to reenter civilization.

The Torah's description of the priest's examination of the afflicted person reveals a fascinating insight into the way many of us think about disease. The Torah explains that after examination, "the priest shall isolate the affliction for seven days" (Lev. 13:4). Note, the object of the verb is no longer the person but the disease itself. As Baruch Levine explains in the JPS Torah commentary on Leviticus, this is most certainly a case of metonymy, a literary device whereby the disease is meant to represent its victim. For us, however, it serves as a poignant reminder not to lose sight of the individual. Behind the increasing numbers of Coronavirus victims reported hourly on the news are individuals with family, friends, and loved ones. We should not lose perspective on how this global pandemic is impacting individuals. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 illustrates this point when it equates every life to an entire world. As we struggle to adhere to the demands of social distancing we cannot lose sight of the stakes. We are working together to save millions of lives and the worlds attached to each of those lives.

In a pithy verse summarizing the process of declaring the individual impure, the Torah states: "He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (13:46). The *metzora* must live outside the camp to protect others from infection and remain alone indefinitely until the disease heals. This feeling of loneliness is shared by many of us as we are distanced from our loved ones. Yet despite this isolation, I believe we can take comfort in the description of Miriam's quarantine when she was afflicted with *tzara'at*. The Torah notes: "Miriam was shut out of camp seven days; and the people did not march on until Miriam was readmitted" (Num. 12:15). A midrash (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael, *Beshallah*) adds that not only did the people of Israel wait for Miriam, but that God too waited with the nation for Miriam to reenter the camp. God would not allow the Clouds of Glory to continue on their path while one of the leaders of the nation remained behind. While we cannot simply ignore the gravity of our circumstances, we can and must assure each other that we are not alone. We, too, are waiting for the time when we can emerge from our distancing and once again share our camp together.

Finally, the Torah provides us with its own path for emerging from outside the camp. We must recognize that experiences this profound change us, and we need an opportunity to reflect on the choices we have made in the past and those we will make in the future. At the conclusion of the purification process, the priest applies the blood of the sacrifice to the ear, thumb and toe of the purified (Lev 14:17). Ibn Ezra explains that this act of purification is meant to remind the now-cured person to listen to the word of God and be deliberate in their deeds now that they have been given a second chance. Now is the time to begin thinking about our past commitments to our religious and communal lives and the steps we can take to thrive during our time outside the camp so that we will emerge stronger and prepared when we are able to return to the camp. I hope that the purification process of the priest can also serve as a reminder to appreciate the voices we will be able to hear without the use of technology, the places we will be able to go, the hands that we will be able to shake, and the hugs we will be able to share once again.

It feels most appropriate to conclude with Moses's blessing of mercy for Miriam as she was afflicted with *tzara'at* and sent from the camp. *El na refah na lah*, "O God, pray heal her!" Praying for a complete and speedy recovery for all those in need.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z"l) and Harold Hassenfeld (z"l).