

Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5780

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Every year, there are bar and bat mitzvah students around the world discover they have been assigned Tazria Metzora and their hearts sink. After all, who wants to discuss strange and mysterious illnesses? Who would want to have to face Torah passages about embarrassing bodily functions? How would a teenager relate to social isolation, ostracization, and people who are ill being separated from the entire community?

This year, no rabbi is wondering how we will need to spin Tazria Metzora. In fact, this year of plague has been the closest that many of us have ever had to living through something of apparent Biblical proportions.

Throughout this week's Torah portion, we see so many similarities to what we are going through today. It would be easy to look at the events of our current time and try to perceive Divine punishment inherent in the pandemic.

When we try to assume that we know why God is punishing an individual, a specific group, or even all of humanity, it is important to remember the words of Isaiah:

(ח) כִּי לֹא מַחְשְׁבוֹתַי מַחְשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דַרְכֵיכֶם דְּרֹכַי נֹאֵם ה' (ט)
כִּי־גָבְהוּ שָׁמַיִם מֵאָרֶץ כֵּן גָּבְהוּ דַרְכֵי מִדְּרֹכֵיכֶם וּמִמְחֻשְׁבוֹתֵיכֶם:

(8) For My plans are not your plans, Nor are My ways your ways —declares the LORD. (9) But as the heavens are high above the earth, So are My ways high above your ways And My plans above your plans.

Rather, I would suggest that we look at this time as the ultimate opportunity to seek out the ultimate good in each of our lives. We take the maximum number of precautions that we can to protect our health – and the health of our neighbors. These last number of weeks, though, have reminded us of what we have control over in our lives and what we do not have control of in our lives.

The mysterious affliction that we see in the Torah is called *tzaraat* which is often translated as leprosy. This is not actually Hansen's disease, the medical name for the ailment known as leprosy. It is a spiritual affliction that is diagnosed and treated through spiritual ways not medical

ways. The tzaraat did not only affect the person, but also potentially the clothing and the home.

We now understand the fear of an affliction on our clothing and even in our homes. For those of us who are friends with doctors, nurses and other front-line workers, we know of the regimens that so many families are dealing with during this time. The workers will often come home, drop their clothing off in the laundry, leave their shoes outside, shower and change into clean clothes. So many of us are cleaning everything in our home with the appropriate percentage of alcohol, wiping down the surfaces and even our groceries.

In today's Torah portion we have a different type of house cleaning that is described. The Torah describes the possibility of this *tzaraat* infecting the home of an Israelite.

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן לֵאמֹר: כִּי תֵבְאוּ אֶל-אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר
אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לָכֶם לְאֶחְזָה וְנִתְתִּי נֹגַע צֹרְעַת בְּבַיִת אֶרֶץ אֶחְזִיתְכֶם: וּבֹא אֲשֶׁר-
לוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לְכֹהֵן לֵאמֹר כָּנָגַע נִרְאָה לִי בַבַּיִת:

The LORD spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house

in the land you possess, the owner of the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, “Something like a plague has appeared upon my house.”

This translation is actually not so accurate. The translation that most of our chumashim have is “I inflict a plague of *tzaraat*.” But the Hebrew is different: “**וַנִּתְּתִי בְּגָעַע**” **וְצָרְעַת בְּבַיִת**” I have given you the plague on the house.

This idea of God “giving” us pain is a very hard concept to absorb – so let’s reframe this. We don’t know why we receive pain in our lives. We don’t always understand the depth of pain that many need to go through. So much of this is out of our control. But what we do with it is not.

The Malbim, an acronym for **Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser**, who was a rabbi in Romania in the end of the 19th Century writes that Rabbi Yehuda in the midrash wants see the plague [of *tzaraat*] as an opportunity for the elimination of sin and iniquity.

I would hesitate to say – at least in my life – that this time of pandemic has rid my life of sin and iniquity. I still have the same shortcomings that I did before Purim. I still

struggle with the same struggles. I still make many of the same mistakes.

However, I have also seen how many people have used this difficult time to increase the good. This is *matana* the gift that God gives us during this time. It is the realization that we are not totally helpless.

We still have many ways of at our disposal to help the other. We can do this with the skills, wisdom, abilities that God already gave us before the plague. The rabbis say that God has the ability to provide the cure before the disease.

I don't know the path that will take us to healing and wholeness. However, I do know that each of us have the ability to minimize so much pain and discomfort in the other.

This Friday and Shabbat is Rosh Hodesh Iyyar. From my home to yours, I want to wish you a Shabbat Shalom and a month of healing and kindness for you and your loved ones.

