

Emelia Breen's D'var torah

Hi, my Torah portion is Tazria-Metzora, about all kinds of purity and impurity. The section of the portion I found most interesting was the part about leprosy, which also relates to purity in many ways. In biblical days, when you had leprosy you were considered impure and may have been sent away from the community which feared contamination. All of the consequences and cures were very intriguing to me. I found it appalling that people were actually sent away from their communities and sent into isolation until healed because of a disease. I would think that they would want to help the person in need get better, and I don't think being sent to live on their own was very helpful. But then again if someone is really sick and is so contagious that who ever comes near them gets the disease and it becomes an epidemic, maybe this system would work. Even today, we hear debates about when and how to quarantine people with certain diseases.

How do we interpret purity and impurity today? Is illness impurity? Is dirt impurity? Are guilt and sin forms of impurity? I think these are very important questions.

As I was saying before, in Biblical times when someone was “impure” (for instance, someone who had leprosy or had just given birth) they were sent away. In our day, we don’t usually send people away. When my father was sick with cancer our family and friends were always there to help him and us, whether it was taking me and my brother for a few nights or even hours or being there for my mom and dad. Our friends and family also helped the part of my father’s sickness that was spiritual by being there for him, letting him know we cared about him, that we loved him, we were there for him always and forever no matter what happened. This was very important, and different from the doctors who helped him physically by giving him treatments and medicine. In biblical times these roles were combined: the priest was a spiritual and communal leader and also played the role of the doctor and

therapist. By doing so he helped the sick spiritually, mentally and physically.

Jewish commentators have many different views on these ideas. Chassidic teachings explain that *tumah* (spiritual impurity) takes place when a person has an “absence of holiness”. The Kotzker Rebbe thinks along the same lines: He said that the definition of *tumah* is the negative filling of a vacuum, left after G-d has left the Jewish soul. But a check of the word impure in the thesaurus will give you words such as contaminated, corrupt and unclean. Rabbi Shraga Simmons thinks that is why so many people think the word *tumah* means spiritually undesirable or dirty.

Throughout history leprosy was seen as impure, but there are many other ways people interpret it. Some people think of it as an illness, and it was seen as very contagious. I think that the Biblical disease “tzara’at” (most commonly translated as leprosy) was a spiritual disease caused when a person was impure in some way. It

could have been the person was impure, or that the person felt impure. This could have been physically, or mentally impure, I believe that depends on the person or what the person has done. For example, someone might feel impure when they have not bathed for days, or someone may feel impure when they are feeling guilty because of actions or thoughts. In biblical times (or even now) guilt may have come from eating a non-kosher food or otherwise disobeying G-d.

My biggest sense of guilt came a couple of summers ago when I accidentally insulted my grandparent's friend Anita. Once I knew I had hurt her feelings, I felt guilty, or what I am calling impure. But once I had apologized and gotten her forgiveness I didn't feel as guilty, it was like I was becoming pure again. But before I apologized I felt many different feelings including fear, guilt, dread, anxiety and shame. I think that sometimes when people do really hurtful things to the people they love the most they can go into a depression that may even lead to physical impurity.

Jews have rituals we do to “rid” ourselves of impurity. Where we used to give sacrifices to the priest, now on Rosh Ha’Shana, those who have sinned (or have become impure) over the course of the year, throw breadcrumbs into the water as a symbol of becoming pure again. We also have prayers for the sick, in hope they will get better, or become “pure” again. I think in our society people like to feel good about themselves and these rituals help them feel pure hence making them feel good.

Over the past few months I have spent a lot of time studying this portion and I have learned a lot from it. What stands out to me most is what purity really means. As I was saying about the Kotzer Rebbe, sometimes impurity can be understood as the absence of G-d. Some people feel that G-d is the key to purity. I am not sure I know when or if God is in my presence, so I don’t feel impurity as the absence of G-D.

It seems to me that in biblical times, becoming pure was something anyone could do, no matter what status they held. In Tazria-Metzora G-d gives the option of offering a sheep or 2 doves to return to purity. This makes it seem that returning to purity was this big thing that only wealthy people can do, because they would have the money or the sheep or doves. But even poor people could offer what little they had and they would still be giving an offering and therefore still becoming pure.

To me, in our day, purity is still in all our hands. I think purity now means doing the right thing. This could be owning up to your actions or acting with honesty, respect and kindness to the people you love. There is still impurity too: You are or can be physically or spiritually impure when you feel like you have done something very wrong or feel very sick, but I think each person should decide how to understand and correct their own impurity. In this world there are many ways of becoming impure and there are many forms of impurity. And we are able to return to purity without

priest or rabbis. We can pray alone, we can do Tashlich (the throwing of the bread on Rosh Ha'Shana) without a rabbi and we can apologize to the people we insult. We all need to find in ourselves the best or right way that will help us become pure.

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