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Life More Ordinary

Parshat Tazria-Metzorah (Leviticus 12:1-15:33)

Parashat for the Jewish Journal by Rabbi Lisa Edwards

I recently visited a congregant in the hospital and was surprised to find a doctor crying in the hallway. I told her I was a rabbi and asked if I could help. The doctor immediately apologized for her tears.

"It's been a hard week," she said, "I'll be OK."

She told me she had just presented a terminal cancer diagnosis to a woman in her early 40s. I felt for this doctor, and for her patient, but I also felt pleased at what I saw -- a doctor who cries.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of the books "Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal" (Riverhead, 1996) and "My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging" (Riverhead, 2000) tells the story of how, as a young intern, she had been reprimanded by her chief resident for crying with a young couple whose baby had just died. Her supervisor told her she had let them down.

"They needed you to be strong," he told her.

Now a teacher of physicians herself, Remen remains true to her initial impulse and teaches that crying with patients can be an appropriate response, saying, "You can burn out doing 'meaningful' work, if you lose the meaning."

In this week's double Torah portion, Tazria-Metzorah (Leviticus 13, in particular), God instructs Moses and Aaron on the role of priests when people take ill. The priests play diagnostician. They do not try to cure the sick, but they do examine people stricken with strange skin eruptions. The text -- with more than enough description of skin ailments -- is a little too graphic for some people. It also often seems irrelevant, as it describes practices no longer done by a priesthood that has long since faded from Jewish life.

But this portion also focuses attention on people who are not well. In order for the priest to evaluate what ails the people who are ill, he must get near to them, probably even touch them. And the priests see those who are ill more than once; they return days later to determine whether the person has recovered.

The daily tasks of the priests described elsewhere in the Torah consist primarily of animal sacrifice and temple caretaking, suggesting that priests are usually apart from the rest of

the Israelites. So it is remarkable, and instructive, to imagine the priests -- a part of the community -- attending to the ill, taking note of those in need. Imagine Aaron, the high priest, coming to see the weak in the midst of the Israelites. Imagine a priest taking the time to speak with the afflicted among the people. Imagine the priest being the one to escort an afflicted person back into the community, declaring them free from contagion and assisting them in offering a sacrifice to God upon their recovery. Simple gestures perhaps, but imagine how welcome they would be to someone who had suffered physical pain and the worry that they might bring illness to others. Imagine how they might have restored someone's sense of self-worth or desire to remain alive.

This past week saw another Yom HaShoah V'HaGevurah, the day of commemoration for the Holocaust and for Acts of Courage. When the Israeli Knesset years ago chose the 27th of Nissan for this annual day of commemoration, they did so amid controversy. Some would have preferred the anniversary of the start of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, but that landed (by Nazi plan) on the first day of Passover. Still, the Warsaw Ghetto and its heroes surely figured in the minds of those who selected the week following Passover for this memorial day - the uprising itself lasted almost a month.

Irena Klepfisz, whose parents managed to get her out of the ghetto and whose father died a hero in the Warsaw Ghetto, said in 1988, on the 45th anniversary of the uprising: "What we grieve for is not the loss of a grand vision, but rather the loss of common things, events and gestures.... Ordinariness is the most precious thing we struggle for, what the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto fought for. Not noble causes or abstract theories. But the right to go on living with a sense of purpose and a sense of self-worth -- an ordinary life."

How poignant to read her words this week as we read of the priests tending to the ill -- not focused on the grander work of the Temple or the sacrifices that took place at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.

As we read in Leviticus of the extraordinary lives of the priests, tenders of the sacred flame, preservers of the religion as it was then, I like to think also about the sense of purpose God gave them in commanding them to offer simple gestures of concern and care; I like to think about the meaningfulness they might have found in their ordinariness and in their tears.

Lisa A. Edwards is rabbi of Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, and is also currently teaching Bible at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.