

This week's Torah reading is the double parashah Tazria-Metzora, which deals with questions of ritual impurity, specifically the kind of impurity that causes a person to need to be quarantined from the rest of the community. Tazria means 'she conceived, or she will conceive,' and the beginning of Tazria deals with childbirth, and the time a woman must take after childbirth before ritually purifying herself and rejoining the community. Rebecca Hart, in her this American Jewish life talk last year, noted that as unpalatable as the phrase "ritual impurity" sounds, it actually refers to a recognition that our life force is not always at its fullest, and that a woman needs some space and time after childbirth to regain her strength before she can resume her typical roles in the community. An early version of FMLA, as it were.

I want, therefore to focus on the subject of the rest of Tazria, and much of parashat Metzora, which is in fact, the Metzora – the person who is struck with the disease *tzara'at*, commonly translated as leprosy. Most of *Tazria* deals with how to diagnose when someone has *tzara'at*, which is defined throughout the text as some kind of skin affliction that can involve swelling, discoloration, hair discoloration, boils, and more. There is an elaborate procedure of examination by a priest, and if a person is determined to have *tzara'at*, Chapter 13, verse 45, instructs: "the one's clothes shall be rent, their head shall be left bare, their upper lip shall be covered" – all traditionally signs of mourning, "and they shall call out, 'unclean, unclean' They shall be unclean as long as the disease is on them, and being unclean shall dwell apart, dwelling outside the camp."

This is a tough text. Especially contemporary commentators, wanting to honor the dignity of those who are ill, find it difficult to grapple with the stigma that the text seems to place on those who become afflicted with this disease. It raises troubling questions about the tendency to associate moral purity with physical health, and if we are honest it invites us to look at the ways that even today, we live in a culture in which the healthy tend to shut off people who are ill or vulnerable, or even whose appearance is just unappealing, effectively quarantining them, in order to preserve a real or imagined safety. If nothing else, I think this text is valuable for that. If we feel uncomfortable with it, we must ask, how far is it from our lived experience of how our current culture deals with illness, any reduced capacity?

Fortunately, we are not the first ones to grapple with the text. For as long as Torah has been publicly read and studied, our sages have been troubled and sought to find compassion in the text.

The first piece of evidence for that is in the *haftarah*, the prophetic reading assigned to the text. Each weekly *haftarah* is somehow thematically related to the Torah reading. The *haftaroth* were assigned to the Torah portions by the early rabbis sometime between the first and 3rd century, and the *haftarah for metzora* is, in my opinion, a powerful act of subversion by those rabbis.

The Haftarah for *Metzora* is taken from Second Kings, Chapter 7, starting at verse 3. The context is the city of Samaria in Northern Israel under siege by the Arameans, the inhabitants starving in the city, food so scarce that people are eating their children.

The *haftarah* opens with four lepers, sitting outside the city – as is required for their quarantine. Because they have nothing to lose, they decide to go beg for mercy at the Aramean camp. When they arrive at the camp, however, they find it deserted – a miracle that the Arameans had all fled in the previous night.

The lepers begin to take spoils from the camp but, as it says in verse 9, “They then said to one another, ‘we are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent – we can wait no longer – let us inform the palace.’” And thus it is the lepers who bring the news that saves the lives of all of the starving inhabitants of this city.

But the story does more than just cast the marginalized lepers as virtuous, for it is their very marginalization that places them in the position to find out about the miracle, and to be able to save the lives of the others. That is why I say the haftara choice is so subversive – the rabbis are answering the marginalization of the *metzora* in the Torah portion with a story that cast the experience of the lepers as central to the entire people.

They do not argue against the quarantining of the lepers, but they do something subtler. While accepting that the *tzara'at* must be quarantined, this haftarah nevertheless reminds us that that when people are sent to the edges, they will see and understand things that are invisible to those at the center. Those who are comfortably – or uncomfortably – shielded in the middle would do well to seek the wisdom from the margins.

This brings me back to the situations that, according to *Tazria-Metzora* call for such marginalization. Childbirth and transformative illness certainly in our contemporary culture tend to force a person to step aside from their usual concerns and typical roles that they fill. With my own recent memory of childbirth, as blessedly complication-free as it was, I know that I had to “encamp outside of the community,” so to speak. I was in a state of altered-consciousness, and I couldn’t move physically and otherwise at the same pace as the community, at the same pace that I was used to, for several months.

And that time on the margins was instructive, as, like the lepers in the parashah, from being outside, I was able to see clearly things I couldn’t take the time to look at from the places I usually occupied – in my case, I was able to notice decisions and pressures on how I use my time, how I think and speak to and about babies – not just my baby but all babies. And I am certainly better, and I am bold enough to hypothesize that this community might be better for my having taken that time away. I am still sorting out the wisdom I am bringing back from that.

What if we understood all of the things that force us out – not just childbirth, but illness, injury, anything that might cause us to step outside the community, so to speak – as opportunities for learning the wisdom of the margins? What if those in the center proactively sought the wisdom of the margins? How much wiser, how much healthier, might our whole community be?