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Parshat Tazria-Metzora

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“Tazria, might be the grossest, weirdest parashah in the whole Torah,” says Jennifer Traig, a contributor to one of my favorite websites, G-dcast.com. “Universally dreaded by B’nei Mitzvah kids; it’s full of boils, fungal infections, rashes and sore sprouting hair.” And, this week we get a double portion! The second, Metzora, doesn’t disappoint on the ooh scale either. It continues on with these yucky topics.

It reminded me of when I was in my thirties and flew up to San Francisco and celebrated the secular New Year with a bunch of friends and my beloved Davi, who had not yet relocated to Southern California where I was living. During dinner I mentioned I felt a little queasy. As the clock struck midnight, we cheered, hugged, and kissed. The next morning I boarded a plane to fly back to Southern California. It was a full flight with me squished into a middle seat.

Back in L. A., the next morning, my skin was abloom with red spots. They were in my scalp, ears, and feet, just everywhere. Just thinking about it again, while writing this drash, I actually broke out in a rash. Something Davi found funny--Thanks Davi. But, back to my story. Turns out I had chicken pox.

Lathered in pink calamine lotion from head to toe and my mother's voice in my head, "for God's sake don't scratch," I gave Davi the good news. Fortunately, she'd already had chicken pox, but how about our friends? She told each one of them, no doubt followed by frantic phone calls to parents. Within a week though I was better, my friends were no worse for the wear, and hopefully the same for the airplane passengers.

I can't help but wonder what if my chicken pox episode happened while the Israelites were wandering in the desert. I imagine something like this: I scurry up to the Kohanim—who Traig jokes were "the dermatologists of Biblical times"—for my

diagnosis. Eleazar, son of Aaron, shouts out, “Dad, there’s a lady to see you, she looks awful.” Aaron, ankle deep in blood, keeping the altar flame going, and cooking up pleasing odors to God, groans and comes toward the entrance. An overworked, underpaid Aaron who looks faintly like my grouchy Uncle Bob squints his eyes. “Hmmm, son, give me the Torah.” Eleazar responds, “The what...” Exasperated, Aaron replies, “That thingy that has my job description in it.”

He studies the appropriate passage and then bends down to get a really good look at my red bumps. While he taps his temple he says out loud to himself, “The conditions for tzaraat (later incorrectly called leprosy) are swelling, rash, or discoloration. Well, you definitely have a rash.” He goes through the leprosy diagnosis checklist. “Is the affected area scaly?” He peers down again and says, “No.” He continues, “Has the affected area turned white? No. Has the hair turned white? No. Is the affected area more than skin deep? No.”

Aaron strokes his beard and says, “I think my work here is done, but, just to be sure I’ll check one more source. Son, hand me the Mishnah.” Eleazar responds, “But, Dad that hasn’t even been written yet!” Aaron snaps back, “Don’t pilpul with me, young man!” Quickly he scans it and mutters to himself, “Except in rare cases, symptoms cannot be examined on the Sabbath or the first day afterward. Judge color leniently. Person cannot be examined early in the morning, in the evening, in the house, or on a cloudy day. Best done on the fourth, fifth, eighth and ninth hour of the day.”

He chucks the book over his shoulder. Aaron’s frustrated!

“Doesn’t God know I don’t have time for busy work?”

In my story, Aaron seems underqualified as a “dermatologist” and overwhelmed with his “normal” duties in the holy of holies. Aaron has a point: Why does God ask him to busy himself with the lowly leper, in Hebrew, the m’tzora when there is so much sacred work for him to do?

In fact, God expects much from a priest regarding the care of the leper. God commands the Kohen to meticulously examine a potential leper. If he determines that individual is, he must send that person out from the community, every seven days the priest is required to check on the individual, and when the one who's been ill recovers, it is the priest who must purify and return them.

The priests and the lepers share another interesting bond. Lev. 14:15 describes the ritual the priest does to bring a leper back into the community. Did you know it's the same ritual performed on the priests during their ordination? Smearing blood on the ridge of the right ear, hand, and big toe. This ritual is performed for only two groups of people, the priests and the lepers.

Perhaps, God is telling the priests, "When you see them, see yourself." Their face, their fate are yours.

The examination of the afflicted is not to happen from afar;

instead you must look close and hard. Has even a single hair changed color? You must understand the gravity of the situation; your decision might isolate someone from the rest of the community. Your concern though does not end there; you must see, be near them every seven days and when they are healed it is you who must bring them back into the community; and in doing so you protect them from prejudice and hatred. This is sacred work.

In Exodus, God said, “All the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex. 19:5-6) To God each of one of us is holy, chosen to busy ourselves in sacred work, to protect those who might be or already are cast out from society.

Being Jewish and Queer we know what vulnerability feels like. Last week, we observed Yom HaShoah and remembered the millions of lives lost, including many from our own families. We

look on in horror at the “Kill the Gays” legislation now pending in Uganda, but feel comfort we don’t live in such a society. Or, maybe we do? U.S. pastors strongly influenced the language of the bill. In some places Hate Crime laws do not cover members of the GLBT community. And, people voted in state after state to ban gays and lesbians the fundamental right to marry. With the passage of Prop 8, even a blue state like California is not beyond the reach of shame.

Unfortunately, others are with us outside the main camp of society. At BCC’s Poetry Slam a few weeks back, Yuval David said the homeless are today’s social lepers. I’d add others. The mentally ill, who often find themselves on the streets; the poor, the uneducated, and despite the election of our first black president, the “isms” of racism, sexism, and ageism remain. It’s shocking how we almost automatically dismiss whole groups or classes of people, only because they’re perceived difference from us. What a stark contrast to the priests’ careful attention paid to each potential leper, to the point of a single hair! To exile

even one person was a weighty decision made with great caution. And, if isolation was required, the person was brought back into the community as soon as possible, escorted by the priest himself.

Like the priests, the Torah commands us to look hard at the boils, fungal infections, rashes and sore sprouting hairs of prejudice and hatred of our day. When we see those who are excluded, we should see ourselves. Their face, their fate is our fate.

Shabbat Shalom