

## Lunch'n'Leprosy

### *Text 1 – Leviticus 13:18-23*

When an inflammation appears on the skin of one's body and it heals, and a white swelling or a white discoloration streaked with red develops where the inflammation was, they shall present themselves to the priest. If the priest finds that it appears lower than the rest of the skin and that the hair in it has turned white, the priest shall pronounce them unclean; it is a leprous affection that has broken out in the inflammation. But if the priest finds that there is no white hair in it and it is not lower than the rest of the skin, and it is faded, the priest shall isolate them for seven days. If it should spread in the skin, the priest shall pronounce them unclean; it is an affection. But if the discoloration remains stationary, not having spread, it is the scar of the inflammation; the priest shall pronounce them clean.



### *Text 2 – Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg, 2015*

Sometimes there is the need for someone with an illness to be isolated, for their own protection and/ or that of the wider community. We have become familiar with the need, for example, to keep those suffering from ebola separate.

However sound these precautions may be, they have also had some unfortunate consequences. It has sometimes led to those with profound physical or emotional difficulties being isolated, being kept out of the camp, often in inappropriate institutions, and while this is being remedied in our rather more inclusive time, it remains a struggle. Clearly there does need to be special care for those with severe mental-health problems, but some children with special needs can greatly benefit from being at school with so-called 'ordinary' children, provided they are given some help. For others, it is too much of a struggle, and it can be difficult to work out what is right for whom.

*Text 3 – Rabbi Nancy Wiener, 2009*

When a person is suffering, can the rest of us go on with the tasks of daily living? Or does the knowledge that someone is outside the camp impede our ability as a group to function as a healthy organism? In one account of a specific individual laid low and the impact of that event on the community at large, we learn a great deal. As the Israelites wander in the desert, Miriam is afflicted, and the entire community comes to a standstill. Everyone's journey comes to a halt for the period in which she is placed outside the camp. Only when she returns can the group members all move forward again.

- 5
- 10 What a remarkable model our ancestors provide for us! The community is comprised of all of its individual members. The life of the community is compromised when someone is outside the camp, when someone is on the margin. Forward movement is impossible for everyone as long as one individual is outside the camp. Perhaps that is because everyone knows that departing from that place would mean certain death for the person on the outside.
- 15 This portion reminds us of essential questions we must ask ourselves as individuals and as a community: is the progress we perceive real if it is predicated on removing individuals from our midst? Are we truly moving forward if we can walk past those along the wayside and not extend a hand to them?

*Text 4 – Rabbi Stacey Offner, 2012*

Over the years of serving in my congregation, I have discovered that each of the parashiot have reputations that have been given to them by bar and bat mitzvah students. Every parasha is meaningful, I teach our 13-year-olds, and there is no such thing as a 'better' or 'worse' portion. But I must say that those b'nei mitzvah students who have Parashat Tazria feel that they are in a special club. Why is this so? They joke that, of all the Torah's portions, theirs is 'the worst'. Perhaps it is because of our societal discomfort with talking about the details of such personal matters. Bodily emissions and unusual discoloration of fluids do not seem, they say, to be topics appropriate for public discussion from the bimah. Perhaps it is because we continue, even in today's modern world, to be frightened of diseases that we don't understand.

- 5
- 10 The words of this parasha are most frightening. The experience is too familiar. Who among us has not noticed something strange on his or her own body? Let's say that one day you are just brushing your teeth, daydreaming about work, when you glance in the mirror and see a spot, a patch, a quarter-inch square of skin that is just a shade darker than the rest. Or maybe you see a mole or a rash or a lump. You think the worst. Then you counsel yourself: 'Don't be silly. It's probably been there all my life and I just never noticed it before.'
- 15

20 Then you get scared again. You call the doctor. They take a biopsy. You wait. You  
pray. You share your anxiety with the rabbi, but ask that it be kept confidential  
because really, you are still hoping that it's nothing. You can taste the relief  
(tinged with a bit of embarrassment that you made such a big deal over nothing)  
when your doctor pronounces that miraculous word: 'Clean!' And you get dizzy at  
25 the prospect that a different scenario is emerging, one in which your doctor utters  
the horrid verdict: 'Unclean!'

Our health is based on a closely interwoven web of medical and spiritual needs. It  
is not a coincidence that many of the great rabbis of our people, Moses  
Maimonides among them, were both rabbis and physicians. Those who were  
priests and those who were doctors were both, rightly, referred to as healers.

### *Text 5 – Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, 2013*

The book of Leviticus brings us into a world we no longer understand. Yet we still  
read about it, and it is important that we do, because it reminds us how ancient  
our tradition really is, and it brings us into the religious and spiritual world of our  
early ancestors. We may find it incomprehensible and off-putting, but such texts  
5 hold the memory and history of our people and must reveal to us something of  
what they meant in their time.

The impurity brought about by the disease of tzara'at had serious consequences.  
The sufferer was required to stay on the periphery of the community and  
announce to all that they were in a state of ritual impurity. They were to tear their  
10 clothes, and to keep their distance from everyone else. They were outcasts.

While we are given a great deal of quasi-medical information about tzara'at – all  
the signs and symptoms are elucidated in the text with a rather grisly fascination –  
the Torah is not in fact interested in its medical significance, but instead it cares  
about the ritual significance of the condition. The people who are to monitor and  
15 assess the cases are not the healers but the Cohanim, the priests. This is a matter  
not of medicine, but of ritual. The priests don't in any way treat the condition nor  
do they act as safe-guarders against infection for reasons of public health. Their  
job is to patrol the borders of ritual purity and impurity, and, most importantly, to  
create the way back into the community for the one who had been afflicted and  
20 marginalised.

The priest conducted an elaborate ritual in order to bring back the sufferer into  
the community once the skin disease had run its course. This ritual was, as is all  
good ritual, transformational. The rejected person was brought back into the  
people, their status cleaned up and made as if new. It was as if the priest, by  
25 power of the ritual, could conquer the fear of tzara'at embodied by the sufferer,  
and bring forth a new reality for them.

What is happening throughout the purity/ impurity issues which make up the bulk of the book of Leviticus is not some ancient superstitious magic. What is being enshrined in ritual and social structures is a way of dealing with, and including, the  
30 frightening randomness of life, sudden illness or ill fortune, the terrifying closeness of death to life, the way our bodies sometimes seem to be following a plan we know nothing about and would not willingly agree to if we did. The role of the priests is to mediate this in some way, and always to bring the person closer to God even if there has to be a temporary alienation in order to demonstrate the  
35 return.

The Book of Leviticus sometimes seems to be one of a world no longer relevant – altars and sacrifices, blood and smoke, white spots and red skin, magic and superstition. But reading it carefully it reveals itself as something else, rather like  
40 an optical illusion, makes itself known. It is first and foremost about what a priest should be, how a leader should behave. Empowered by their role as leaders of the worshipping community the priests use that power to create a society where everyone has access to God, everyone is able to be brought into the community.

The priest is the leader who holds the ability to create the community through the ritual system. We no longer have a prescribed ritual system but we still have the  
45 imperative to find ways to bring people from the margins back into our society. The Book of Leviticus still calls to us to find a way to do this holy work – it calls to us.

**GW 27.04.17**