



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Tazria*

Leviticus 12:1 – 13:59

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The entire book of Leviticus is a fascinating journey into the world of illness and healing in ancient Israel. As Dr. Tamara Eskenazi notes in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, "In Leviticus a person's body, the sanctuary, and the community each constitute a microcosm of the universe in its sacred aspect." A major goal in the Israelite world is to maintain a sense of balance and harmony—connoted as holiness. When that sense of balance is upset, it is imperative to repair it. This is the central focus of the concepts of *tahor* and *tamei*, often translated as "pure" and "impure."

This week's Torah portion, *Tazria*, deals in depth with issues of purity and impurity. *Tazria* focuses in part on discolorations and eruptions of the skin. Implicit in the understanding of this portion is the realization that disruptive physical conditions cause contamination of not only the person or object, but by extension the sanctuary and the community. What causes these "coatings" or outer layers to become clogged and the process of returning them to their natural state of health is a central focus of both the portion itself and generations of Torah commentators.

Chapter 13 of the book of Leviticus begins, "The Eternal One spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: When a person has on the skin of the body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of the body, it shall be reported to Aaron or to one of his sons, the priests. The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of the body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of the body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest sees it, he shall pronounce the person impure" (Leviticus 13:1-3). One of the functions of the priests was to examine people, walls and textiles and diagnose conditions as indications of a state of purity or impurity. No wonder there are so many Jewish doctors in the world today!

The rabbis have struggled to understand these concepts in a manner that speaks to every generation. In his commentary on this portion, the Sefat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter, makes a connection between the Hebrew word *or*, meaning skin, that is mentioned in this portion and the Hebrew word *or*, meaning light. He notes that the midrash refers to a distinction between "garments of skin" and "garments of light." Originally, we were clothed only in garments of light, but because of the sin of Adam and Eve, we were then "clothed" by God in skin, "And God made outfits out of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). The Sefat Emet goes on to note that the skin is porous, containing many tiny holes. It is through these microscopic holes that the light of our inner selves shines forth. Through the act of sinning, we clog

up these pores which, he notes, is why *tza'arat* (the “scaly affection”) is translated into Aramaic as *segiru* or “closing.”

As Rabbi Arthur Green notes in his comments on the Sefat Emet’s commentary, “Here the wordplay between the Hebrew *‘or* and *or* (“skin” and “light”) becomes the vehicle for a profound assertion of ancient Hebrew myth: that behind and within the person of flesh there lies another self, one dressed only in pure light. That this is our true self is attested by the fact that it was our identity at the beginning of human history, and will be so once more at the end.”

Often when we are sick and vulnerable it is hard to let the inner light shine through. We sometimes feel “covered” by our diagnosis, sitting upon us like an extra layer of skin, obscuring the porousness that helps our spirits to shine forth. Tragically, too often in the midst of our pain and suffering, we lose touch completely with that inner light, with our true self. For caregivers as well, often the inner light of those we care for is obscured by the layers of institutionalization and suffering.

Ancient Israel turned to the priests for a diagnosis of the physical afflictions that befell them, much as today we turn to our physicians. As Jews, we can also turn to the wisdom of our tradition to help with the healing process. Through turning our attention to the inner light within ourselves and others we can participate in healing not only ourselves but, by extension, the entire community. By peeling off the extra layer that clothes us in our diagnosis or that perhaps we feel is protecting us from more pain, we are able to begin to heal the emotional and spiritual wounds wrought by illness. Thus may the inner light of our beings shine forth.

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