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Tzara'at and the Stigma of Radical Illness

David Andorsky '92 | BronfmanTorah | Tazria-Metzora / Yom HaZikaron & Yom HaAtzmaut 2017

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Ever since I started my medical training, I have been asked to give divrei torah on this week's parsha, Tazria-Metzora. I suppose the thinking is that my medical training gives me greater insight into what is often seen as one of the most opaque and least relevant portions of Torah. But for many years, it seemed as opaque as ever. This double parsha is almost exclusively concerned with tzara'at, an ailment that is often translated as "leprosy." A careful reading of the signs and symptoms shows that this disease, with its various eruptions and discolorations, does not correspond to any single condition that modern medicine is familiar with – and furthermore, the same disease is described as afflicting clothing and houses. By the time of the Talmud, the illness is seen as a punishment for the sin of slander, based on a pun ("motzi shem ra" – one who gives another a bad name) and a connection to the story in Numbers 12 where Miriam is punished with tzara'at for complaining about her brother Moses' special relationship with God.

I struggled to find much relevance in the priestly diagnostic algorithms for tzara'at, until I read an essay by Rachel Adler entitled "Those Who Turn Away Their Faces: Tzaraat and Stigma" (in Healing and the Jewish Imagination, ed Rabbi William Cutter). She writes:

Tzaraat is ancient Israel's version of what I am going to call radical illness, illness that strikes at the root of our being in the world, ravaging our communities, filling witnesses with fear. Radical illness erodes the body and often the self. It takes us and unmakes us. Radical illness seems to us arbitrary; either we do not know how to cure it or why it struck, or we do not know how to contain its spread.... The paradigmatic radical illness of our own time is dementia, although AIDS, cancer, Ebola, and bird flu have been or are currently contenders for the title too.

I stumbled across this essay in the midst of my training as an oncologist, when every day I was confronted with great suffering and a mysterious, capricious illness which was more often than not incurable, despite the supposedly great power of modern medicine and science. Suddenly, the concept of tzaraat was not so hard to grasp.

Once the metzora (the individual afflicted with tzaraat) is diagnosed, he/she must dwell outside the camp until their illness remits. Lest we think that we moderns are so much more compassionate, we should reflect on the fact that we quarantine the ill and dying, separating them from the healthy and the young, to a degree far greater than in previous eras. Whereas in the past, elderly or demented relatives were cared for at home by family, today they are in nursing homes, visited on occasion but mostly out of sight. Death, which awaits every single one of us, is separated and hidden to an even greater degree. Most people my age who are not in the medical profession have never been in the presence of a dying person or a dead body. Death itself has become our "radical illness."

What can the rules and regulations of this parsha teach us about how to treat others with radical illness? One observation is that it is the cohen who must periodically leave the camp to visit the metzora. One might think that the cohen,

who needs to keep himself in a state of ritual purity, would be the last person for this task. But the Torah teaches that the cohen himself, not a messenger or a delegate, must visit the impure.

An even more subversive rule is the ritual for the purification of the metzora when their illness remits. After shaving their hair and immersing in a mikvah, they offer a sacrifice, the blood of which is dabbed on their right ear, thumb, and finger. This is quite similar to the ritual for anointing Aaron's sons as kohanim (Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8) and is the only time a non-cohen undergoes such a ritual. The ritual seems to say, this afflicted individual is as holy and as pure as a cohen. Adler concludes:

What does it take to see a leper as a son of Aaron? What does it take to see the devastated bodies or brains of radically ill people as exemplars of holiness, even when only the rags and tatters of personhood remain? It requires accepting our fear and revulsion but allowing compassion for the other to override them.

Continue the conversation. Send David your thoughts: david.andorsky@gmail.com.

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