

“Our Sacred Responsibility... To Care for Public Health”

Parashat Metzora – Pulpit Swap April 2016 Rabbi Amy Joy Small

My daughter Aliza, who is 27 years old, still remembers with a shudder an incident over twenty years ago when she was in first grade. You know how it is when a traumatic experience as a young child stays with you forever? The memory is imprinted like a thick, discolored scar. Here’s what happened – she was sent home from school by the school nurse because she had LICE! It was at the beginning of the school year and this was our first introduction to a nearly annual problem that hit much of their school. Some kids – maybe only one poor child – brought lice home from summer camp. It didn’t take much for it to spread quickly through the school, especially with little kids piling their stuff in a pile in the classroom cubby area.

So many kids were sent home. But that didn’t prevent my daughter from feeling ashamed. While my two sons were also sent home, I was able to take them to a barber who gave them closely cropped crew-cuts, but I could not find anyone who would help with my daughter’s hair. For the boys, it was easy to get rid of the lice -- back to school the next day, no harm. But my daughter had a lot of curly hair and while I tried day after day to comb and pick out all the nits, each day when I brought her back to school the nurse managed to find one I missed and summoned me to come get her. After five days of trying all the treatments recommended to us, and still a stray nit, I needed to get back to work and she needed to get back to school. I was desperate, so I cut her hair short. She hated it, and she recently told me that she’s still mad about it...

Why did they put us through the ordeal of staying out of school with no help from the school to resolve the problem? And why was it *so embarrassing*? She didn’t do anything wrong!

At that time I was teaching at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. One of my rabbinical students asked if she could meet with me – at my home. A rather unusual request. Guess why. She was teaching children in a local Hebrew School and had discovered that she too had contracted LICE. She too had a lot of curly hair. She knew that I had been struggling over this with my daughter -- after I’d been out of the College for a whole week of classes. She was too embarrassed to talk to me about this at the College lest anyone find out – she came to me because she wanted me to help her get rid of the lice. -- Just call me “Rabbi-Mom.”

So why the *embarrassment*? Maybe it was because we live in a culture that expects each of us, as individuals, to take personal responsibility for ourselves. If we have a problem like LICE, maybe we are not careful or clean enough, or maybe we should just quietly deal with it so no one else could be affected. After all, it’s gross. No one wants lice! If you have a contagious condition – you better make it go away. It’s your problem -- don’t make it mine!

The ethic of individual responsibility has motivated and enabled many Americans to unprecedented levels of personal achievement. But it comes with a cost – the value of collective responsibility. And when it comes to disease, illness and healthcare, we have done a dismal job of caring for public health. There are still millions of underinsured and uninsured people in our country. The affordable care act didn't go far enough to care for all of us.

We fear contagion because we are ill-equipped to help each other as individuals struggling with unpleasant health conditions, even those that should be fairly easily remedied. You have lice – it's your problem. *And -- there must something wrong with you if you don't succeed in resolving it, or healing.* It is just like when the AIDS epidemic spread and so many -- too many -- people reacted with judgment, rather than compassion. A society without compassion is spiritually empty.

Every spring the Torah reading calendar comes around to this week's and next week's portion, known by their Hebrew titles Tazria/Metzora, from Leviticus chapters 12-15. In synagogues all over the world there is collective, "ugh" -- why are we reading this? These chapters, detailing the diagnosis and treatment of leprosy and other infectious skin conditions, in the context of purification for sacred worship, make us uncomfortable in their graphic detail and ancient pre-scientific medicine. The priests of ancient Israel were not only religious functionaries, intermediaries between common people and God, but also the administrators of an ancient public health system. What can we do with this text when it doesn't seem to have anything to do with *our* world? Pity the 12-year-old child whose bar or bat mitzvah falls during these weeks. How can they find meaning in this for the preparation of their devar Torah, the speech when they share of their own interpretation of a section of Torah, from the portion for the week. Oy, what's a kid to do?

So, every year, I eagerly anticipate the opportunity to help others uncover the mystery of the values lessons and interpretive possibilities in these chapters. The Torah only **appears** to be talking simply about skin disease and ritual purity vs. impurity. Yet, these chapters in the early readings from Leviticus are as much a window into our ancestors' values and ethics as much it is a mirror into our world. We may *think* we are beyond worrying about scaly skin or malignant eruptions as religious issues. After all, we have doctors to deal with that. But actually, we have a lot to learn from the Torah's fixation on the contagious affectations of our bodies.

For example, these chapters push us to consider: How do we treat people who are otherly-abled, or whose bodies are shaped and formed in ways that our society considers outside the range of "normal"? Or those who don't fit our society's superficial definition of beauty? Or those who have skin conditions or wounds or missing limbs or scars? How can we see each other NOT by appearance, but our character?

These Levitical laws also remind us to ask: How do we help those who are suffering from illness to become well? How do we make sure that all people are able to receive healthcare; and the care that will prevent us from becoming incapacitated from illness? Whose responsibility is this?

These and much more are among the powerful values questions that this section of Torah raises for us.

In Vayikra/Leviticus 13:47-51 we read expansive laws concerning the spread of disease through infected clothing.

Leviticus 13:47:

And when the plague of leprosy is in a garment, whether it be a woolen garment, or a linen garment; And when the plague of leprosy is in a garment, whether it be a woolen garment, or a linen garment; or in the warp, or in the woof, whether they be of linen, or of wool; or in a skin, or in any thing made of skin. And the priest shall look upon the plague, and shut up that which hath the plague seven days. And he shall look on the plague on the seventh day: if the plague be spread in the garment, or in the warp, or in the woof, or in the skin, whatever service skin is used for, the plague is a malignant leprosy: it is unclean. And if the priest shall look, and, behold, the plague be not spread in the garment, or in the warp, or in the woof, or in any thing of skin;" ...

The text goes on to detail the examination, quarantine, cleaning and resolution of the diseased article, even commanding the destruction of garments or sections of garments that cannot be cured of the contagion. As we find in the other sections of Tazria/Metzora, the overall concern is that **the public be protected from the spread of contagion.**

The great Medieval sage Rashi interpreted the phrase, “a malignant eruption” on fabric or leather to mean “a prickly leprosy.” It was, in his view, a curse of “prickling briars and lacerating thorns.” What could Rashi mean? What *was* attached to the fabric that would harm others? Was the introduction of some foreign substance or material responsible for the spread of a nasty affliction? Evidently so. Rashi is interpreting this text to be telling us to avoid adding things that can cause harm -- in this case, harm to a large part of the community by spreading something toxic through the community. Rashi’s comments go on to teach that if the walls of a house are afflicted with some toxic substance, you may need to tear the walls down, or tear down the whole house.

This teaches us: Don’t introduce anything that will cause harm to the health of individuals or the community. Then, if it still happens that something toxic is introduced into the environment, it is the community’s responsibility to remove it immediately. This is not about shame; it is about getting the job done. That is the difference between individual and collective responsibility.

There is collective responsibility for **preventing** the introduction of polluting, sickening or poisoning agents into our environment in every possible way that this could happen. And should that pollution somehow happen, the community shares responsibility for remedying the problem with due haste.

Only then can all of the community be pure to stand with God.

Everything and everyone is interconnected, and we animate the sparks of Divine light and healing when we share responsibility for a safe and healthy world. If we fail to recognize or to act on the shared value of health and wellbeing, we have blocked the Divine from our world and ourselves. God is not present when we treat health as an individual responsibility, or when we hoard the resources that could keep all of us healthy for the few who have the ability to protect themselves from health risks. The Torah points out that healthcare for the wealthy few only goes so far -- our world is too interconnected to hide from the complications that arise from greed and apathy. The treatment of our natural resources and our bodies is all part of one whole -- we share both the consequences of negligence or willful harm, as well as the benefits of mutual responsibility.

This year we have learned of the willful disregard for health by officials in the state of Michigan. The largely poor, and predominantly minority community of Flint Michigan, not very far from where I lived twenty years ago in SW Michigan, has been permanently damaged and harmed by the introduction of poisonous lead into the water system. The money-saving decision to pump water from the Flint River through lead pipes without treatment to prevent the leaching of the lead was more than a mistake. It was more than greedy. It was more than foolish. It was evil, because it was a willful disregard of predictably harmful consequences. An entire town's population, especially its children and babies, will suffer for the rest of their lives from irreversible lead poisoning. This was a preventable form of contagion -- it is just what the Torah and our sages like Rashi were warning against. It is a demonstration of what happens when our sage Ramban defined as "God departing from him." That is what evil is -- is when we have closed our eyes and our minds and our hearts from God's spirit. Then the harm that we bring upon others is to our harm too.

How can any individual be whole, healthy and safe when we do not recognize the essential truth of collective, mutual responsibility? How healthy can a community remain when the souls of some, especially those in power, have blocked God's spirit from their consciousness?

Individual responsibility is important, but it has its limits. Yes, we each must find the path to our most moral, ethical, most fully human selves. But we cannot do this alone. We need community. That is why the Torah spends so many detailed chapters on the laws of purity, including the laws regarding leprosy and other contagious afflictions -- ultimately they are about how we maintain the spiritual and physical wellbeing of ALL of us.

So what should be done for the people of Flint? What must be done in all places where willful disregard of public health harms a community, especially those most vulnerable?

We have a sacred obligation to speak out and to demand remedies, compensation, and repair of what has been damaged, including the lives of those who were poisoned. We have a sacred obligation to demand that power and greed not govern decisions that affect the health and wellbeing of our world and our lives.

How could officials who willfully ignored warning of poisonous water remain in power? The Torah instructs the priests in the ancient world to carefully examine the fabric -- the warp or the woof or the skin for any green or red streak -- or any sign of toxins. What if they had noticed or been warned of the signs of such contagion and had just let it go because it was too much trouble, too costly, to fix the problem? Unequivocally, the Torah commands that it is a great sin to allow such neglect.

The sin of greed, and individual responsibility without collective and mutual responsibility, harms us all. We can't wait for God to fix these problems. The Torah taught that the people, even the ancient priests, have the wisdom, the tools and the power to care for the health and well-being of all members of the community. We can only find God's care and protection when we help each other. This is our sacred responsibility.

What a delight to be able to share learning with Pastor May and your community. Our deep, heartfelt sharing has made this pulpit swap more than a superficial show of friendship. We know that we can trust each other to carry the torch of God's compassion each in our own way, and to work together to fulfill our sacred mission to repair the world. Thank you for the honor of this partnership.