



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Tazria-Metzora 5769

By Rachel Farbiarz

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In this week's double portion of *Tazria-Metzora* we read of the purification ritual for the *metzora*, the unfortunate person struck with *tzara'at*—a preternatural skin disease that resulted in a status of ritual uncleanness and temporary banishment from Israel's encampment. The surprising intimacy of the purification ritual underscores the importance of restoring dignity and community to those living with stigmatic disease.

In the biblical imagination, the *metzora* occupied a space similar to that of the leper in the popular imagination—one who is isolated and cast-out for a shameful affliction.<sup>1</sup> Although indisputably mistaken, many English editions of the Torah preserve a centuries-old chain of mistranslations that renders *tzara'at* as “leprosy” and *metzora* as “leper.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, some translations of the Torah deliberately preserve this error to imbue our understanding of *tzara'at* with the dread and fear inevitably conjured by leprosy's mention. This malevolent portrait of *tzara'at* is further reinforced by the Rabbis' reading of the malady as Divine punishment for acts of slander and malicious gossip.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop, the ritual for the *metzora's* purification is jarring in the physical intimacy it demands between the priest and the afflicted. After initial rites that permit the *metzora* to reenter the encampment, the *metzora* offers sacrifices. From these, the priest “take[s] some of the blood of the guilt offering, and . . . put[s] it on the ridge of the right ear of him who is being cleansed, and on the thumb of his right hand, and on the big toe of his right foot.” The priest then pours sacrificial oil into his own left palm. Some of this oil he sprinkles “before the Lord.” Some he smears on the *metzora* over the sacrificial blood. The remnant, he pours onto the *metzora's* head.<sup>4</sup>

The intimacy of this ritual emerges clearly when one considers that the priest—who must avoid any contact with ritual uncleanness—himself smears the *metzora's* extremities and anoints him with oil. In so doing, he advertises that the *metzora* retains no impurity, but is instead suitable for an intimate encounter with the holy man. Once the *metzora* is purified—these rituals seem to say—there is no clinging “taint.” The rite is thus carefully calibrated to remove not just the *metzora's* ritual uncleanness, but also to restore his dignity, to eliminate any residual stigma or shame.

This message is further underscored by the ritual's scriptural context. Similar smearing and anointing appear elsewhere. Aaron's and his sons' priestly consecration is marked by Moses smearing sacrificial blood onto their extremities.<sup>5</sup> Saul is transformed from citizen to King when Samuel anoints his head with oil.<sup>6</sup> Just as these rituals confer Divine authority to priests and kings, so too do they confer re-acceptance of the *metzora* into the Divine community. Indeed, he is not begrudgingly allowed back in, but is honored through the same choreography that dignifies Israel's priests and kings.

<sup>1</sup> For example, see *Midrash Tanchuma Metzora 2*.

<sup>2</sup> For explanation of this chain of mistranslations, see the discussion in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, Gunther Plaut, ed. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981, pp. 828-29.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Plaut, p. 829.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 14:10-20.

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 8:23-24.

<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 10:1.

The restoration of dignity and community at this ritual's heart has palpable ramifications for our response to the global HIV/AIDS crisis. While there certainly has been much progress on this front, the isolation of people living with HIV/AIDS remains a trenchant obstacle decades into the pandemic. Individuals are still abandoned by family and community, left to suffer alone. The ill resist testing because of the stigma that diagnosis brings. And as the pandemic spreads, it imports its shame and isolation anew.<sup>7</sup>

This heart-breaking situation is probably best expressed in the words of Anyo, a Burmese woman living with HIV. She recounts:

My life has been on a downward spiral ever since [I was diagnosed]. Even my closest friends wouldn't speak to me. I decided to return to my village...to be with my family, but never told them about my condition. Where I live, people...would never accept me and I was afraid of the stigma I would face. In [Burma], learning you are HIV-positive is like receiving a death sentence....<sup>8</sup>

Like Anyo, those living with HIV/AIDS too-often become our modern-day *metzoraim*, stigmatized by sickness, shamed by affliction and banished from community.

Just as the priest restored the *metzora's* dignity through his anointing touch, we have a duty to restore dignity and community to people living with HIV/AIDS—to provide them with more than medicine and clinical treatment. Critical in this effort are those grassroots projects throughout the world—such as those supported by AJWS—that fight discrimination and educate communities to reduce isolation and stigma.

At the core of the *metzora's* purification ritual is the silent injunction that we are to encounter each other not only as healer and patient, priest and *metzora*, but as human beings. Such encounters have the potential to embrace the *metzora* back into Israel's encampment, and the individual living with HIV/AIDS into her community—each with dignity, each with humanity, each created *b'tzelem elo-him*, in the Divine image of God.



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<sup>7</sup> V. Prakash, "Survey Pinpoints Stigma Against HIV/AIDS," *Johns-Hopkins Newsletter*, 14 Feb. 2008.

<http://media.www.jhnewsletter.com/media/storage/paper932/news/2008/02/14/Science/Survey.Pinpoints.Stigma.Against.HivAids-3212157.shtml>.

<sup>8</sup> IRIN, "Anyo, 'I don't Know Whether I Will Live or Die,'" Dec. 2008. <http://www.irinnews.org/HOVReport.aspx?ReportId=81916>.

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