



D'var Torah for parshiot Tazria/Metzora

By Paul Bleicher , Apri 22, 2023

Shabbat shalom.

Today is my fourth time “at bat” on Tazria-Metzora, the third on my own, and another as a batting coach for our son, Isaac, who drashed on Metzora at his Bar Mitzvah.

Distilled to its essence, Tazria-Metzora is a parashah that describes the exclusion and inclusion of people from a community because of a spiritual affliction that manifests itself as a visible skin eruption. Over the years and these multiple drashot, I have come to realize that Tazria-Metzora has a fundamental, underlying theme about the importance of community. In fact, I believe this parashah has particular resonance with us at the moment, as we struggle with the implications of the fizzling and smoldering residual COVID pandemic for our community.

My first drash on the parashah was in 1996 when it became a transformative moment that catapulted me from quiet obscurity to truly becoming a member of the community. Julia and I had come to the Minyan having grown up in fairly secular homes, and I was on a steep learning curve in both my knowledge and observance. The idea of giving a drash was, well, intimidating, but something possessed me about this particular drash. Perhaps, because I am a dermatologist.

The drash traced the spurious origins of the use of “leprosy” as a translation for tzara’at introduced in the handoffs from the Greek translation of the bible known as the Septuagint to the 5th century translation of the bible from Greek to Latin, known as the Vulgate. I argued that not only was tzara’at not leprosy, but that while it resembled aspects of many skin diseases, it didn’t fit any one particular skin disease. Skin lesions that could fit some of the descriptions are quite common, and many of us have them in the form of psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, pityriasis rosea, and many other skin problems. Tazria-Metzora was, in my mind, a manual for the Kohen to use to “rule out” (as we say in medical parlance) tzara’at in the many who were afflicted with skin rashes, and to only apply it to those who suffer from the spiritual decadence, possibly lashon hora, which was the true cause of tzara’at. In my mind, the laws of tzara’at allowed the Kohen to keep the community as intact as possible, while still retaining a tool to isolate the ritually impure who were a threat to the community.

Nineteen years later, I revisited Tazria-Metzora, this time focusing on the elaborate and prolonged ritual of purification performed by the Kohen – using detailed diagnostic criteria – to declare someone free of tzara’at. It was to be performed, according to commentary in Etz Chaim, only after the tzara’at has disappeared, to avoid the appearance of performing a magical cure.” My argument at the time was that the community might be suspicious that a person returning wasn’t cured of their spiritual affliction. They might wonder whether someone returning to the community still had lesions of tzara’at under their clothing or hidden in some way. The Kohen’s elaborate rituals would serve an essential purpose, not as a cure, but as a public pronouncement to the community that the metzora who was once tamei was now tahor. I found some

parallels between the rituals of the Kohen and the routine of the modern practitioner of medicine. And this leads us directly to COVID.

The parallels between COVID and tzara'at are fairly straightforward if one looks beyond the ideas of spiritual affliction and skin disease. Like tzara'at, COVID required testing and evaluation to distinguish it from other diseases. Isolation was a key aspect for those afflicted with either disease to prevent contagion to the community. And part of the "ideal" process of returning to the community was another test and/or examination in which the absence of contagion was confirmed, again with parallels between the two.

Amid the COVID Omicron spike last winter, I mentioned my two drashot on Tazria-Metzora and my thoughts about its relationship to COVID to my friend and fellow dermatologist, Paul Birnbaum. His eyes lit up as he told me that in the Spring of 2021, he too had given a drash on the parashah at Temple Israel in Sharon.

Paul's drash took a very different tack to the discussion, in some ways quite the opposite of my original drash. He posited that the laws of Tazria-Metzora were written for a time when it was clear that there was contagion of some skin diseases (ringworm, measles, etc.) but nobody understood the principles of the spread of disease as we do today. Just as we asked those who were exposed or had symptoms of COVID to self-isolate, the Kohen would separate all those with possibly contagious skin diseases from the community until they cleared.

This commonly held view, of the Kohen as a public health official, is something that Hirsch's commentary on Tazria dismisses, perhaps a bit harshly. Without going into

detail on his well-reasoned argument, the idea that the laws pertaining to nega'im were "sanitary regulations" is wholly unacceptable to him, and he dismisses the idea as myth, pure and simple.

The other theme in Paul's drash, that the separation of the metzora was not an exclusion of some from the community, but rather, a way to safely include as many uninfected people as possible in the community, is particularly powerful. It certainly has strong parallels with the rules of masking and social distancing for protecting the community during COVID. The laws of Tazria-Metzora and our precautions for COVID were all about keeping the whole community well and intact, even if it meant some hardship for some individuals in the community.

The idea of the protection of the community is particularly reinforced in the Talmud, in Tractate Moed Katan. The metzora's cry of "tamei, tamei" was not only to warn the public to stay away to avoid contact and potential contagion of ritual impurity. It was also to inform the community of the metzora's pain so that others may pray on their behalf. The clear implication is that while the metzora may require temporarily isolation from the community, they remained no less a part of the community than before they developed tzara'at.

The analogy of tzara'at to our experiences over the past three years is quite compelling and has some personal resonance for me. For a while, I wrote a regular series of postings to the Minyan community list during the pandemic attempting to explain the context and results of the rapidly growing body of knowledge on COVID and to communicate some of the challenging concepts in immunology, infectious disease, public health, etc. that suddenly took on a life and death meaning for all of us. I also

found myself as part of a small group of physicians and other experts at the Newton Centre Minyan and later at Temple Emanuel who advised on when we could safely gather together as a Minyan and when we could not, who are okay coming to shul, and who probably should not, what protections we should take in gathering, etc.

Informally, I fielded many unsolicited calls and emails from Minyan members, asking for advice on whether or not they could go on a trip, have guests for Thanksgiving or Pesach, or any number of other topics. These discussions were often challenging and I found myself trying to walk a fine line between advice that would optimally protect the community and their families and friends, and advice that would enable them to participate in as much social interaction as they were willing to risk. As I prepared this drash, I realized that these roles had given me a little bit of insight into the challenges of the Kohen in interpreting the specific diagnostic manual for tzara'at and isolation described in this parashah.

As I give this drash, we have reached a point where the COVID pandemic appears to be smoldering, but not going away completely. Many of us are doing our best, as much as possible, to go about life as normally as possible. Others are continuing to mask and limit social interactions as they don't want to risk the possibility of getting sick with COVID or any other circulating respiratory illness, with its attendant risks to them, their families, and their community. Most have rejoined the community, but some have adopted new behaviors, such as masking, Zoom services, smaller Shabbat dinners, etc. And then, there are those of us who are elderly, have underlying illnesses, and despite vaccinations and Paxlovid, are unable to rejoin the community.

While we have worked assiduously to maintain community through Zoom services and more recently gathering with precautions, I think most of us would say that things just

aren't quite back to the way they were in the pre-pandemic times. Some of us are still outside the tent or just peaking in, and there is no Kohen, no ritual to declare us as tahor, or ritually pure or clean, and nothing declaring that we can return completely and without hesitation. We are left to slowly drift towards a return to normalcy, which may never completely arrive. In the absence of some defining declaration or ritual, such as in Tazria-Metzora, we can appreciate the power that such a ritual must have held in preserving and reclaiming community in Temple times.

There are still some important lessons we can learn from Tazria-Metzora – first, the importance of community and of taking responsibility for our actions to maintain the health and well-being of everyone around us. Second, that those who are afflicted with COVID and those who cannot physically rejoin the kahal for health reasons still remain a vital part of our community. For now, it is essential that we continue to support each other and respect our individual choices. The role of the Kohen in safely preserving community in Tazria-Metzora provides us with a model for our own behavior as we continue to move forward in these still uncertain times.

Shabbat Shalom.