



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Metzora*

Leviticus 14:1-15:33

7 Nissan 5768

April 12, 2008

This week's Torah portion describes in exquisite detail how to restore a sense of purity to community members with serious skin ailments as part of their healing. Ritualized cleansing, sacrificing and anointing by priests mark the movement from contaminated to clean. The impure to the pure.

In contemporary society, we too tend to privilege as the desired norm the notion of purity above what we consider unclean. We may use anti-bacterial soaps to thoroughly cleanse our skin; we may be in a hospital surrounded by hermetically sealed rooms and instruments; we drink "pure" spring water. Our society stresses a certain level of hygiene, which may be construed to mean purity.

Today the definition of purity stresses the absence of things and finds outside influence a source of contamination. Being impervious to external interference may make us pure, but ultimately it creates a level of alienation and isolation that render us alone – outside of community.

What if this kind of hygienic purity was a myth? What if being free from all germs was simply an impossible notion? Patients in hospitals are often encouraged to go home before they have healed completely, not only because modern health care demands more room for more people, but because of impurities in the hospital itself. There are times when one may be safer at home than in a hospital – an institution defined by its mission to help heal the ill.

Let's re-read what purity meant for our forefathers and what it can mean for us today. The complex healing rituals in *Parashat Metzora* are meant to ease people back into their communities after a disabling or disfiguring or spiritually jarring experience. Many scholars have conjectured that the purity that is reached at the end of a series of rituals by the priests may not be solely for cleanliness or cure from illness. A cleansing of the mind, reducing negative thoughts and speech that damage our mental and physical being may also be the purity our priests found important and aimed us to achieve. Reintegration with a community after a ritual of purification may have rendered one more capable of being a more vigorous and passionate member of society. Hence purity reflects a state of communal and self-acceptance, a degree of normalcy and readiness for our regular roles in family and society.

If we shift our definition of the concept of purity from the notion of estrangement and distance *from* people and society toward a concept of ceasing or reducing those "contaminations" that hurt and divide our society and ourselves, in our thoughts and speech as well as those of others - gossip, slander (including self-slander), racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism – we are able to achieve a sense of purity (of harmony, or of integration) within our own local and global communities. In this sense,

purity is attainable, but very much a long and even arduous process. This process toward relational (re-)connection and wholeness is ultimately worthwhile, for it is a journey that helps create a sense of justice and responsibility.

A world free of contaminants and germs may never be possible, but a society free from oppression and exploitation is a goal that all of us can help achieve (or work toward).

There is a way to be pure and still engage in a world that so desperately needs more love, hope and healing. We may not find a cure for our illness, but we can still see ourselves as pure. We can also be healed and whole.

May you find your own sense of purity from the inside out.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rae Hendriksz, Website Manager for the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.

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