

Parsha Tazria-Metzora

Fabrangen 4/22/23

David Goldston

I've always felt sorry for the bar and bat mitzvah kids who got this portion – and I feel like I know a lot who have – and I wasn't pleased when realized I had picked it when I signed up to give this week's d'rash. But as usual, being forced to look more closely at the text had its rewards.

At first blush – maybe even more – this parsha seems almost totally alien and irrelevant to us – a mix of misguided medicine and priestly mumbo jumbo, as outdated as it gets. In the wake of COVID, maybe the discussion of quarantining began to seem more topical, but I think that actually turns out to be a misleading way to think about this portion.

I don't think it's particularly helpful to look at the parsha through a medical lens; that's not ultimately what it's about. I think one has to step back a bit from the details to see what's going on here.

Like much of the Torah, the concern here is maintaining a functioning community. The concern is entirely with the community; there's nothing in the parsha about caring for, or curing the person with the affliction. If the author of the parsha were a doctor, he'd be one who said – no matter what the illness – “Time will take care of it; call me back in seven days.” It's the community that the parsha is trying to protect.

So what is the threat to the community the parsha is interested in keeping at bay? It's not illness but rather ritual impurity. People and things that are “unclean” threaten the sanctity of the holy precincts. Maybe that's why the focus is on skin afflictions – things that can touch objects and people – and fluids; not on serious illness. Also, childbirth is treated the same way, and even ancient people did not think childbirth was a contagion.

The central concern is keeping the community whole, keeping it functioning. And the most necessary thing for that is keeping the connection to G\_d, which requires ensuring that rituals – ritual objects and places, and ritual leaders – not lose their sanctity. Just as later in the Torah, in Numbers, the community is physically laid out in a way that puts the Ark at the center; this portion puts protecting the ritual connection to G\_d at the center; it's the fundamental on which the community is built.

And the way the Torah lays out how to protect that ritual purity is actually an advance in civilization, no matter how oddly the dermatological details strike us. The Torah is not leaving enforcement to individual views or actions – not creating a situation of anarchy or vigilantism. Nor is it allowing the priests to make arbitrary decisions, which could lead to a kind of autocracy. Rather, the Torah lays out rules that would be known to everyone. Yes, the priests still have to exercise judgment, but based on criteria that are widely known. It's what today we call “transparency.”

And the system includes a clear, visible end-point when a person is no longer unclean – those rituals mark the end of the uncleanness; they are not designed to magically remove the affliction – and provision is made for the poor to participate despite their lack of means.

This all seems to me to be a relatively advanced, humane and coherent approach to controlling intangible, unintended, uncontrollable threats to the sanctity that keeps the community functioning.

I was trying to think of parallels in our own world to these kinds of concerns. One thing that came to mind was the way the flag is treated. As a symbol of nationhood and of the community as a whole, the flag is subject to rules on how it is handled, folded, flown, etc. Notably when it is mistreated, we describe it as being “desecrated.” Until court decisions in the 1960s, it was illegal to burn or deface it. The impulse behind this was not so different from what’s going on in the parsha. Most of us, I assume, back the court decisions that did away with such laws, but that’s just a way of saying that we think the First Amendment is our most sacred value.

The provision in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment forbidding those who participate in “insurrection” may be another example of an effort to protect what’s central to the community. Yes, part of what’s behind that rule is punishment for the individual and a practical fear of our system of government being undermined, but it seems to go beyond that – to a desire to keep away from the political system someone or something that would contaminate it in an intangible way.

Just as the rituals to maintain the connection between the community and G\_d were central to the Torah, the processes to maintain the connection between the polity and its officials are central to our system. The vote is the main connection for us. Not allowing prisoners to vote is again partly about punishment and fear of illegal manipulation of the vote, but perhaps it’s also about this same kind of fear about contaminating a sacred process. I wouldn’t want to overlay that analogy, but I will point out again that the Torah includes a path for the period of uncleanness to end.

So I’m interested to hear thoughts on whether this interpretation of the parsha is helpful and about other ideas on current parallels.