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Tzara'at and the #MeToo Movement

Aaron Steinberg | BronfmanTorah | Tazria-Metzora

Aaron Steinberg is the Deputy Director of The Bronfman Fellowship. He lives in White Plains, NY with his wife Adina and three young children.

This week's Parasha explains what happens when someone is stricken with a white-colored skin affliction Tzara'at, commonly referred to as leprosy. The Metzora (one afflicted by Tzara'at) is examined by a priest who declares them either pure or impure. If impure, they are exiled from the camp. On their way out, they rend their clothes, bare their head, and call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" (Leviticus 13:45-46)

It sounds like a pretty humiliating experience. Although the Torah doesn't say this explicitly, the Rabbis understand that the Metzora must have sinned in some way. Since there are already plenty of laws on the books with clearly delineated forms of punishment, there must be a new category of sin being introduced here. They determine that Tzara'at is a punishment for people who commit a sin against another person that is either hidden from view or difficult for a court to prove. Examples of this include slander, swearing falsely and miserliness. God gives the punishment directly by inflicting the person with Tzara'at because earthly courts are unable to adjudicate these crimes.

People who commit private sins against God (like blasphemy and idol worship) are punished with Karet - a spiritual disconnection from the Jewish people that takes place in the afterlife. In contrast, Tzara'at is inflicted on the living, and is done so in such a way that is public and humiliating.

It seems that the Torah understands how insidious interpersonal violations that are committed in private can be. With the courts powerless to act, victims continue to suffer and victimizers continue to offend. If there were no consequences to the horrible acts both big and small that are being conducted, a cancer would spread through society, eating away at the fabric of the Jewish community.

We are living in a very different world today, but one that could learn from the handling of biblical Tzara'at. The #MeToo movement has arrived after years (decades, centuries, millennia) of sexual abuse and harassment being conducted both in and out of the shadows without any consequence. We have reached some sort of breaking point that has empowered (mostly) women to speak up against the (mostly) men who had been assaulting them with impunity for years. The response has been swift and harsh, and many powerful people have lost their status in society.

The outpouring of accusations and confessions is a communal form of Tzara'at - an unavoidable indicator that something is rotten in our society. The institutions we have set up to protect people have not been up to the task. #MeToo has forced people in power to address a problem they would much rather ignore or keep hidden, much like a splotch of white infected skin on one's face cannot be ignored.

So the question begs itself: what do we do now that we've recognized the problem?

The analogy is imperfect, considering the fact that there is no known victim in the case of Tzara'at. Nonetheless, the Bible's prescription for dealing with someone accused of a crime without evidence is quite illuminating: An offense is committed, an objective party steps in to review the claim, and then the offender is named and removed from the community. Importantly, there is a clear process to address the

issue when it first arises, and there is also room for the offending party to ultimately rejoin the community. After the Tzara'at clears up, the Metzora engages in a lengthy ceremony over the course of more than a week including atonement and admonition, and only then may they rejoin the community.

A beautiful (if gruesome) moment during the ceremony involves the priest taking blood from a sacrificed animal, and applying it to the ear, thumb and big toe of the offending party. Immediately afterward, the priest would take oil and place it in the same three spots - directly over the blood, and putting the remainder of the oil on the Metzora's head (Leviticus 14: 12-20). It's a clear reminder that how this person engaged with the world was completely wrong - how they listened, spoke and traversed the world. But at the same time, they have been given a second chance, and are anointed with oil in a similar manner to how one might anoint a monarch. They can't ignore the blood that was there representing the sins they committed, but they have been given a chance to overcome their previous ways and act virtuously.

What lessons can be applied to the current state we find ourselves in? Some of the most vexing cases of harassment and abuse are those that are difficult to handle in the courts due to lack of evidence. This can result in victims who cannot find the solace of Justice served, and the accused whose reputations and livelihood may remain forever in limbo. I would suggest there is something we can learn from these passages in the Torah that can apply to how we deal with some accused offenders today who cannot be processed by the legal system. In some instances that might mean removing people from their environment after an accusation in order to gain perspective on what they may have done or how their actions were experienced by others. Perhaps there are better ways for us to allow certain offenders to safely admit their wrongdoing and embark on a journey that results in their reentry to society with a second chance. Perhaps we need a ritual not only for the victim and the accused perpetrator, but for a whole community to heal after being damaged by an abuse case that lacks closure.

We don't have the benefit of a supernatural power to point out the offenders in our society, but we do have the power to consider the fate of the Metzora as one possible approach to dealing with some of the unresolved claims of abuse in modern society.

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aaron@byfi.org

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