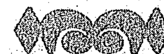
The Bedside Torah

wisdom, visions, and Dreams



Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson

Edited by Miriyam Glazer, Ph.D.

Contemporary Books

Chicago New York San Francisco Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan New Delhi San Juan Seoul Singapore Sydney Toronto

TAZRIA/Delivery

Leviticus 12:1–13:59

The next two parashiyot *detail issues of* tumah *(ritual impurity) and* tohorah *(ritual purity).*

A woman who bears a son is tamei *for seven days, and fourteen days for a daughter. The boy is to be ritually circumcised on the eighth day. There is a subsequent period of* tumah *for either boy or girl, and then the matter brings a sacrifice to restore her* tohorah.

Tzara'at *is an eruption that affects human skin (and has often been confused with leprosy). It also affects fabrics, leather, and plastered building stones. The Torah speaks of four different categories regarding* tzara'at: *(1) in humans, (2) in fabrics and leather, (3) a ritual to restore the purity of a person healed of* tzara'at, *and (4)* tzara'at *in plastered or mud-covered building stones. The role of the* kohen *is strikingly non-magical: He doesn't "cure" anyone of the illness; he merely diagnoses it and, when it is already cured, restores the person's ritual wholeness. In cases of acute* tzara'at, *the sufferer was banished from the camp for the duration of the illness, often for life.*

METZORA/The Leper

Leviticus 14:1–15:33

Metzora *continues the discussion of the ritual response to* tzara'at, *and is often read together with the preceding* parashah *during synagogue Torah-readings.*

The parashah *opens with the rites for restoring the* tohorah *of a person who suffered from acute* tzara'at. *These elaborate rituals were similar to those for a person who comes into contact with a corpse. Like the ordination of the priests, this ritual takes a full seven days plus one (marking a new creation or rebirth of the individual). Also like the ordination of priests, the person has sacrificial blood smeared on his right earlobe, right thumb, and right big toe.*

Within Eretz Yisrael, *this plague also affects homes. The home is then cleared prior to the priestly inspection. If it is indeed infected, the home is shut up for seven days. At the end of this period, the priest inspects again, and the affected stones are removed from the home (and from the town). The plaster inside the home is scraped off, and new plaster is applied. If* tzara'at *breaks out again, the home is demolished. The ritual for purging a "healed" home is almost the same as for a healed individual.*

The parashah *now moves to consider discharges from sexual organs, male or female. These discharges result from illness or infection, not from menstruation or normal seminal emissions. As with much of Leviticus, illness is subsumed under the category of* tumah *(ritual impurity), making illness a religious concern and equating healing with* tohorah *(ritual purity). Abnormal male and female discharges are both referred to by the same term:* zav. *The philosophy underlying this religious attention is expressed at the end of the* parashah: *"You shall put the Israelites on guard against their uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Tabernacle, which is among them."*

Parashat Tazria/Metzora/Delivery/The Leper
Take 1

Toward Healing

Like others in the ancient Near East, our people suffered from frequent eruptions of skin diseases, called *tzara'at*. Many of these "leprosies" were severe and in all the cultures of the ancient world they bore a severe social stigma. Countless stories in the Bible and the Talmud attest to the dreaded consequences of these diseases and the devastation they could bring in the lives of individuals, families, and communities.

According to the biblical view of how the world works, *tzara'at*—like all illness—was a divine punishment. If everything comes from the One God, then illness, too, must have its origin in divine will. The logical assumption was that people became diseased because they deserved it. The only question was which illness resulted from which deed. According to the *Midrash Va-Yikra Rabbah,* God inflicted "leprosies" as punishment for libel, bloodshed, vain oaths, sexual crimes, robbery, and the refusal to offer *tzedakah.*

It would follow that if God punishes through illness, anyone who tries to heal the sick is the equivalent of one who helps a murderer escape from prison. Logically, a physician who heals a leper or anyone else whose illness is understood to come from God is violating God's plan, rebelling against the way God rules the universe.

Logical, yes. But also cruel. Such a viewpoint requires blaming an individual for being sick—as if we could "earn" cancer or heart disease, as if the wrong thoughts are enough to merit pain and death. Such a viewpoint treats a victim like a criminal, ultimately withholding sympathy, company, or care.

Judaism has always valued the mind. "Talmudic" is often a synonym for "logical" and has been throughout the ages. Yet logic was not permitted to restrain compassion. According to rabbinic tradition, the overriding obligation of humanity is to become God's partner in creation—actively applying our learning and our skill to intervening and improving on the world as we find it.

Where Jews find illness, they are commanded to heal.

Where Jews find hunger, they are commanded to feed.

Where Jews find suffering, they are commanded to empathize with the sufferer and to alleviate the pain.

According to *Midrash Temurah,* the psalmist compares people to grass because "just as the tree, if not weeded, fertilized, and trimmed, will not grow and bring forth its fruits, so with the human body. The fertilizer is the medicine and the means of healing, and the tiller of the earth is the physician."

The Talmud understands the biblical injunction "not to stand (idly) by the blood of your brother" as mandating medical care. The Ramban sees that obligation in the verse "Let your brother live with you" and in "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18).

Judaism's rejection of the "logical" position reflects its notion of how God and people are to relate. Rather than viewing God as an unchanging monarch and humanity as the passive recipient of whatever happens, the Jewish view of God and people is like that of mutual lovers. The lovers yearn for and work on a deepened relationship. In caring for one another, we express our love, both of God and of God's creatures.

Parashat Tazria/Metzora/Delivery/The Leper
Take 2

Of Leprosy and Lips

With today's Torah portion, we learn a great deal about the ritual function of the *kohanim* in helping people cope with infectious illness. *Tzara'at,* leprosy, becomes the focus of sustained attention, presumably because it was a common one in the ancient Near East.

Basing their ideas on a story found in the Book of Numbers, the rabbis of the *Midrash* viewed leprosy as an external sign of internal decay. Illness became a symbol for corruption, immorality, and callousness. This link between illness and a lapse of ethics arises from the story of Miriam's criticism of Moses's wife for being a Cushite. Clearly, Miriam uses her sister-in-law's ethnicity as a pretext for attacking her brother.

In a condemnation that neatly parallels Miriam's criticism that Moses's wife is too black, Miriam is stricken with an illness that leaves her skin a flaky white. Since her *tzara'at* resulted from her critical words, the rabbis naturally associated the two. Thus, the biblical laws on

infectious disease became an extended metaphor for self-centeredness, critical or slanderous speech, and hateful deeds.

Midrash Va-Yikra understands the law of leprosy as an allusion to seven traits the Lord hates:

> haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked thoughts, feet that run eagerly toward evil, a false witness, and one who sows discord among people.

How many of these violations pertain to an irresponsible use of language! Speaking and thinking ill of another person, construing their actions in the worst possible way, gossiping, and spreading rumors that harm the reputation of another person—these activities are so familiar to us that they may scarcely attract our notice at all. Yet they strike at the core of the kind of world Judaism is trying to establish. They provoke a cynical disregard of human decency; they cultivate our suspicion of each other and our anxiety that others are speaking ill of us behind our backs just as we are of them. In Hebrew, such speech is called *l'shon ha-ra* (literally, "an evil tongue").

L'shon ha-ra is the practice of speaking *about* other people negatively rather than speaking to them. It involves transforming a living, complex human being into a caricature—an object of evil, sloth, or competition. In speaking ill of others, we participate in their dehumanization, initiating a process the end of which is uncontainable. In the words of the rabbis, "A loose tongue is like an arrow. Once it is shot, there is no holding it back."

The *Midrash* notes that five times, the word *torah,* teaching, is used to refer to *tzara'at.* From this superfluous repetition, the sages derive that "one who utters evil reports is considered in violation of the entire five books of the Torah."

A marvelous tale is told of a wandering merchant who came into a town square, offering to sell the elixir of life. Large crowds surrounded him, each person eager to purchase eternal youth. When pressed, the merchant would bring out the Book of Psalms, and read them the verse "Who desires life? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from guile."

We all need to commit ourselves to a language of responsibility, kindness, and compassion. Rather than spreading rumors to make others

look bad, we need to use our empathic imaginations to understand why someone might have acted in a disappointing way. Rather than speaking *about* other people behind their backs, we need to speak *to* them and *with* them, creating a shared community together.

A trusting community rooted in goodwill and integrity is what establishing "God's rule on earth" actually means.

Parashat Tazria/Metzora/Delivery/The Leper
Take 3

All That You Can Be

Today's Torah portion opens with the ritual implications of childbirth: "When a woman gives birth . . . " The miracle of birth is itself a significant religious event, often the closest a person comes to feeling God's presence in an immediate and overwhelming way.

Posed on the border between life and death, divine and human, the miracle of birth make us question the basic assumptions of what it means to be human. What does it mean to be a man or a woman?

In the world of scholarship, a debate rages over whether the emotional and temperamental differences between men and women are culturally induced, the result of years of social conditioning, or instead the natural expression of innate distinctions. Persuasive scholars support opposite positions with passion and with extensive documentation and eloquence.

Some insist than men and women are different at core; that, due to hormonal and biological traits, women are more gentle, caring, nurturing, and private, whereas men are naturally aggressive, competitive, and playful. Women automatically translate feelings into words, and rely on lengthy discussions of feelings, moods, and perceptions to cultivate a sense of intimacy and closeness. Men, on the contrary, don't discuss their feelings, preferring instead to show feelings through deeds and moods. Women get together to talk; men gather together to play.

While not denying the reality of many of these differences, those who argue in favor of the impact of society on behavior insist that we don't really know what differences are natural because all children are

gender expectations. Even if gender differences are innate, we cannot possibly identify what *is* innate because the social construction of gender begins at such an early age.

Jewish tradition provides an interesting meditation on this issue. Looking at the verse on childbirth, *Midrash Va-Yikra Rabbah* records the thought of Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman, "when the Holy Blessing One created the first human, God created a hermaphrodite, fully male and female."

Rabbi Levi expands on his colleague's insight; "When the *adam,* the first person, was created, God made *adam* with two body-fronts, and then sawed the creature in two, so that two bodies resulted, one for the male and one for the female."

According to this provocative *midrash,* the original state of the human being was both male and female, fully at home as both masculine and feminine. What a remarkable idea! In the beginning not only of the world, but also at the beginning of every human life we are potentially both male and female. Only in the course of our development, as a species and as a fetus, do we gradually assume the distinct and exclusive identification with a particular gender. In fact, the process of gender identification continues throughout one's lifetime, as the notions of what is "male" and what is "female" shift and alter across the years.

But this *midrash* also hints at something more profound than simply recapitulating our origins. It alludes to the notion that in our ideal state all human beings are not merely one gender or the other, but in important ways are still both. We have room to express the fullest range of human responses and emotions, both the nurturing which we define as "feminine" and the drive we consider "masculine"; both the reliance on words to communicate feelings, and the ability to savor silence in a loved one's company.

By adhering rigidly to either a masculine or a feminine self-definition, we chop ourselves in half—denying a significant part of our own longings, development, and possibilities.

Rather than struggling to reduce our souls to the severed half which remains, we might direct our energy, as Judaism does in so many other areas, to hastening the advent of the messianic utopia. In the realm of social justice, that means restoring the primal harmony symbolized by the Garden of Eden. In the depths of personal expression and gender identity, it means reclaiming our severed halves—learning from the men and women with whom we share our lives how to allow our souls to blossom and be infused by the full range of human potential.

AHAREI MOT/After the Death

Leviticus 16:1–18:30

Picking up the narrative after the death of Aaron's sons Nadav and Avihu, who had offered alien fire and died in the process, God tells Moses to tell Aaron that he and his sons are to enter the shrine only when performing the sacrifices in a fashion commanded by God.

The rituals for Yom Ha-Kippur *(the Day of Atonement) receive the attention of chapter 16. The purpose of these rituals is to remove the* tumah *of the Israelites, the priests, and the altar, transferring them onto the goat of Azazel (the scapegoat), who is then driven into the wilderness. The biblical purpose of the Day of Atonement is to purify the sanctuary, allowing God to dwell in the midst of the Jewish People and maintaining the efficacy of the Temple ritual. Later Jewish thought shifts the focus from restoring the sanctuary to atoning for the people. This shift is reflected in the Torah in the words, "On this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins; you shall be clean before the Lord."*

The unit from Leviticus 17:26 is known as the Holiness Code because its dominant theme is the holiness of the people Israel. The constant refrain "You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy" becomes the vocation of each individual and of the entire Israelite people. As a result, the laws of this section pertain to all Israel, not just to Moses or the priesthood. Like the two other great biblical collections of laws (the Book of the Covenant—Exodus 20:19–23:33, and the Book of Deuteronomy) it begins with a prologue that outlines the proper mode of worship and concludes with an epilogue consisting of blessings and curses.

After the prologue, the Holiness Code moves on to the commandments pertaining to forbidden sexual practices, which are designated as to'evah *(abominations) inconsistent with priestly purity. The overarching principle of this section (and the following sections) is God's injunction: "My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws: I am the Lord your God. You shall keep My laws and rules, by the pursuit of which a person shall live: I am the Lord."*