



# WEEKLY PARASHA

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Parashat Metzora | April 4, 2014 / 4 Nissan 5774

Parashat Metzora continues to detail the laws of *tumah*, impurity, that can occur to people and that would require them to maintain their distance from the Mishkan. The *parasha* opens with the case of the *metzora*, the person afflicted with the skin disease of *tzara'at*, and how he is to become pure: "This shall be the law of the *metzora*, the skin-diseased person, on the day of his becoming pure..." (Vayikra 14:2). The Torah wraps up the discussion of *tzara'at*, and then turns its attention to other people who are impure - the *zav*, literally the "flow," a man with an unusual penile emission; a man who had a seminal emission; the *niddah*, the woman who has menstruated; and the *zavah*, the woman who has had an irregular flow of blood.

The common denominator of all of these *tumaot* is that they are the result of a state occurring to a person; they are not contracted from the outside. Whether the state is a skin disease, or some type of flow, it is something that is sourced in the person him or herself. The Gemara refers to these people as those who have *tumah yotzei mei'gufo*, the *tumah* emerges from their bodies. The *tumah* here is of less severity than the *tumah* of touching a corpse. Kohanim are prohibited from contracting corpse-impurity and the purification from this impurity requires not just a *mikveh*, but the ashes of the Red Heifer. Nevertheless, although less severe in terms of its intensity, the *tumah* of this week's *parasha* is more severe in one important area: it directly defines the status of the person, and demands that such a person not enter into to the Levite camp, or after the wilderness period, the Temple Mount. A person with corpse-impurity, by contrast, can go up onto the Temple Mount.

What is the reason behind this greater severity? When *tumah* comes from the outside, even if it is very intense, it does not define the identity of the person to whom it transferred. A person who touched a corpse is just that - a person who touched a corpse. We do not have a proper noun for such a person - he is only described in terms of what he has done. In contrast, this week's *parasha* is filled with a cast of characters: the Metzora, the Zav, the Niddah, the Zavah. These people are *defined* by their status, since their status reflects their physical state of being - their flows, their skin, and so on. They themselves are the source of *tumah*, and this becomes

their identity. Hence, they must keep even more distant from the Temple, where the primary concern is not just to keep *tamei* things out of its environs, but more specifically *tamei* people.

The difference between identity and essential character on the one hand, and traits, behaviors, and what the Greek philosophers would call "accidental characteristics" on the other hand is one of great importance. We know that a key educational and parenting principle is to focus on the behavior, not the person. "I know you are a good person, but what you did was wrong. The action was bad." is a healthy parenting technique. "Bad, bad, bad!" yelled with a finger pointing to the child, is not. One reinforces the person's sense of herself as a good person, and calls on her to live up to that true, inner self. The other leads the child to see herself as bad, and to live up to, or rather down to, that identity.

While we know this principle when it comes to parenting, we often forget it when it comes to how we relate to those who are different than we. I still remember that until my children were about 10 years old and learned about the Civil Rights Movement in school and how our country had discriminated against blacks, they were blissfully unaware that people were categorized as black people and white people. If asked how our South African babysitter was different than we, they would have - and did! - respond that while we had light brown skin, she had dark brown skin. What a wonderful age of innocence! But it makes us wonder, why do we use skin color to categorize people, to define identity? We don't use eye color to do so.

We so often take a trait and decide to identify it with a person's very identity, very self. This can help us organize our reality, but it can also lead to blatant and subtle forms of generalization and discrimination. My children have special needs, but that doesn't define them. I do not want them to go through life as "he is Apserger's" or even "he is autistic." I want no one - and most of all not them - to forget that first a foremost they are special, unique, wonderful people,

people who are so much more than any particular condition they may have. As my wife, Devorah Zlochower, and I wrote in an article on this topic, "Most importantly, speak to our children and recognize them for the beautiful souls they are. Our children are poets, artists, philosophers and psychologists; their emotional and spiritual lives are deep and intense ones." When people meet one of my sons, they need to see Kasriel or Netanel; if all they can see is "special needs" then they are not seeing them at all.

When we realize how easy it is for us to take a trait and turn it into an identity, and we then turn back to this week's *parasha*, we will discover that we have done the same to the people described therein. It is true that the Torah gives a proper name to the one with *tzara'at* - he is a *metzora*, but that case is the exception, and the name is ironically only given when he is in the process of leaving that state. However such labeling is clearly not the case when it comes to the other people mentioned in the *parasha*. The man with an irregular flow is *ha-zav*, which could be translated as "the Flow-er," or "the Emitter." However, almost all translations do not take this approach, and understand that the word *zav* is not meant here as a name, but as a descriptor, and translate it as "the man who has a flow."

This insistence to describe, rather than label, is even clearer in the other cases. The man with the seminal emission is not, as he is in Rabbinic literature, a *ba'al ker*, an ejaculant, he is rather one *asher teizei mimenu shikhvat zera*, "who has experienced a seminal emission" (Vayikra 15:16). The woman who menstruates is not a *niddah*, a flow-er or a menstruant. She is only called this in Rabbinic literature. In the Torah, however, she is a woman who is *bi'nidattah*, "experiencing her flow." (15:20). The woman with an irregular flow is not a *zavah*, as she is in Rabbinic literature, she is rather a woman who is "in her flow" (15:26, 28).

All of these people are described, not named. They are not disabled people, they are people with disabilities. This makes all the difference.

Because the *tumah* occurs to them directly, they own their *tumah* more, and they are more distanced from the Mikdash. And yet, the fullness of their identity does not have to be and should not be reduced to this status. This status may not even be a bad one: it is a natural occurrence, and in the case of the menstrual flow and the seminal emission, it is part of the human capacity to create new life. But who wants to be reduced to any status, even a neutral one?

As humans it is easier for us to assign labels and categorize. It helps us

organize our reality more easily. This is why the Rabbis have given names to all of them, have given us this colorful cast of characters. They had *halakha* to discuss, and it would have been unwieldy to constantly be referring to "the man who has a flow," or "the woman who is in the midst of her menstruation," rather than just simply as "the *zav*," or "the *niddah*." And it is easier to conceptualize *halakha* categories and rules in reference to people who are named, categorized, and assigned a particular identity.

This might be somewhat necessary in legal texts, but it is dangerous at the human level. When dealing with people, labeling is reductionist and it dehumanizing. The Torah's careful use of descriptors rather than labels reminds us that we should think of these individuals as people, people with special conditions, people with disabilities, but not disabled people. These are states of being; they are not who the person is.

When we recognize the humanity and the irreducible nature of the person, we allow them to transcend any state or limitation. All these people can become *tahor* because we refuse to box them in and define them by these states. We recognize their humanity, their essence, their innate purity, and this allows them to undergo the process of *taharah*, of purification, that will allow them to regain this state of being. By never losing sight of the unique and irreducible *tzelem E-lohim* of the other, by refusing to reduce a person to certain states, characteristics, conditions or generalizations, we help protect that *tzelem E-lohim* and bring all of us one step closer to entering the Mikdash, and to living in a world in which we experience the Godliness of each individual.

## Shabbat Shalom!

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