

Charting a Way Back

Rabbi Ayelet Cohen, Pearl Resnick Dean of the Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS



The book of Vayikra can be understood as an exercise in transition; if one imagines the Torah as the lifecycle trajectory of Israel, this book represents adolescence/early adulthood. The Israelites are still transitioning from being an enslaved people toward becoming a free people. With their newfound autonomy, they must learn responsibility to one another and service to God. They struggle with faith, patience, ethical behavior, interpersonal relationships, and boundaries—in short, all of the things that are hard about maturation and adulthood.

Ancient Israelite religion is making a parallel transition, from the extreme and often brutal moral and legal codes of the ancient Near East, to a proto-Judaism. If we try to translate the norms and codes of Vayikra directly through a lens of contemporary values, we may see only how archaic it is. We know the ways that certain verses have been magnified and distorted to criminalize and declare immoral the lives of LGBTQ+ people, control women's bodies, and ostracize people with illness, among other things. We also see the beginnings of a system of justice and communal responsibility. If we are able to see Vayikra as a document of transition, we can discern the beginnings of an ethos not only of keeping people out of the tent, but allowing for a way back in.

Tazria contains everything that makes Sefer Vayikra fascinating, challenging, painful, and rich. The text offers an account that is graphic yet belies the squeamishness that expresses the ancient fear and anxiety about misunderstood bodily processes. This anxiety, and the desire to control those bodily processes in order to manage anxiety, has persisted throughout Jewish law,

Judeo-Christian tradition, and human culture. Much of this is rooted in misogyny and the fear of illness and death. Any blood that came from a source the presumably male authors feared or did not understand, specifically blood of menstruation and childbirth, and any bodily substance that they thought to have the potential for life and death, was deemed *tameh*. The less they understood it, the more it was associated with female and menstruating and birthing bodies, the longer the *tumah* persisted.

Those designated as *tameh* are separated from the camp, reinforcing a fear of contagion, as well as the association of menstruation and childbirth with illness. As if the condition of being a menstruating woman or giving birth was transmissible and therefore all the more dangerous. Male priests are afforded the authority to decide if someone is ready to return.

Biblical *tumah* is rooted in the terror of death, the discomfort with bodies and bodily fluids, and an assumption that female bodies are at best, mysterious, at worst, of lesser worth. None of this is surprising in its context. The spectre of death was ever present in an ancient world, and likely even more terrifying than it is for us today. And yet, while we now understand these processes, the devaluing of female bodies and the impulse to control and legislate them continues to have a powerful and strengthening hold in the Christian society of the contemporary US.

Perhaps for this reason, what is most remarkable about Tazria is not the desire to remove certain people from the camp, but that the rituals of the sacrificial system offer

people a way back into the camp. In their ancient context, the *kohanim* are enacting a radical system. These sacrifices and rituals offer a way back into the camp. In nearly every case, when a person is marked by *tumah* they are not cast out of the camp forever. There are specific rituals for ensuring the reentry of those who have been deemed *tameh*, such as this process prescribed for one recovering from childbirth:

וּבְמִלֵּאת יְמֵי טְהָרָהּ לְבָן אוֹ לְבַת תָּבִיא כֶּבֶשׂ בְּיָשׁוּבוֹ לְעֵלָה וּבֶן יוֹנָה אֲחֵר לְחֹטְאֵת אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד אֶל־הַלֶּהֶן:

On the completion of her period of purification, for either son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. (Lev. 12:6)

The text continues to offer a more expansive version of the ritual, to make sure that the ritual of return is not out of reach for anyone economically:

וְאִם־לֹא תִמְצָא יָדָהּ דֵּי שֶׁהָ וְלִקְחָהּ שְׁתֵּיתַיִרִים אוֹ שְׁנֵי בְנֵי יוֹנָה אֶחָד לְעֵלָה וְאֶחָד לְחֹטְאֵת וּכְפָר עָלֶיהָ הִלְהֵן וְטָהְרָהּ

If, however, her means do not suffice for a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. The priest shall make expiation on her behalf, and she shall be pure. (Lev. 12:8)

Similar rituals are introduced for one afflicted with *tzara'at* and other skin conditions, who are deemed ready to return to the camp. Midrash acknowledges the vulnerability and fear of those who are set outside of the camp. Notably, our tradition tells us that the people refused to move on without Miriam when she was removed from the camp in the Book of Numbers. Midrash Rabba, imagining both the privacy issues of having Miriam's brother, Aharon examine her, and the spiritual vulnerability of being excluded from the camp, imagines that God was present with her, leading her through the rituals of return.

אָמַר הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֲנִי פְהֵנָא, אֲנִי מְסֻגְיָהּ, אֲנִי מְטַהְרָהּ, הִדָּא הוּא דְכְתִיב (במדבר יב, טו): וְהָעָם לֹא נָסַע עַד הָאָסַף מִרְיָם, אִם כֵּן הָעָם הָיָה עִם הַשְּׂכִינָה וְהַשְּׂכִינָה מִמִּתְנַת לָהּ

The Holy One of Blessing said: 'I am the priest, I quarantine her, I deem her ritually pure.' That is what is written: "The people did not travel until Miriam was readmitted" (Num. 12:15). If so, the people were with the Divine Presence and the Divine Presence was waiting for her. (Vayikra Rabba 15:8)

These texts are an important part of our spiritual and religious evolution as Jews. Every year, Tazria urges us to question our own impulses to turn away from what is unfamiliar or frightening to us in the lives, and illnesses and bodies, of others. It invites us into discomfort and impels us to craft responses enabling those who are excluded from the community due to fear and ignorance to find their way in and be honored in the fullness of a being created *betzelem Elohim*. It prompts us to consider how ancient understandings and misunderstandings of life and death, illness and healing, gender and sex, led to moral understandings and legal systems that we now endeavor to reframe or transform. This week, the Torah calls each of us to seek out and build new pathways which enable those who are marginalized to return, to come back into an ever-expanding camp.