



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Metzora 5768

By Carol Towarnicky

April 12, 2008

As the title suggests, this week's *parshah* deals with the care and treatment of *metzoraim*—lepers—as well as people with other physical afflictions and diseases. The text gives instructions for purification so that individuals who leave the community because of illness and impurity may re-enter safely. Not surprisingly, fresh water is essential to the process: “He shall...bathe his body in *mayim chayim* and he shall be clean.”<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrew phrase *mayim chayim* translates as “living waters.” These waters are, indeed, the waters of life. The sense of the idiom, according to modern translator Robert Alter, is that the water is not stagnant, but flowing, either from a spring or river. “The...ritual,” he writes, “is designed to carry off the impurities from the place inhabited by the community.”<sup>2</sup>

While water's function of carrying disease away from the camp is central to the *parshah*, the phrase “living waters” also provides a description of what the water brings to the community. The words “living waters” convey how essential clean fresh water is to all people. It provides for sanitation and health, both in treating illness and in preventing it.

The *parshah* makes the assumption that illness is inevitable. The word “when” is used repeatedly to introduce the instructions for healing.<sup>3</sup> This phrasing calls on us to ensure that we can treat illness, as well as prevent it as much as possible. In this context, we are directed to ensure access to clean water in order to restore health and life.

Note that the Torah assumes that, even in the desert, living waters will be available for cleansing and purification. In a sense, ensuring that the Israelites had access to flowing water for drinking and sanitation was essential to their national survival. Yet in the modern global community, billions of people lack access to the water they need to live and thrive.

The lack of clean water endangers the health and economic well-being of more than a third of the developing world.<sup>4</sup> According to the United Nations, 2.6 billion people—42 percent of the world's population—lack access to basic sanitation. This results in preventable child and adult deaths and disease, and expands the divide between rich and poor.<sup>5</sup>

Improving sanitation can dramatically improve the lives of individuals and communities. Every dollar spent on improving sanitation and hygiene results in up to 34 dollars saved in health, education and social and economic development.<sup>6</sup> 2008 is the International Year of Sanitation, part of the International Decade for Action on Water

---

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 15:13

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter. *The Five Books of Moses*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 599

<sup>3</sup> Vayikra 15:2, 13, 16, 19, 25, 28

<sup>4</sup> United Nations press release, March 5, 2008. “Secretary-General, in Message for World Water Day, Calls Lack of Political Will Biggest Culprit in Failure to Achieve Basic Sanitation Goal.” <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2008/sgsm11451.doc.htm>

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization: Celebrating Water for Life. [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/en](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/en)

<sup>6</sup> 2008 International Year of Sanitation brochure, <http://esa.un.org/iys/docs/UN%20Sanitation%20Brochure.pdf>

declared by the United Nations in 2005. While significant progress is being made on providing safe drinking water, the drive to increase sanitation is well below its targets.

The major barrier, says U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, is a lack of political will. Our elected leaders have not made water a priority and neither have we. Here again, the Torah teaches us.

The Israelites who fell ill, who became impure with skin afflictions and discharge, were not neglected by the community. Rather, they were cared for by the most revered members of the community, the priests. The religious and political leaders themselves stepped out of the *mishkan* and walked among the people to engage personally with lepers.

Imagine the implications for our global community if political and religious leaders paid regular visits to those suffering from preventable diseases, to those denied access to sanitation, to those without living water. Providing a spotlight for the current reality would build political will. It is when leaders step out of their houses of leadership and walk among the community that real needs begin to be addressed.

The name of the U.N. movement for water and sanitation is called "Water for Life." This week's *parshah* calls on us to raise our voices to make clean water a focal point of our action and advocacy.



**Carol Towarnicky** is a freelance writer in Philadelphia who recently retired after 31 years as an editorial writer and columnist with the Philadelphia Daily News. She is a founding member and former president of Mishkan Shalom, an activist Reconstructionist synagogue with a mission to integrate prayer, study and action for social justice. In a regular column she continues to write for the Daily News called "Common Good," she tries to "pray with the news," to apply progressive religious values to current events. Carol can be reached at [towarnicky@aol.com](mailto:towarnicky@aol.com).

©2008 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit [www.ajws.org/parshah](http://www.ajws.org/parshah).

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.