

Tazria-Metzora 5781

Not Quite Home

A colleague recently wrote that this week's double parashah used to be the one we all struggled with. How could this ancient language of contagion and separation and quarantine and rehabilitation be relevant today? Surely categories of purity and impurity are no longer part of the lives we live?

And then the pandemic came, and you could almost hear the screech of brakes as the parashah did a 180 degree turn to propel itself to the top of the Torah relevance charts.

A year on, it's still speaking to us.

We'll focus this morning on the opening of chapter 14 (it's on page 660 in the Humash). This passage describes how the person who has recovered from contagion in quarantine is to re-enter the community.

They don't just walk back in. There's an intricate ritual that needs a priest to conduct it. First there is a complex sacrifice involving scarlet thread, hyssop, one bird that is slaughtered and another that is set free. Then the person washes and shaves off all their body and head hair. Then they take a ritual bath and return to the camp, where they wait seven days, sitting outside their tent. Then they shave their whole body and head again. Then they come back to the priest with another sacrifice - animals this time. The priest elevates one of the animals, then slaughters it and daubs its blood on the ridge of the person's right ear, the thumb of the person's right hand and the big toe of the person's right foot. Then the priest anoints those same places with oil and pours some oil on the person's head. Then the animal for the burnt offering is slaughtered and sacrificed. And finally, the person is pure.

As the availability of vaccines and the proportion of our population in this country who are vaccinated increase, we, too, are confronting the question of how to re-enter society. Whether it is how to go back into our workplaces, or how to socialize outdoors or indoors, or how to reopen the places we worship, there is already a recognized phenomenon called 'Covid Re-Entry Anxiety.' After a year of blurring and fog while at the same time being called upon to be constantly adapting and reframing, many of us are contemplating the road ahead with a mixture of excitement and dread.

There's nothing new under the sun: it must have been much the same for the *metzora*, the person who had been quarantined outside the camp while they recovered from *tzara'at*, the strange disease that puts things that should be inside on the outside and messes with the boundary between the skin and the world.

So what is the function of the ritual, and what can we learn from it to help us today?

First we need to notice that the ritual exists in the first place. It answers a need - this moment of reintegration and rehabilitation needs careful marking and observance. In fact, the ritual is almost exactly the same as the one that was used for ordaining the priests themselves - see p 815. So it's code for a kind of extreme holiness/specialness. Coming back in, getting going again, is a significant change, a change which must be held and acknowledged.

Next, let's notice the process is gradual. There's waiting (more waiting, even after the waiting of quarantine...). The person is allowed back into the camp but remains 'outside,' in the liminal space outside their tent. I think of porches, backyards, the levee, the Sukkah space - all the liminal spaces in which we have gathered as we make this journey ourselves.

The journey is punctuated with symbols of purification. The person washes. They immerse. They shave themselves - so they actually look as different on the outside as they might feel on the inside. When we make a transition such as this one, we must leave something of ourselves behind. What will that be for us?

And the journey is a journey from death to life. A bird is set free. This is different from the ritual for the priests, where all the animals involved are killed - and unique in Tanakh. Our traditional commentators note that the bird is not to be released to the desert or to the sea - not into places where it can be lost or destroyed - but into another liminal space, the space of the 'open country' - not yet in community, but on the way back.

And then there are the ritual actions. The priest daubs the person with blood and anoints them with oil on the ridge of their right ear, the tip of their right thumb and the tip of their right big toe. What does all this mean? (Remember, again, that we are in the book of patterns.)

Why the ear rather than the nose/mouth? Was the person still wearing a mask?! Or perhaps there is a significance to listening as a person makes this transition. I remember my grandfather's wisdom: we have two ears and one mouth for a reason. Perhaps after a brush with sickness we need to listen twice as much as we speak?

Why the right hand? The Torah like other ancient works, shows strong preference for right over left, so the right hand is the first point of action with the world. The commentator Hizkuni (R Hezekiah b Manoah, France 13c) specifies that it is the back of the hand that was anointed, a symbol of letting go.

And the right foot must symbolize the first step back into life. Esther Hendler reminded me last week of the ritual of rising from shivah - the tradition of accompanying the mourner as they take their first steps outside their home into the world that has been forever changed by the loss of the one they love. We will walk as we walked before - but everything is different.

Why is the healed one anointed with both blood and oil? Daubing with blood was common in sacrificial ritual, but oil has a different kind of meaning. In psalm 104 we read that it makes human faces shine, a symbol of joy and satisfaction. (It's a fact that lavender oil and vitamin E oil do indeed heal the skin.) So this is a symbol of nourishment and rehabilitation. We say to the returning person, as we say to each other - you were touched by death and now you are touched by life.

As a postscript we should notice that if people are too poor to bring enough animals to sacrifice, they get a different ritual. Nobody is to be left behind on the journey back to healing.

But I come back to the birds. Not to the sea and not to the desert, but to the open country - to freedom but to a place that is not quite home. There is still going to be some waiting before we ourselves fly free again. But as we make that journey together, let's remember the importance of rituals along the way, and observe them, so we can consciously hold every precious moment of transition.