

TazriaMetzora – 4/27/2012

Shmueli the Israelite was getting ready for school one morning when he noticed a weird mark on his arm. It didn't hurt, so he shrugged, swung his Ancient Near Eastern backpack over his shoulder, and headed out of his tent and down the sand path to class.

By the time he had arrived at the Teaching Tent, the weird mark had grown. It still didn't hurt, but it was definitely larger, and small bits of skin were starting to flake off, kind of like he'd gotten a really bad sunburn. But Shmueli's mother always made him wear his SPF 50 sunscreen, especially since she'd heard that they were going to be traveling in the desert for quite awhile, and so Shmueli knew it wasn't a sunburn.

He didn't know exactly what to do, so he decided to just wait and see what happened.

When lunch rolled around, the situation had gotten worse. Not only was the weird mark still getting bigger and bigger, but all of Shmueli's arm hair was turning white! As Shmueli was examining his arm, his favorite teacher, Mr. Nachshon, walked past.

Mr. Nachshon took one look at Shmueli and his arm and immediately went into action. He calmly but quickly motioned to another teacher to move all of the other students away from Shmueli. He directed Shmueli out of the tent, motioning gently toward the exit without actually touching him.

Once they were out in the open, Mr. Nachshon explained that they were going to have to take a trip to Aaron Cohen's house. "See, Shmueli – you may have *tzara'at*," said Mr. Nachshon. "Don't worry too much yet, let's see what Mr. Cohen the Kohen has to say about it."

Our friend Shmueli is experiencing what we read just a few minutes ago.

Tazria-Metzora deals with the mysterious concept of *tzara'at*. Traditionally but incorrectly translated as leprosy, *tzara'at* can show up not only on people, but also on garments and even houses. The process of diagnosing *tzara'at* is the responsibility of the priests, and once a person is diagnosed, he or she is declared impure and is required to leave the community and reside outside of the camp for the duration of his or her ailment.

Many have questioned the message this sends – do we want to be teaching our children that those who are ill must be sent out of the community? Surely we should be instead teaching that those who are sick deserve all of the care we can provide! Indeed, we could have a conversation about isolation and its negative impact on the human psyche, but I don't think

this Torah portion focuses on isolation or, for that matter, neglecting the sick. In fact, *bikkur cholim*, caring for the sick, is highly valued in Jewish tradition.

Speaking of *bikkur cholim*, the message of this portion can also be seen as a health issue. All ancient societies created their own ways of dealing with illness in a way that maintains the health of the rest of the community. Various studies have cited Jewish rituals as one of the reasons the Jewish people have remained so healthy in times of disease – people speak about keeping kosher, formalized washing of hands, use of the mikveh (aka ritual bath) as ways in which the Jewish people have thrived as a result of plain old hygiene. But while the diagnosis and isolation of those who have contracted *tzara'at* may well trace to health concerns of the ancient Israelites, the religious message being sent here is quite different.

The text is concerned with maintaining a ritually pure community.

In the world of Leviticus, communication with God came through the Tabernacle and the sacrifices made there. The priests were responsible for properly creating that communication. But sacrifices were only valid when they were pure. That meant that the priests had to follow very specific rules so that they and their ritual instruments would remain ritually pure. If any of those rules were violated, their sacrifices were invalid and communication with God was lost.

Now, part of being pure requires being surrounded by purity, and so the Torah outlines all of the ways in which everyday Israelites (not just the priests) were also to rein in their impure human tendencies.

Most things that make us cringe nowadays are also cringe-worthy in the Torah, and so it was important to outline how to deal with these cringe-worthy but very human situations: various body liquids, death and corpses, and skin diseases like *tzara'at*. (Fun stuff, right?)

Generally, as outlined in Tazria-Metzora, there is a procedure for dealing with various impurities. People who are diagnosed with *tzara'at* are required to leave the camp until they are cured of the ailment. Once the *tzara'at* has subsided, there is a detailed purification ritual that takes place outside of the camp; the formerly afflicted person is required to wash and shave. They are visited by the priest, who performs the purification rite, which involves a couple of birds and some plants. After this they are allowed back into the camp but are not allowed to sleep in their tent for seven full days, after which they must bring three different sacrifices to the Tabernacle. Once the sacrifices have been offered up, they are fully reinstated as pure members of the community.

What stands out here is how involved the community is in each piece of the process of dealing with *tzara'at*:

- The first step of the process requires someone in the community to recognize the issue and bring it to the community's attention. This is what Mr. Nachshon does for our friend Shmueli.
- The second step, diagnosis, is entirely dependent on another member of the community, the priest. The priest is the only person who is able to let the affected person know whether or not he has *tzara'at* or not.
- Once the *tzara'at*-inflicted are sent out of the camp, the Talmud [Kreitot 8b] understands that their spouses joined them outside of the camp. Thus the sick, while isolated from the larger community, are still cared for.
- Most importantly, there is an elaborate process in place for reinstating the person into society as a full-fledged member of the community, re-purified as if she had never been impure in the first place.

Each community, as you all know, is made up of many individual parts. When any specific part becomes infected, the entire community is affected. Healthy communities make sure to call out issues when they see them. They acknowledge who plays what role best and allow each person to perform that role. Healthy communities create a procedure both for diagnosing problems and also for fixing problems and continuing to grow without dwelling on the problem once it is fixed.

May we all have the insight to recognize the strength and power of our communities and to utilize them for the betterment of ourselves and each other.

May we be like Mr. Nachshon, recognizing when our Shmuelis need help.

May we be like priests, carefully diagnosing which infections are worthy of isolation and concentrated effort.

May we be like supportive spouses, willing to move outside of the camp in order to take care of our loved ones.

And may we strive to be like Shmueli – patient during diagnosis, understanding during separation, focused on cleansing ourselves, and always working toward the moment of return, when we can be newly reinstated, complete. Pure.

Shabbat Shalom.