

Tazria drash 4/13/24 Rabbi Chai Levy

Who is inside the camp and who is outside?

Who can be close to God's holy place who is excluded?

These questions arise in Tazria and also in next week's Metzora

As we read the arcane and mystifying rules of

Scaly skin afflictions, discolored body hairs,

various discharges from the sex organs and

how they render one *tame*, ritually impure,

and how long one must be isolated until they can be purified.

It all seems very weird and irrelevant to us today

when these rules of *tuma and tahara* no longer apply,

as we are all ritually impure these days, but the truth is:

the issues of inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside are very much relevant

to us today, even right here in our community,

and that's what I'd like to talk about with you today.

Why were people deemed *tame* and required to isolate?

Bible scholars have explained that *tuma* was associated with death.

The things that made one tame:

Contact with a dead body

Scaly sores on your skin

The loss of life-generating fluids – menstrual blood, semen, even the blood of childbirth –

All of these needed to be kept out of the Israelite camp,

Away from the Mishkan, which needed to be a place of life.

We still have residual practices of this ancient instinct to keep death away from life:

This past week after we buried Roger's dad, and left the cemetery,

we washed our hands outside the shiva home, as is customary,

as a way to try to keep the realm of death separate from the realm of life.

For our ancient ancestors, skin diseases and related afflictions on one's house and clothing, or things like blood and bodily emissions
 Must have been frightening and not fully understood
 and so this system of *tuma and tahara* was created to keep the forces of death away from the forces of life.

Of course the rabbis had to put an ethical layer of meaning onto it
 And associated the *metzora* (the one with the skin disease)
 with *motzi shem ra* (slander – hear the play on words)
 and connect the ritual impurity to the contagious danger of gossip.
 It's a bit of a stretch, but the rabbis wanted to make a relevant ethical lesson from some of these mysterious and arcane instructions about purity.

I want to draw a different lesson from these laws, that is,
 what does the Torah want us to learn about exclusion and inclusion?
 The Torah draws our attention to the fact that some people,
 Due to illness, circumstance, life event,
 Are for a time excluded from the camp – from that life-affirming and holy place where everyone else gets to be together.

Let me ask you a question: how do you imagine the metzora felt?
 Imagine what it might have been like to find yourself with a condition that rendered you *tame* and required you to isolate?
 Many of us have experienced something like that when we had Covid.
 Many of us have conditions that last much longer than the week or so that Covid isolated us. How does it feel?[answers]

I'm raising this topic because I've heard from many in our community recently who have shared with me their experiences of isolation or exclusion:

- Older folks or people with disabilities who can't get to shul without a ride, and then have a hard time finding a ride;
- people who feel they have become invisible, forgotten, or ignored by our community since becoming disabled.
- A person who uses a wheelchair who came to services and felt ignored when they couldn't maneuver their wheelchair through the set up of the chairs in the sanctuary and through the crowd in line for food in the sanctuary, and no one noticed or offered to move chairs so they could get into the service, or get through the line and find a place at a table to eat with others. They felt isolated, excluded, unseen.
- People who because of health issues need to stay home and rely on Zoom to participate in our community who want to feel more included and seen by: being acknowledged from the sanctuary that they are present [say hello to those on Zoom], by always having breakout rooms so that they can connect with each other on Zoom, by better use of the microphone from the sanctuary so that they can hear and be fully included.
- And I've heard from people who have hearing challenges who feel isolated because they can't participate in conversations at shul or the assistive listening devices we have aren't working, or again because people don't project enough into the microphone.

I want to acknowledge and thank our member, Sari Hale-Alper who spoke with me a few months ago about some of the ways that our members with disabilities or our older members are feeling that we could be doing a better job at inclusion. From her initiative, we honored Jewish Disability Awareness, Acceptance, and Inclusion Month in February, and Elana Naftalin-Kelman took on heading up a new committee to work on issues of inclusion.

Thank you Elana and Sari, and all who joined this new committee (and others are invited to join in as well!)

In our parasha, it says that the Metzora, the person with the skin disease, shall call out “*Tame Tame*”

This was not just to warn others of their contagion.

The Talmud explains that it was to draw compassion from the people.

And that is what members of our community are doing –

They are calling out and saying: we feel unseen in our community,

We want to be included.

We want to be able to participate and connect just like everyone else.

Those in the camp, so to speak, might not realize the ways people feel excluded and isolated.

I’m grateful to those who spoke up and called out and let me know,

And now I want to share their calling out with you.

We see with the metzora, the community is responsible for bringing the isolated person back into the camp.

We read throughout our parasha that the *cohen* must examine the afflicted and bring them back into the camp.

The English translation says “examine,” but the Hebrew is *ra’ah* – the cohen must SEE the person; this word repeats over and over, Sometimes more than once in one verse.

The Torah seems to me to emphasize this sense of seeing as part of bringing the isolated person back into community.

Just as I heard from those in our community who feel unseen in their disability, who want to feel seen in the ways they are excluded.

So, these arcane instructions about tuma and tahara are actually quite relevant to us today.

People still find themselves in situations that isolate and exclude them from community

And the Torah is telling us two important things:

(1) We need to hear them calling out, as the metzora called out, and

(2) It’s our duty to SEE them and to bring them back into community from their isolation, as the cohen did.

There are many things we have been doing.

I'll mention them so people are aware of the efforts that have been made.

- A year or so ago, we instituted a no fragrance policy. This is because there are people in our community who have sensitivities and can't breathe here when people wear fragrances. This is an issue of inclusion.
- We endeavor to have Zoom access to all of our services and events for people who can only participate from home. Part of that is being mindful of using the microphones well so that people at home can hear. And making other arrangements such as, making sure that handouts used during after-kiddush talks or other study sessions are available digitally so they can be shared on Zoom.
- We've spent effort and money on upgrading our internet, our microphones and sound system so that people on Zoom and in person can hear better. But it still requires us to learn how to use a microphone [demonstrate projecting and holding the mic]
- And of course, we have a special bimah that can be lowered to honor the dignity of someone who is short or uses a wheelchair.

We do care about everyone feeling included and are making an effort, but there is much we could be doing better.

Again, in the spirit of the metzora who called out to make others aware, If there is something you need to be better included, let us know.

We now have an Inclusion committee, let Elana know, or join the committee, if you can.

Let's all be more aware of the people around us –

People who might feel invisible in their isolation

Who haven't you seen for a while? Reach out to them.

Step upstairs for a bit and see who is on Zoom and say hello to them.

Take note of who might be having a hard time navigating the kiddush line because of mobility challenges, and offer a hand.

Let's be a community where no one feels invisible or isolated.

Let's see each other and make sure all are included.