



**A Communal Response toward Illness:
Torah Reflections on *Tazria-Metzorah***
April 21, 2007 Leviticus 12:1 – 15:33

In this week's Torah portion, God instructs Moses and Aaron how to respond when certain diseases and issues of health appear in the community. In great detail, we learn about the symptoms and diagnosis of a skin disease called *tzara'at*. *Tzara'at* is commonly translated as leprosy, however, scholars now believe that what *tzara'at* is more akin to psoriasis.

Moses and Aaron are given a strict protocol for how to diagnose and treat the afflicted person. When a specified blemish appears on the skin of an individual, that person must appear before one of the high priests for an examination. At this point, the priest will either declare this person to be ritually clean or "unclean". Cleanliness, in this case, refers to a ritual category. It is not so much a statement about hygiene, as it is a comment about a person's current ritual status and his or her ability to partake in certain communal worship rituals.

Having the disease of *tzara'at* places someone outside of the camp of the Israelites, away from the place where he or she is able to participate in communal worship services. This is not so different from present day situations where illness or hospitalization may prohibit one's ability to attend services at their synagogue. However, our Torah portion says more. Leviticus 13:45 reads, "As for the person with a leprosy affliction, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall call out 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp."

For anyone who has had the experience of being ill, the above words may prove challenging. Why does the person stricken with illness rend her clothes and bare her head? What does it mean that having a disease leads one to dwell outside the margins of the community? Why is the person with *tzara'at* enjoined to call out to others that he is "unclean"?

Tearing one's clothing and baring one's head is a sign of mourning in the ancient world. For many, serious illness signifies a loss of some sort. It may be a loss of freedom, a loss of comfort, or a loss of security. The words of Leviticus help give the person with disease the language to express his or her illness. Rather than being proscriptive of how a person with disease should behave and be treated by others, our Torah portion is descriptive of what the experience of illness can be. When the Israelites rend their clothing, it is a sign of mourning that expresses the loss many feel when diagnosed with illness.

Likewise, dwelling outside of the camp describes the feelings of many who suffer from illness. Feelings of isolation are common when one is hospitalized or homebound for a significant period of time. Sometimes, isolation is even medically necessary to prevent the spreading of disease. As mentioned above, this feeling of isolation may occur when an individual is unable to participate in communal worship because they are physically unable to attend synagogue. People with serious illness may be unable to go to work, or participate in social functions and gatherings, or be prevented from doing volunteer service. Being "outside the camp" may thus lead to questions about one's self worth and one's relationship with God.

However, in the midst of all of this, God is concerned with the well-being of those who are ill. The Talmud (*Moed Katan*) states that the reason the person with *tzara'at* is commanded by God to call out to others, "Unclean! Unclean" is to inform members of the community of his or her anguish so that he or she will be prayed for. This interpretation recognizes the importance of the community being aware of someone's illness so that they may be able to respond in some way. For some, asking for help and letting others know that they are having a difficult time is not easy to do. Leviticus teaches us that we should, indeed, reach out when help is needed.

(over)

The Jewish community has a long tradition of practicing the act of *bikkur cholim*: visiting the sick. It is seen as one of the highest values and revered as a holy act that any person is capable of performing. The Talmud states that one who visits the sick removes 1/60 of that person's suffering! Visiting the sick breaks down the walls of isolation and lifts the person's spirit.

The description of disease in our Torah portion emphasizes the importance of communal involvement when one is ill. It recognizes that disease affects not only the body, but the spirit as well. It teaches us that we need to find the necessary language to describe the suffering and isolation that often accompany illness. And finally, we learn that the community plays an important role in countering feelings of isolation, and facilitating prayers for healing. Above all, we learn that God is intimately concerned about those who suffer from illness by addressing Moses and Aaron on how to deal with illness in the community of Israel.

May God's Presence forever guide us and encourage us to reach out to others as both recipients and bearers of hope and compassion. Through the open hearts, outstretched hands, and prayers of others, may we find comfort, strength, and companionship.

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