

Metzora - The Rebirth and Restoration of the Afflicted Individual

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In last week's parasha, we saw that a person afflicted with *tzara'at-scale disease*, the *metzora*, was like a living corpse. Thus, the rituals of the *metzora* were primarily mourning rituals in which the *metzora* lives alone outside the camp and mourns for himself. In this week's parasha, the *metzora* returns to society. It starts out as follows:

ויַדְבַּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. זֹאת תְּהִיָּה תוֹרַת הַמִּצְרָע [regarding] the metzora
God spoke to Moshe, saying: This is to be the torah-instruction [regarding] the metzora

תּוֹרָה. Before examining the rituals of return, let us first focus on the term **תּוֹרַת הַמִּצְרָע** *the instruction of the metzora*. **תּוֹרָה** means many things, including: the Five Books of Moses, the scroll in the Ark, and anything and everything that is in any way connected to the written Torah, the Tanakh, and the entire corpus of Judaism down to our day (Torah with 'T') The narrowest meaning of **תּוֹרָה** is



what we have here: a specific instruction, law or ritual (torah with a 't'). Here we are dealing with the **torah**, i.e. the rituals and instructions relating to the *metzora*, but we should point out that the Book of Leviticus has **ten** such **torot** - **ten sets of ritual instructions**. This is the opinion of R. David Tzvi Hoffmann (1843-1921 Germany), who writes in his commentary on Leviticus 15:32-33:

נִדְמָה, שְׁבִסְפָר וַיִּקְרָא הַכֹּהֵן בְּמִכְנֹס רִמָּה וְהָיָה חָמֵשׁ תּוֹרוֹת, וְהָיוּ חָמֵשׁ תּוֹרוֹת הַקְּרָבָנוֹת וְחָמֵשׁ תּוֹרוֹת טְהוֹרָה.
It appears that in the book of Vayikra, there are intentionally included ten torot, to wit: five torot relating to sacrifices and five torot of impurity.

In the words of Jacob Milgram, this is a **decatalogue of ritual life**. This is fascinating because when Israel stood at Mount Sinai, they received a **decatalogue of covenantal life**, that is, essential laws upon which their society, would be based.

וַיֵּרָא הַכֹּהֵן וְהָיָה נִרְפָּא נִנְע הַצְרָעַת מִן הַצְרוּעַ.
The Kohen examines And here, the affliction of tzara'at has been healed from the tzaru'a.

This is a very helpful way of understanding two different voices in the Torah that are in dialogue and in tension with one another. The **Ten Commandments of Sinai** establish the **moral foundation** of Israel. The **Ten Torot of Leviticus** establish the **ritual foundation** of Israel. Both answer fundamentally different questions. The Ten Commandments answer the question: *what are my moral responsibilities to God and to my society?* The Ten Torot answer the question: *how do I behave in my relationship with God and maintain God's presence among my people so that my people will survive?* We typically understand the first five

commandments as being **בֵּין אָדָם לַמָּקוֹם-between human beings and God**, while the second five are **בֵּין אָדָם לְחֶבְרוֹ-between human beings and each other**. The ten **Torot of Vayikra**, on the other hand, consist of five **תּוֹרוֹת קְרָבָנוֹת-torot of sacrifice** as well as five **תּוֹרוֹת טְהוֹרָה-torot of purification**. And they are as follows:

תּוֹרַת טְהוֹרָה	תּוֹרַת הַקְּרָבָנוֹת	5 Torot of Sacrifice	5 Torot of Purification
תּוֹרַת הַחֵיִיּוֹת הַטְּהוֹרוֹת וְהַטְּמְאוֹת. (י"א:מז-מז).	תּוֹרַת הָעֹלָה (ו:ב)	The Olah Burnt Offering (6:2)	Pure and Impure Animals (11:46-47)
תּוֹרַת הַיֹּלְדֵת. (יב:ז).	תּוֹרַת הַמִּנְחָה (ז:ז)	The Minha Cereal Offering (6:7)	Paturient Woman (12:7)
תּוֹרַת הַצְרָעַת. (יג:נט, יד:נד-נד).	תּוֹרַת הַחֹטָאת (יח:ז)	The Hatat Purification Offering (6:18)	Tzara'at Scale Disease (13:59, 14:54-57)
תּוֹרַת טְהוֹרַת הַמִּצְרָע. (יד:ב-לב).	תּוֹרַת הָאָשָׁם (ט:א)	The Asham Reparation Offering (7:1)	Purification from Scale Disease (14:2-32)
תּוֹרַת זִיבַת אֲבָרֵי הַמִּינִן. (טו:לב).	תּוֹרַת זָבַח הַשְּׁלָמִים (ט"א:ז)	The Zevah Hashlamim Well-being Offering (7:11)	Genital Discharges (15:32)

Back to the *metzora*. What happens to him?

בְּיוֹם טְהוֹרָתוֹ וְהוּבָא אֶל הַכֹּהֵן.
On the day of his purification, he is to be brought to the Kohen.

On the day that his infirmity is over, he makes a ritual transition from the state of being a **מִצְרָע-metzora-one afflicted by scale disease** to a **מִטְהַר-mitaher-one who will be purified**. His ritual transition is also a spatial transition: he moves from outside the camp to inside the camp. Standing at the boundary is the Kohen, to whom he is brought, in order to perform the ritual of this transition.

וַיֵּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן אֶל מַחוּצֵי לַמַּחֲנֶה.
The Kohen exits and goes outside the camp

The Kohen crosses the boundary and meets the *metzora* where he is. He is collecting him and readmitting him. The rabbis interpreted this as welcoming. Verifying that the *metzora* has been healed, the Kohen performs a series of rituals to enable him to come back into the camp:

Two birds are taken.	These birds are wild, not domesticated. They don't have a homing sense related to the camp. One bird is slaughtered.
The live bird is dipped.	Cedar wood, crimson yarn and the remaining live bird are dipped into an earthen vessel containing a mixture of spring water and the blood of a slain bird.



The person is sprinkled.	The cured person is sprinkled with the blood-water mixture seven times, after which the live bird is set free.
Laundry, shaving and bathing.	The healed person is admitted into the camp (or city) after he launders his clothes, shaves all his hair and bathes, but he is not yet allowed to enter his residence (and resume his normal marital life, Rashi).
Residence Re-entry.	He is permitted to return to his domicile on the seventh day after shaving, laundering, and bathing again. On the eighth day he enters the sanctuary with a gift of oil, semolina flour, and sheep for various sacrifices. (based on Jacob Milgram, <i>Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics.</i>)

The rabbis ask: Why is one bird slaughtered and the other let go? Here is one opinion:

לומר לה כשם שאי אפשר לשחוט להזר כך אי אפשר לנגעים להזר. Vayikra Rabbah 16:9	To tell you that just as it is impossible for the slaughtered one to return, so it is impossible for the disease to return.
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In other words, the act of slaughter is so decisive, it is a clear marker that what has taken place is over, and that this individual will never experience it again. A rather definitive and hopeful perspective. But here is another opinion:

אלא אם עשה תשובה, אין הצרעת חוזר עליו. Tanh. Metzora 3:1	(To indicate) that if he did Teshuva, the scale disease will not come back.
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In other words, the release of the bird always presents the possibility, despite its wildness, that it could return, with the disease. The only thing preventing that is the behavior and disposition of the individual. If he does not change his ways it will come back. But if he does, through Teshuva, it won't.



From an anthropological perspective, it's more likely that by slaughtering the first bird, the Kohen is symbolically "transferring" the person's impurity to the blood. When he mixes the blood with "living water" he produces a sufficient quantity of liquid to coat the other bird. Then, after dipping, he sends it off to the wild, where it transports the impurity and gets eaten by predators. Thus, the impurity vanishes to where it will pose no danger and the camp is saved. Admittedly, this is a very strange ritual. Scholars believe that it is a vestige of pre-biblical Israel, and that, because it was so captivating, it was preserved, albeit in a form that stripped it of any magic or paganism. Rituals like this from antiquity shouldn't surprise us. In fact, similar rituals exist today in contemporary culture because they respond to an array of deep emotions. Take "balloon releases." This ritual has become common over the last several decades at funeral or memorial services. The balloon represents the soul of the departed and is "sent off"

to heaven, (to the consternation of environmentalists). Dove releases are not uncommon either, at Christian funerals or weddings (check them out on YouTube). In Judaism we have some symbolic rituals of "discarding" or "letting go." **Tashlikh**: throwing bread into a body of water at the start of a new year, symbolizes the casting away of sins. **Kapparot**: the practice of holding a live chicken and reciting penitential prayers, is still performed in some communities prior to Yom Kippur. It also symbolizes the transfer of sins. **Biur Hametz**: the discarding and burning of hametz prior to Passover (**remember to do it this Monday, before 11:36 a.m.**). To some, the burning of hametz is a ritual of purging ourselves of arrogance the spoiled parts of our characters. Each one of these rituals has a power of its own and is often quite moving. After the bird ritual, the **mitaher** crosses the boundary and re-enters the camp, but he has to experience another transition ritual on the first and the seventh days of his re-entry. He has to shave his skin and bathe his body. What is this about? Yonatan Grossman explains:

אנו מרגלים בטבילה, אולם מדוע חייב המצרע לגלח את כל שעריו? ככל הנראה, זהו בסוי של לדה מהדשת; של אדם הפורץ מהדש לאוויר העולם ומבקש שוב לחיות. היציאה ממי הטבילה ללא שצרה אחת על גופו מזכירה מאוד לדה של תינוק... אכן יש לראות את המצרע שהטהר כנולד מחדש, בבחינת תחיית המתים.	We are quite accustomed to immersion (or bathing), but why does the afflicted individual have to shave off all his hair? Evidently, this is an expression of re-birth. The person is bursting forth anew to the air of the world and desires to live again. Leaving the waters of immersion without a single hair on his body, reminds us very much of the birth of an infant. Thus, we should see the <i>metzora</i> who is being purified here as a new-born baby, along the lines of the resurrection of the dead.
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These rituals then are nothing short of a symbolic rebirth of the individual; renewal of relationships; rehabilitation and reintegration. The **Torah of the Metzora** like all the ritual **torot** of Leviticus reveals a story about an individual's need to restore his place in the community and preserve God's presence. He has had this brush with death because of a transgression against the community. Afflicted with scale-disease, he has been a living corpse. No-one else can mourn for him, except he himself. When he heals, he goes through different stages of restoration, crossing many boundaries. His impurity cast to the wild, he now returns to the camp. He shaves, and renders his skin soft and fresh, like a newborn. And when he immerses in living water, he re-enacts his own birth. The **Torah of the Metzora** is thus a story about death and rebirth; like all great stories, it is a story about hope, something that we all need, as we turn to Passover this year, with Israel in our hearts. **Shabbat Shalom!**

Today is Day 197. We pray for the return of the hostages. May God watch over them and may they be freed now! May God shield and protect Israel!