

## Parashat Metzora: Knowing You Are Pure

Dear Friends,

Parashat Metzora isn't any old parasha (not that there is such a thing!). It is a "Torah": **"This shall be the Torah of the leper"** (Vayikra 14:2)

What does a Torah of a leper mean?

Much has been written about biblical leprosy, which is different from the disease known today to the medical establishment. Our Sages and many other interpreters understood it as a spiritual disease that affects those who have gossiped or slandered. This interpretation uses a play on the Hebrew words: "metzora" (leper), and bringing forth evil - "motzi ra". This is a wonderful interpretation and perhaps it is enough.

But there are other possibilities, and the Torah always beckons us to seek them.

As we read last week in Parashat Tazria, which also deals with leprosy, the Torah does not discuss the method of healing. The Cohen observes the affliction and sends the leper outside of the encampment for a week. The only method of healing, if at all, is to take some time out - a break from daily life - as I wrote last week.

This week I wish to suggest another insight.

The discussion of leprosy in the Torah teaches us a lesson about our original, essential, and default state of being, prior to becoming diseased. The Torah calls this state of being Tahara - purity. Indeed, when we are not temporarily diseased we are "tahor".

Our essence is purity until something happens, rendering us impure. When the afflicted person completes the process imposed upon him or her, which lasts a week or more (depending on the severity of the affliction) of removal and isolation - the

Cohen performs a fascinating ceremony in which the leper can then return, not only to the encampment but also to his or her original state of purity.

That our default condition is purity is a very significant idea. Purity is wholeness. Human beings, it turns out, are not in need of repair! If we were, the Cohen would need to fix us, not just quarantine us for a week. The leper goes outside of the encampment in order to return to it and to his state of purity. He does “teshuva” - he returns to himself and to his own purity!

Many of us spend our days with a vague, yet deep seated sense that we are in some way broken, faulty; that there is something inherently wrong with us (in fact I don't know of anyone who doesn't carry a variation of this “condition”). It is no coincidence that shame is the first human experience described in the Torah.

It is not difficult to become infected by shame. From an early age we absorb many references to our inadequacy: we are not like them, we don't try hard enough, we are not polite, we are not... (the list is long). We learn early on that in order to receive warmth and love we need to fulfill certain expectations and demands.

I am not familiar with another organism that comes into the world so pure (and sweet) and learns so quickly how lacking they are, how faulty.

I am also not familiar with another organism that learns how to judge itself and its surroundings as we humans do. We learn to live with stipulations such as “If you don't do/ behave/ straighten-up/ try harder... you will not be happy/ successful/ worthy/ loved.”

To my limited knowledge, animals do not know that they are pure in their essence (although they are!). But they do not go about their lives feeling inadequate, guilty, remorseful, or in pain as a result of a deeply-seated sense of being faulty.

If we return now to the insight of our Sages mentioned earlier - that a leper is one who brings forth evil from within himself - then the **Torah of the leper** teaches us something about our own self perception: the slandering is not in what we say about others. Rather, it is our slandering of ourselves, of feeling broken and in need of repair.

Truly knowing we are essentially pure is very good news. It reminds us that the only fault we have is our mistaken grasp of our essence, and it is time to change it. Not to change ourselves, because we are not faulty, but to change our faulty state of mind which tells us we are.

None of us are defective! Not even you!

At the end of seven days of quarantine, following the Cohen's reassessment of the affliction and his permission to return to the encampment, the leper goes through a fascinating process: he becomes a baby again - he becomes as pure as the day he was born, thus returning to his default purity! **“On the seventh day he shall shave off all his hair—of head, beard, and eyebrows. When he has shaved off all his hair, he shall wash his clothes and bathe his body in water; then he shall be clean.”** (Vayikra 14:9)

And then, on the eighth day, just like a brit, both males and females renew their covenant with their pure selves and with the God of purity: **“On the eighth day he shall take two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, three-tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering, and one log of oil...”** (14:10)

This Shabbat is called “Shabbat Hagadol” because it is the Shabbat before Pesach. I would like to wish all of us joyful and easy preparations and sane cleaning.

Please remember: dust is not chametz, and we are not defective!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha