

Drash for Metzora
April 9 2022/ Nisan 8 5782

The past few weeks, our readings have focused on the Tabernacle, the training of the Cohanim, and the creation of a sacred gathering space for our community. **Today's Parsha, Metzora, brings into focus the pain and isolation we feel when we are unable to be a part of this sacred community space. In this parsha we are confronted with an eruptive plague - tza-ra'at - that affects our bodies and our homes, resulting in impurity.** The eruption is called tza-ra'at and the person afflicted is the Metzora. The presence of **tza-ra'at** requires that the Metzora quarantine outside of the camp and away from the community. Moreover, this parsha also deals with an eruptive plague on the house. Now this just feels like an insult to injury!

The Etz Hayim Commentary points out that the plague of **tza-ra'at** entering into the refuge of our homes is a “breakdown of societal values that kept a family safe and united.” While in past years, commentaries have tried to make sense of this, we now unfortunately know a modern parallel. We have all been impacted by multiple waves of the Covid Pandemic and feelings of loss, isolation, and disconnection.

Fortunately, **our tradition** provides us with a path to address reintegration back into the community.

In Metzora, The Cohen examines the house, closes up the house for seven days and then returns. A ritual is then offered with two pure birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop to purify the home. Research on Sefaria helped me learn that hyssop or azov is known in arabic as Zatr, or oregano and part of the mint family. The Etz Hayim commentary points out that cedar wood is tall and strong and hyssop is small and vulnerable. This symbolizes “the leveling power of illness, which afflicts the powerful and powerless alike.” The Torah is teaching us that there are illnesses and afflictions that isolate and separate us and there is a way to bring people back together.

This process for purifying the home via a priestly blessing and the introduction of natural elements of live birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop strikes me as very different from our modern world. For one, The Kohen wears many hats - making a house call, acting as home inspector, following disease protocols, and also reciting a transformative blessing.

Second, the purification tools are part of nature, not purchased at the market and subject to supply chains. Third, our Congregation Netivot Shalom community is participatory and egalitarian. I can't imagine the work that has to go into pulling apart the house, moving the rocks, dumping them outside the city, and replastering.

Ok, maybe I can just a little bit. What if, instead of taking apart our houses and moving the rocks somewhere outside of the city, we packed up for the weekend to set up a new camp somewhere else to dwell among the Redwoods?!

Our Biennial Congregational RETREAT is **one way that our community can** reconnect, get out into nature, and celebrate being together. It is a way for our egalitarian participatory community to pitch in, volunteer, greet, lead a session, lead services, or help schlep. And it also is a chance to meet new people.

This year our Biennial Retreat will be nestled among the Redwoods at Westminster Woods with our Guest Speaker, Rabbi Mike Comins, who will

focus on prayer and connection to the outdoors. **He will provide an experiential way to connect to the spirituality of prayer and nature.**

Our retreat site at Westminster Woods is new for us and the dwellings may be more basic than other retreat sites. This site will provide plenty of time to be outdoors, plenty of hiking trails, and a chance to be in nature and in community. There is also a giant playground and a ropes obstacle course.

Even if you are unable to come on the Retreat, there are other ways to recognize our collective need to ritualize the safe re-integration into communal life and welcome each other. As an egalitarian participatory community, we are not reliant on The Cohen to bring the materials for healing. Maybe you will volunteer to be a greeter, maybe you will invite someone new to go for a walk, drop off some flowers for Shabbat or even share a recipe with oregano, mint or zaatar. These small acts are in each of our hands to strengthen our community and safely participate to welcome each other back.

CONCLUSION

We are not out of the woods of the Pandemic. Our return back into the community takes longer and is more complicated than the priestly blessing with two pure birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop.

Like the strength of the cedar and the vulnerability of the hyssop, we can tap into the participatory and egalitarian values of our community to reach out and re-connect. We can reach out across the divide to welcome each other back into our sacred spaces.

I invite you to consider coming onto the Retreat to Connect, Discover, and Transform. And if you cannot make it onto the Retreat, what blessing can you provide to someone in our community?

Shabbat Shalom!