

This week's double paarshiyot are Tazria-Metzora, which deal extensively with issues of *tum'ah*, ritual impurity, often mistranslated as "uncleanliness." They particularly focus on a little understood Biblical disease called *tsara'at*, commonly translated as leprosy, though we know that it was not the same thing as the disease labelled leprosy in contemporary times. Parashat Tazria deals with the details of how the disease is diagnosed and how those diagnosed with it are quarantined, while parashat Metsora focuses on the reintegrate of the *metzora*, the one who had been afflicted with *tsara'at*, back into the community afterwards.

At the risk of hitting a little too close to home, I find it instructive to engage with the questions that come up as I study Torah's treatment of the *metzora* – the sick person who must be quarantined. Particularly, I want to share with all of you the verses that I explored with some of you in Torah study yesterday. From Leviticus 13:45-6, which originally use the masculine singular; I'm using "they" for gender neutrality:

"As for the person with a leprous affection, their clothes shall be rent, their head shall be left bare, and they shall cover over their upper lip; and they shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" (46) They shall be unclean as long as the disease is on them. Being unclean, they shall dwell apart; their dwelling shall be outside the camp."

There is a lot going on here. On the one hand, the *metzora* is physically separated. On the other hand, we see that separation is not complete, there must still be some social contact with others, for they are still encountering other people, and shouting *tamei, tamei* – "impure, impure!" at them.

The commentators wonder why the metzora must shout this, and two opinions emerge. One is put most succinctly by Rashi, who says, “he must proclaim aloud that he is unclean, so that people may keep away from him.” According to Rashi’s position, the function of the *metzora’s* shouting is to warn others away – what any of us do, when we have a cold in normal times, and tell others, “oh, you don’t want to shake my hand; I’m sick!”

The other is reflected at several points in the Talmud, as in Masechet Sotah, page 32b: **One should publicize one’s troubles. As it is taught: “And they will cry: Impure, impure” (Leviticus 13:45), the metzora must announce their pain to the masses, and the masses will pray for mercy on their behalf. And similarly, anyone to whom a painful matter happens must announce it to the masses, and the masses will pray for mercy on their behalf.**

If Rashi’s opinion is that the metzora yells, in order to warn others away, this teaching suggests that the yelling functions to rally spiritual support. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive. It is taught elsewhere in the Talmud, in Moed Katan, 5a, that “If [the verse comes to teach only one idea,] **it should have said: And he shall cry: Impure. Why [does it repeat] impure, impure? Learn from this both** interpretations: the *metzora* publicizes their condition both to warn others physically and to muster spiritual support. Or, from the perspective of the community’s obligation, the community must both keep themselves self from contracting the contagion of the *metzora*, but must still face their condition, see them, pray for them and eventually reintegrate them into the community.

I want to suggest an additional read on the *metzora’s* cry. This one has to do with the very definition of *tumah*, impurity, which I taught about this *parasha* last year.

But since I won't assume you all remember, even if you were there, I'll recap a little.

As Rabbi Avi Weiss has taught, "*Taharah* means that which is everlasting and never deteriorates. *Tumah*, the antithesis of *taharah*, stands for mortality or finitude, that which withers away.

A dead body is considered a primary source of *tumah*, for it represents decay in the highest sense not only because the corpse itself is in the process of decaying, but also because the living individual who comes into contact with the corpse usually suffers emotionally and endures a form of spiritual fragmentation, a counterpart of the corpse's physical falling away."

And as I said last year, when teaching about this parashah:

*Tumah* [is] a state in which one is, simply put, unlikely to feel up to the normal tasks of day-to-day society, for both physical and psychological reasons. When a person is in such a state, whether because of illness, menstruation, childbirth, or encountering death, Torah not only allows, but mandates that their particular condition be recognized and labelled as *tumah* . . . a status that demands that those who hold it slow down, step back, and let some of the burdens of normal life drop. For that reason, I actually want to argue for the value of *tumah*, in our contemporary framework that too often doesn't allow any of us to act as if we are anything less than *tahor*, [pure and high-functioning] all the time."

So perhaps in our parasha, the *metsora* cries out *tamei, tamei*, not just for the reasons the commentators discuss, but to remind listeners that there is someone around who can't function at the fast pace and high level that society expects. To say, not only do I need some prayers, but I need some *slack*.

And perhaps, that very cry *normalizes* the reality of *tumah*, reminds listeners, in fact, that *tumah* is a part of every life, and that no-one should take high functioning for granted. Perhaps it even makes it a little easier for others to face the *tamei* in their own experience.

I want to suggest that many of us are currently in a state of *tumah*, even if we are not physically sick right now. We are burdened by encounters with death. We are not at our highest functioning. And I think there is great wisdom in Torah's teaching that when we are in a state of *tumah*, things change. We name it. We expect less of ourselves, and ideally, society expects less of us.

Right now, there is so much pressure to act as though everything is still *tahor* – “everlasting, not-deteriorating!” We are trying to behave as if online working, learning and connecting is the same as the in-person version, as if every household being stuck on its own is an awesome opportunity to increase productivity or even take on new hobbies. We are trying to keep things as normal, as smooth as possible.

What if that's a mistake?

So for those of you who are trying to work 8 hours a day staring at screen, feeling like your brain is melting, wondering why you are not as productive, wondering why you are exhausted: consider the idea, archaic though it may sound, that you are in state of *tumah*. It's not your job to be at your best right now. It's our job to actually call it out, partially in order to curb the physical and emotional contagion – for of course, even emotional stress is contagious. But also to ask for help and compassion, to perhaps encourage all of us to unite in our common humanity, our common exhaustion, our common need. What would you like to call out?