

Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Torah Text: Exodus 12:35-36

וְהִצָּרִיעַ אֲשֶׁר-בּוֹ הַנִּגַּע בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרָמִים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ וְעַל-שָׂפָם יַעֲטֶה
וְטָמֵא | טָמֵא יִקְרָא: כָּל-יְמֵי אֲשֶׁר הַנִּגַּע בּוֹ יִטָּמֵא טָמֵא הוּא בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה
מוֹשְׁבּוֹ:

As for the person with a leprous affection: his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and his upper lip shall be covered over; and they shall call out, “Impure! Impure!” He shall be impure as long as the disease is present. Being impure, he shall dwell alone in a dwelling outside the camp.

Guiding Question:

Who gets sent outside of the camp and how do they return?

Rabbi Yose ben Halafta

[2nd Century, Usha]

Why is the metzora different from other impure persons, so that he must dwell alone? Because he separated between husband and wife, between a person and their fellow through malicious speech; therefore, the Torah says: “He shall dwell alone.”

Rashi

[1040-1105, France]

“He shall dwell alone” – meaning, separated from other impure persons. Since he caused separation through his speech, he too shall be separated.

Nachmandies

[1194-1270, Spain]

This affliction is not natural at all... rather, it is a sign and wonder in Israel, to warn them against evil speech... for when one speaks evil, the walls of his house are first afflicted... and if he persists, his garments... and if he persists, his body.

Maimonides

[1138-1204, Egypt]

The afflictions of tzara'at are a sign and a wonder to caution against slander, for one who speaks slander is separated from society until he reflects and returns.

Question:

Is the metzora sent out in order to protect the community, to punish the individual, or to create space for reflection? What difference does that distinction make?

Lamentations 3:28-29

[6th C, BCE]

Let him sit alone and be silent. Let him put his mouth to the dust—there may yet be hope.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

[1903-1993, United States]

Loneliness is not simply a physical condition; it is an existential state in which one feels excluded from the community of man.

Erving Goffman

[1922-1982, United States]

Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural. The stigmatized individual is reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.

Susan Sontag

[1933-2004, United States]

Illness is the night-side of life, but the metaphors surrounding illness often impose meanings that isolate and stigmatize.

Question:

At what point does a system meant to manage danger become a system that produces stigma? How would we know the difference?

Leviticus 14:2

זֹאת תְּהִי־הַתּוֹרַת הַמְצַרֵּעַ בְּיוֹם טְהָרָתוֹ וְהוּבֵא אֶל-הַכֹּהֵן:

This shall be the ritual for the leper at the time of being purified when it has been reported to the priest.

Sforno

[1475-1549, Italy]

The purification comes only when he desires to be purified... when he turns his heart toward repair.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

[1948-2020, United Kingdom]

The cure for lashon hara is not silence but reconnection; the restoration of relationships that have been broken.

Aviva Zornberg

[1944- , Israel]

The metzora returns, but not as the same person. The rituals mark a passage through exile and back again, but something of the outside remains within.

Bryan Stevenson

[1959- , United States]

Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done.

Question

What does a community owe someone who has been sent outside? Is return a right, a privilege, or something that must be earned?