

Tazria Metzora Selected Shorts
Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 17, 2021 5 Iyyar 5781

ויקרא י"ב:ג'
(ג) וביום השמיני ימול בשר ערלתו:

Leviticus 12:3

(3) On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.— Let's remind ourselves where we are in Leviticus. We've had a whole section on the menu of sacrifices effectively answering the question of how Israel is to approach God in the sanctuary. This was followed by the inauguration ceremonies for the sanctuary, the consecration of the kohanim and the initiation of the altar, culminating in the catastrophic death of Aaron's sons. The Torah pivoted from these events to the dietary laws, and now we are continuing with themes related to the body. The first theme in this parasha deals with birth and the ensuing rituals both for the mother and, in this case, the male child. Circumcision, already commanded to Abraham, is commanded here in this context, although, as Jacob Milgrom points out, its mention here is parenthetical to the main story, which is the mother and her post-partum purificatory rituals. Despite the wide practice of circumcision in antiquity among Israel's neighbors, infant circumcision was unique, retaining its symbolic power to this day.

ויקרא י"ג:ב'
(ב) אדם כי יוהי בעור-בשרו שאת או-ספחת או בהרת והיה בעור-בשרו לנגע צרעת והוא אל-אחרו הפתו או אל-אחד מבניו הפתים:

Leviticus 13:2

(2) When a person has on the skin of his body a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on the skin of his body, it shall be reported to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons, the priests. We know skin as the largest organ of the body. Bill Bryson in his book, *The Body*, notes that skin color is found in one millimeter of skin's most outer layer. "That's all that race is - a sliver of epidermis... Skin color is just a body's reaction to sunlight. 'Biologically, there is actually no such thing as race — nothing in terms of skin color, facial features, hair type...that is a defining quality among peoples,' said anthropology professor Nina Jablonski." The Bible has no concept of race. Skin is the boundary of the body to the world and its significance was

probably very easy to grasp: if you are exhibiting any dermatological problems, your life may be in danger, moreover, you might spread the affliction to others. Hence the concern. Not to mention, being afflicted with a skin disease of this sort meant inaccessibility to the sacred areas.

ויקרא י"ג:ג'
(ג) וראה הפתו את-הנגע בעור-הבשר ושלער בנגע הפדו לכו ומראה הנגע עמק מעור בשרו נגע צרעת הוא וראהו הפתו וטמא אתו:

Leviticus 13:3

(3) The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of his body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest sees it, he shall pronounce him unclean. Exactly how kohanim attained expertise in this area is a good question, but reading closely we see that part of the process here was to name the affliction הוא צרעת and to issue a pronouncement of "unclean" on the afflicted individual. This pronouncement in its narrowest understanding meant inaccessibility to the sacred areas. What is interesting here is that there is a story. A sufferer had to notice the malady; the malady required him or her to make contact not with charlatans, witches, warlocks, soothsayers or shamans, not with magical potions or incantations, but with the central religious authority. Skin sickness, which is disfiguring, debilitating, and demoralizing – and also throws your life into chaos – compels the sufferer to make contact with the most ordering place in the nation, and the people entrusted with maintaining that order. A note on leprosy: Most scholars now believe that the diseases referenced here are not leprosy because the symptomology is different and the research has shown that it was not prevalent in the ancient Near East at that time. The late Dr. Eva Stahl z'l, offered that these skin diseases were akin to eczema, psoriasis and dermatitis, but it's quite possible that they were something else entirely.

ויקרא י"ג:ד'
(ד) ואם-בהרת לבנה הוא בעור בשרו ועמק אי-מראהו מן העור ושלערה לא-הפדו לבו והסגיר הפתו את-הנגע שבצעת ימים:

Leviticus 13:4

(4) But if it is a white discoloration on the skin of his body which does not appear to be deeper than the skin and the hair in it has not turned white, the priest shall isolate the affected person for seven days. Why the isolation? And why seven days? The simplest answer is the fear of contagion. Seven days, while symbolic as a unit of "passage time" as we have seen in so many other areas, could have also been the time for the disease to run its course.

ויקרא י"ג:מ"ו
(מו) כְּלִימֵי אֲשֶׁר הִגַּע בּוֹ יִטְמָא טְמֵא הוּא כְּבֵד יֵשֵׁב מִחֹמַי
לְמַחֲנֵה מוֹשְׁבֹו: (ס)

Leviticus 13:46

(46) 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. The afflicted person has to endure a physical quarantine which is disruptive to every aspect of his life. To everyone who has had to endure a quarantine over the course of this pandemic, we can easily identify with the biblical experience. Chief among the complaints of people in quarantine is the experience of social isolation. While the afflicted individual understands the necessity of isolation and is compliant, the residue of social, psychological, and spiritual malaise lingered.

ויקרא י"ד:ב-ג
(ב) זֹאת תְּהִיָה תוֹרַת הַמְצֻלָּע בַּיּוֹם טְהַרְתּוּ וְהוּבֵא אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן:
(ג) וַיֵּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן אֶל־מִחֹמַי לְמַחֲנֵה וּרְאֵה הַכֹּהֵן וְהִגִּיה נִרְפָּא גִגַע־
הַצֹּרֵעַת מִן־הַצָּרוּעַ:

Leviticus 14:2-3

(2) This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he is to be cleansed. When it has been reported to the priest, (3) the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection...The individual endures a total period of fourteen days isolation (what a coincidence!) following which a new encounter with a kohen occurs. Interesting that the individual "is reported to" the kohen and that the kohen also has to "go outside the camp," to see him. Boundaries and traversing boundaries are significant. For the kohen to leave the holy area to the non-holy area where the afflicted person is residing would have entailed changes in dress and the need for some kind of re-entry ritual for him as well.

ויקרא י"ד:כ"ה
(כה) וְשָׁחַט אֶת־כֶּבֶשׂ הָאֵשֶׁם וְלָקַח הַכֹּהֵן מִזֶּם הָאֵשֶׁם וְנָתַן עָלָי

תְּנוּחַ אֲזוּר־הַמִּשְׁטָהר הַיְמָנִית וְעַל־בִּהּוֹ יָדוֹ הַיְמָנִית וְעַל־כִּהּוֹ רִגְלוֹ
הַיְמָנִית:

Leviticus 14:25

(25) When the lamb of guilt offering has been slaughtered, the priest shall take some of the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the ridge of the right ear of the one being cleansed, on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot. The afflicted individual has been apart from the community and is now re-entering it. This disorientation requires some kind of re-entry ritual. Here, the ritual involves sacrifice and also the daubing of blood on the right earlobe, the right thumb, and the right big toe. There are various conjectures as to the meaning of this, one which posits that this individual is being "indexed" akin to the way the altar is "indexed" at sacrifices, namely, blood from the sacrifice is placed on the corners of the altar. Given that a human being doesn't possess "corners", the earlobe, thumb and big toe on the right side will have to suffice. What is also interesting is that this is the same procedure that Aaron and his sons undergo when they are consecrated into the priesthood. A plain reading of this leads to the following conclusion: the period of isolation and debilitation, a period of disorder and chaos, is rectified by a ritual of consecration and order. Far from being an outcast, the individual is now re-admitted to the full membership in "the kingdom of priests and the holy nation." The afflicted individual goes from beyond the boundary of the people to the very limit of holiness permissible to the ordinary Israelite. That's a fascinating story. Re-entry rituals are crucial. Anyone who has sat shiva understands this intuitively, that when the period is complete, you "re-enter" society. Our rituals for this experience are limited, but they are effective in their own way. Usually, they involve the last visit – a rabbi, cantor, or other communal individual – the recitation of a particular piece of text formally terminating the shiva, and then exiting the shiva house for a walk around the block or some equivalent. As people make their way back into shul after the pandemic, we need to create a vocabulary of rituals for them which would include perhaps, an aliya to the Torah, and other prayers and blessings. In the absence of sacrificial worship, ritual daubing and the like, we will need to deploy some extra creativity! Shabbat Shalom!