Metzora: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

Having learned about the signs of the metzora, or the person afflicted by the supernatural plague known as Tzaraat, last week, this week's parsha kicks things off by **explaining precisely how those afflicted can become purified,** a mystical process involving an earthen vessel, a piece of cedar wood, a scarlet thread, and a bundle of hyssop. Also discussed are the ways of purifying homes afflicted with Tzaraat, and **other forms of ritual impurity that can be purified by visiting the Mikvah,** or ritual bath.



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> "He will remain ritually defiled as long as the lesion remains upon him. Since he is defiled, he must dwell isolated from other people. His dwelling must be outside the camp."

Take a deeper dive

The great anthropologist Margaret Mead was once asked by a student what she believed to be the earliest visible evidence for civilization. To his surprise, she replied "a healed femur bone," indicating that taking the time and care to allow another human to heal—as opposed to letting him die rather than be a burden on limited resources—was what civilization was truly about.

It's telling, then, that our parsha's discussion of healing the person afflicted with Tzaraat begins with no less exalted a person than a priest checking in on the patient, who is forced to dwell in isolation outside the camp.

From the very fact that the priest would leave his hallowed dwellings and go visit the metzora in seclusion we learn three meaningful lessons. **First, that we never truly abandon other Jews,** not even sinners. Second, even though it is our duty to be always on the lookout for any signs of wrongdoing from among our fellow Jews, and even though when we find evidence of such wrongdoing **we must mete out punishment, we must also remember to do it with love.** And third, it's a reminder that the priests, as the community's leaders, were expected to show love first and foremost, as **it is not possible to teach or to lead anyone you don't truly love.**

That's all very inspiring. But still, read the parsha in depth and you may scratch your head about the Torah's very particular prescription to healing Tzaraat. Why does the kohen bring two birds, a cedar stick, a strip of scarlet wool, and hyssop? Rabbi Avraham Bornsztain, known as the Avnei Nezer, one of the greatest halachists of the 19th century, had a great explanation. It's one thing to be humbled by external circumstances, he said; you could be cast out of the camp, say, or go bankrupt, or have your husband or wife leave you, and though such blows will certainly humble you, some, maybe even many, people will use their return to society after a setback as an opportunity to boost up their ego, meaning they will learn nothing from the experience. This is why this additional ceremony was needed. The cedar represents the tall and proud person the sinner used to be. The red wool in Hebrew is called a tola'at, or worm, and the hyssop is a plant low to the ground—both representing humility. And there are two birds—one is sacrificed, the other set free—to show that just as we've forgiven the sin and made it fly away, never to return, so, too, should the sinner forget his pride and set it free, never to return. Only in this way are we guaranteed true growth and change.

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