

Skin rashes, Eruptions and molds, oh my!  
 Drash by Davi Cheng  
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 Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles  
 Parashat Tazria/Mezora  
 Lev. 12:1-15:33

I must have been no older than five. It was a very hot and sticky summer night in Hong Kong. The humid air was thick and still. I remember lying in bed drenched in sweat, running a high fever; I was also covered from head to toes with a bad case of Chicken-pox. However, what I remember was not how miserable I felt... what I remember was my grandmother (may her memory be a blessing), sitting there at the edge of the bed fanning me with her big black fan that she carried with her at all times, a fan made out of real bird-feathers. With her soothing voice, she gently reminded me not to scratch those itchy spots because it would leave terrible dents and scars. She sat there and fanned and fanned until I finally fell asleep. I still remember the comfort she gave me. It still gives me that warm fuzzy feeling.

Back in January, when Cara our ritual chair asked me if I would lead services tonight, I said, "Sure," thinking to myself that it is three months away and I have plenty of time to prepare. Well, if I knew back then what this week's Torah portion is about, I probably would have said "no".

This week we read the double portions in Leviticus that deal with the laws of purity and impurity; things like...bodily fluids and discharges, skin rashes and molds. It was doubly difficult to read. I couldn't read it without making faces and saying, "Ewwww!" So — what am I going to talk about in my drash? (I did notice though, that the word 'drash' kind of rhymes with the word 'rash.' How exciting is that!).

In this portion, listed in detail are the descriptions of the different types of skin rashes and eruptions, and instructions for the priests, so that they would know what to do when someone in the community breaks out into rashes. The person who has an outbreak of shiny spots on his or her skin was to be brought before the priest, the priest was to examine this person's skin and decide whether he or she was 'Tamei'— [a word that we struggle to understand, it is usually translated as 'unclean', or 'impure', but the word really does not have the same meanings as how we define unclean or impure today]. When the priest declared the person 'Tamei', then the person was to be isolated from the community for seven days; the priest was to check on this person's skin condition every seven days to see if the person could be declared 'clean' or 'pure' again so that he or she could return to the community. The Torah went on to give explicit visual aids of the rashes: shiny spots with hair turned white, or yellow hair that has sprouted from the spot, whether the shiny-spot was yellowish and below the skin, or reddish but swollen above of the skin...an on, and on... Are we itching yet?

I am. I have a lot of allergies, sometimes it comes in the form of asthma, and sometimes I just break out into rashes. I know how unpleasant and scary it is to get them; I also know how scary it is for others when they see me covered in bumps and blisters and run the other way. Throughout our history, there has always been a group or groups of people we deemed 'unclean' or 'impure' for one reason or another — one thing that came to mind right away for me when I was reading this portion was the height of the AIDs epidemic — when people with HIV or AIDs were isolated and shunned, some were even cut off from their own families and communities. But fortunately for us, a place called BCC started a Jewish response to AIDs - 'Nechama' (Hebrew word meaning comfort), to reach out to those who were stricken. And fortunately for us, BCC has been blessed with loving and caring

clergy who regularly reach out to comfort those who are in need. And fortunately for us, BCC is a community filled with warm and caring individuals that would not hesitate to reach out if someone needed a hand.

I know because both Bracha and I have been, (and still are!) at the receiving end, and benefit from the comfort and warmth our clergy and members so generously offered us. The memories are not so different from the comfort I received from my grandmother, that warm fuzzy feeling. Roughly eight or nine years ago, Bracha and I hit a patch of rough water, Bracha had fallen ill and was diagnosed with CFIDS (Chronic Fatigue Immune Deficiency Syndrome). She was in and out of hospitals, and I was thrust into the role of care-taker and supporter of our household. We were living in Claremont at the time and were new members of BCC; but that didn't stop the BCC community from rallying behind us, offering us prayers, love, support, and comfort. We were so touched and impressed that we eventually sold our house in Claremont, and moved to Los Angeles so that we could dwell in the midst of this caring community. We can both attest to the significance and importance of belonging to a community such as BCC, how this connection and support helped with our own well-beings and our abilities to cope with life's difficulties.

In the Torah portion, the priests checked the status of the person with the skin rash every 7 days. When the person healed and returned to the community, an offering, a sacrifice, is made on behalf of the individual to thank God. I think that it is quite remarkable how, during the days of the Torah, without the knowledge we have now on bacterium and infections, the Israelites coped and dealt with these issues, ensuring the well being of each individual and the community. Now we have physicians and modern medicines, we no longer practice these priestly laws of purity and impurity; but that doesn't mean that we don't have people who are home bound and cut-off from our community. We still have members who are stricken with illness and feel isolated from the rest of us.

So how do we as a community deal with these issues now? We don't have priests anymore to check on people every 7 days... Ah - but now we have telephones which the priests didn't have back then. So let me tell you a little bit about this thing Bracha, my love, started. Wanting to give back what she has received from our caring community, Bracha, in conjunction with the Hesed (Love and caring) committee of BCC, started a Telephone Shabbat Minyan, and a Telephone Torah Study several months ago, to offer a way for people to connect. The Telephone Torah Study takes place on Thursday from 4 to 5 pm every week, and starting this month onward, the Telephone Shabbat Minyan will take place on the first Friday of each month, and will be held here at BCC at 6:30 pm in the front room (the green-room) so that people coming to Shabbat services can come a bit early and participate. The Telephone Minyan and Telephone Torah Study are not just for people who are ill; anyone who wants to join can do so. Their purpose is to provide comfort and connection. Every seven days, we can now check in and give comfort to those who need it; and for those who for whatever reasons are not able to travel to BCC to be with their community on Shabbat, there is now a way for them to connect at least once a month.

Before I end my drash, since I'm on the topic of giving comfort, I would like to acknowledge and give a special tribute to Fran for your tireless work in the Hesed committee. Fran, you are a role model and serve as a mentor for all of us in giving comfort to those who are in need. Thank you for showering us with music of comfort, and teaching us to reach out to others. During services, when you sing the prayer consoling the mourners, your voice embraces us. And when you sing the Hashkivenu, your voice, like my grandmother's fan, spreads over us a canopy of peace, and the warmth of your heart envelopes us.

Tonight, Bracha and I want to publicly thank our clergy, Fran and Lisa, our friends, and the BCC

community for giving us the precious gifts of love, care, comfort and support when we were and are in need of them. And I want to invite all of you to consider coming and participating in the Telephone Shabbat Minyan next month. Be grateful that we can be physically here with community each week, and know that at least once a month, we can make a difference to someone by just being a voice on the phone; we can offer the gift of comfort and support, bringing Shabbat, and our loving-caring community into their homes.

Gei Gezunt! And Shabbat Shalom