

Parashat Tazria: Time to Take a Break

Dear Friends,

This is a special Shabbat! Not only is it Shabbat, but it is also the beginning of the month of Nissan, and also “Shabbat Hachodesh” - the original New Year. In the Torah Nissan is the first month, so tomorrow is Rosh Hashana.

So - Chodesh Tov and Shana (Ivrit) Tova!

And now, to the parasha.

This is the first of two parashot - Tazria and Metzora - which are the least “favorite” in the Torah because they deal with skin diseases and various emissions. Most years they are read together, but on leap years, like this one, where there is an extra Adar, they are read separately, one this week and one next week.

Both parashot deal mostly with skin disorders like leprosy, boils, and others.

It is both interesting and surprising that the hero of the parasha is not the doctor, but the Cohen! There is no medical team and no emergency room. Only a Cohen!

The Cohen examines the affliction, diagnoses it, and if it is indeed leprosy he declares the person impure and sends him or her to “quarantine” - which is actually removal from the encampment for seven days. At the end of these, the Cohen takes another look. If there has been significant improvement, the person may return to his family and his community. If not, he has to remain outside for another week.

There is no prescription, no amulet, no passage of Psalms, no note in the Kotel. There are only the seven days of “quarantine.”

If nothing else, it is at least an efficient way of containing disease and preventing its spreading to others in the community; perhaps even a brilliant one.

Traditional interpreters considered this policy of removal to be punishment for gossiping and slander. Leprosy is a spiritual disease, according to this beautiful explanation, because “metzora” (a leper) is actually “motzi ra”, i.e., the harbinger of malicious gossip. Quarantine for such behavior is appropriate. Just as gossip - be it real or fake news - causes isolation of

the subject of the gossip, so the person gossiping is isolated for a while, so that he can experience its effect and reconsider his behavior.

However, the absence of a doctor - even a voodoo doctor, a shaman, or a traditional herbalist - raises another possibility, which is that healing is to be found within the person quarantined. The health professional or other external remedies are not the source of recovery. The Cohen diagnoses, but does not treat. The Cohen does not have such powers. In this sense, the Hebrew priest is not a shaman. He does not give a prescription or recommend a good potion. The only thing that is needed is time out. The person will heal of his own accord.

This interpretation suggests that the answers lie within us. But in order to connect to the healing power within, and in order to be able to hear the answers, we need to distance ourselves from the noise of life and society. We need some time out.

Nothing is actually broken, and if something or someone appears broken - infected or ill - then a bit of peace, quiet, and distance will enable their inner powers to heal them.

Culturally and ideologically this is not where we are at! Common thought is that people are in fact broken or faulty, and they must be repaired. We hasten to send our near and dear to experts, to teachers, to rabbis and to doctors so that they may tell us what is broken and fix them or us.

The alternative takes a great deal of trust and belief in the powers of healing and recuperation that lay within us. Furthermore, the notion that we have the answers within us sounds lovely, but it is very difficult to implement, and it rubs against our social-cultural norms and conduct.

One possible argument against this stance is that every organism requires nourishment from its environment, things like water, oxygen, food, society, and more. This contradicts the notion that an organism is whole unto itself. But, perhaps this is the difference between being "whole" and "perfect". Nothing is perfect, i.e. not in need of anything at all. I would argue that our needs too are an expression of our wholeness! That is because we too are part of a greater "organism", which is also whole. Just as the billions of cells of our body are each whole, we too are whole "cells" within a larger ecosystem.

This does not suggest that if we take some time out we will always heal, we will always find the answers and never die. Of course we will die! Nothing in the material world is eternal. This is part of its wholeness. The cells in our body die all the time, which is a good thing - it is necessary for our health. And at the end of the day, each one of us is like the billions of cells in our body - whole - but make up a much larger entity. And yes, we too will die one day.

In elementary school we sang a popular "Hallelujah" song of those years whose last verse always left me disturbed. Loosely translated, it went like this:

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSMfd5Lve_0)

***My days are spread before the Almighty
He knows my path
And all of my songs, like prayers,
Have been sent off to the distance.
And when the end of the path comes
I will quietly lock up my life
And a new, young song will live
And sing Hallelujah.***

A new young song will live??? But what about me??? What about my song???

This parasha helps explain that my own individual song never ends. It births, enables, and eventually merges with the new, young song.

Therefore, we will quietly lock up this drasha with another popular Israeli song, a gentler one, written and sung by Arik Einstein and Shemtov Levi (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uw4zU-fHpx0>)

***Taking some time out and not thinking
Sitting at the sea and not worrying
Giving my head time to rest from the noise
Giving my heart time to rest from the pressure***

***I know it's not yet time
And I am not really ready
But my soul yearns for a bit of rest
To breathe before returning to work***

***Perhaps it is just a small crisis and it will pass
Perhaps I have just gotten a bit tired.***

This is not a drasha against doctors, experts, rabbis and shamans. Just a reminder - mostly for myself - that we are never broken! We do not need to be repaired. This does not mean that we don't have needs. We have! But if we know how to take time out, we will be better able to identify those needs and how to take care of them. We will know that they are part of the wholeness of creation.

And also, that if we give our body time it will know how to heal itself, and also when to cease.

Shabbat Shalom, Chodesh Tov, and a Happy (Biblical) Hebrew Year!

Elisha