

Here I Am, *Tzara'at* and All

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When I was 12, a few weeks before my bat mitzvah I went in to meet with one of the rabbis of my synagogue. At the time, the synagogue newsletter included a “*pasuk* of the week,” a verse from that week’s Torah portion that was particularly interesting or thought provoking. However, as the rabbi confessed to me, the week of my bat mitzvah was to be the end of that custom. He just couldn’t find anything that fit the bill. That week’s parashah? Tazria.

In many ways, all of Leviticus is considered the flyover territory of the Torah, something that one needs to get through as quickly as possible to get from the rich narratives of Genesis and Exodus to the wars and reminiscing of Numbers and Deuteronomy. And Tazria is seen as the worst of the worst, with its meditations and legal rulings on childbirth, impurity, and *tzara'at*, which is some sort of skin disease. In addition to being unappealing, it feels irrelevant, and even offensive, to our modern values and sensibilities. So what should we, as Jews living in 2016, make of Parashat Tazria?

I strongly believe that, despite the challenges involved, there is much for us to learn from Leviticus, and even from Tazria. So to choose a *pasuk* of the week, here is what I suggest.

The Torah requires that, if the priest who is inspecting the person with a skin condition finds that he has *tzara'at*, the priest declare him unclean. Then, “the person with *tzara'at*, who has the skin lesion, his clothing is torn and his head is uncovered, and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Impure, impure!’” (Lev. 13:45).

At first glance, the insistence that the victim be forced to identify himself as impure seems cruel. It is bad enough to be sent out from the camp and exiled by the community at his moment of need. Does he really need to call further

attention to himself? Must we add to his humiliation? However, there is another way to read this verse, one that presents a paradigm that applies even when concerns about *tzara'at* have fallen away.

To understand how *tzara'at* and its subsequent punishment might relate to the modern world, it is helpful to understand how the Rabbis regarded the condition, which was likely as mysterious to them as it is to us. The most common explanation of how *tzara'at* occurs frames it as a physical manifestation of our internal failings—specifically, the habit of *lashon harah*, or speaking badly about others. The Midrash makes a pun, connecting the *metzora*, the one who is afflicted with this skin disease, to the *motzi shem ra*, the one who ruins someone’s reputation by spreading lies about that person (Lev. Rabbah Parashat Metzora par. 16:6). (This is a fairly typical example of rabbinic punning, one of the Rabbis’ favorite exegetical tools.) According to this midrash, because there are five sections of the Torah that discuss the disease of *tzara'at*, one who is a *motzi shem ra* has transgressed the entire five books of the Torah.

Building on this assumption, a midrash in the Sifra explains that when Miriam is struck with *tzara'at* in Numbers 12, it is because she was criticizing Moshe behind his back. The Sifra assumes that evil speech not only causes *tzara'at*, but specifically causes it in the face, because “skin lesions do not appear except through evil speech” (par. 5:7). Following the line of reasoning in this framework, forcing the stricken to cry out that they are unclean becomes a type of karmic retribution. The stricken person had spoken in an inappropriate manner about others, and by declaring his or her own uncleanness, the person is opening the door to being talked about in the same way. Speaking carelessly

about others, without regard to the others' reputations, will cause one to be similarly excluded from the community.

But surely, forcing the victim to cry out "Impure, impure" cannot simply be about retribution. Generally, following mitzvot is meant to be restorative, rather than punitive, and surely the system would not be set up in a way that would cause others to sin by encouraging them to talk about the stricken. "Impure, impure," then, must be about something else.

Often, it is difficult to acknowledge our own weaknesses and failings. We excuse behaviors in ourselves that we condemn in others, justifying our actions even as we are uncomfortably aware that we do not really believe we are doing the right thing. Imagine if, every time we wronged ourselves and others, we were forced to stand up and admit it. Imagine if we were forced to declare ourselves impure every time we felt thus on the inside. Imagine if we had a physical sign of our sins and our failings. Would this not help us change—and improve—our behaviors?

So perhaps this is a lesson we can take from this strange parashah, Tazria. While it may be true that we are (thankfully!) not struck by this mysterious disease anymore, the process that one goes through to cleanse oneself can inform the way we think about our own process of self-improvement. If we created a space—an expectation for ourselves—wherein we had no choice but to be honest about our shortcomings, it seems likely that we would strive to improve ourselves and show more compassion for the weaknesses of others. Rather than hiding behind excuses, we would be forced to stand before the world and say, Look, this is who I am, both for good and for bad. And while this might cause us to be temporarily separated from our communities, ultimately it would have the potential to bring us back in, presenting a more honest and more righteous version of ourselves, scars and all.

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