

Metzora 5782
Good Torah
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Nearly every feel-good d'var Torah I have heard on today's parashah assumes midrashic interpretations—that tzara'at came as a consequence for impure speech, or that genital emissions elevate us spiritually somehow, to a level where we cannot approach sacred activity or intimate relations with other people. It is much easier to d'rash on our parashah from a place where we make it mean what it does not say.

It is also easy to understand why my rabbinic forebears chose to use this moment to provide their listeners with detailed instructions for preparing for Pesach. Traditionally on this Shabbat the rabbi would go on for an hour or more about Pesach. So, settle in...no, I will spare you that!

Well then, here is a brief sketch of what we read today—in case you missed it:

First, we have an exorcism ritual for a recovered *metzora*, a.k.a. “leper,” involving two birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff made from larvae, hyssop, fresh water, and a clay bowl. That is followed by a series of purifications and ritual offerings in which the afflicted's right ear, right thumb, and right big toe are wiped with sacrificial blood and oil. Next up, we learn about similar procedures for a house infected with tzara'at, minus the human body parts.

Then we go to other impurities mostly related to genital emissions of one kind or another, the cooties they transmit and their attendant requirements to remove these kinds of tumah (impurity).

That's the parashah we read today.

Hmmn.

I want to say “it's all good!” –that there is meaning beneath the surface—and there *is*. But this is *not* the Judaism we know. In fact, it is not Judaism at all. Today we read about Bronze Age, cultic practices given to our ancestors for dealing with fear and mystery in the liminal space between life and death, in an idiom we imagine people at that time would accept. To us, of course, these practices feel weird, icky and uninspiring. If this parashah were all Moshe taught, and he then asked me if I'd like to take it with a side of 613 mitzvot, I'd run for the hills.

Fortunately, this parashah does not represent not the whole Torah. But we can't just say that—because it kind of does. Purity and impurity held huge importance for our ancestors. In a cancel culture such as ours, I think we must ask: How do we follow a Torah that contains elements that make no good sense to us?

Here's a short answer.

It is simply a fact that the Torah we read today has roots so ancient that some of its words and even major concepts no longer obtain. When we encounter a problematic text, we have three choices:

We can say that it defies our understanding but nonetheless is sacred and good and must be followed to the extent possible. Another way to put that is that we can bury our heads in the sand and refuse to see the problem. Many Jews take this approach, but in a shul like ours, that decision might feel intellectually sketchy and morally problematic. We can cancel the Torah and say we won't hear a word because it's obviously flawed. That is the approach the vast majority of our ancestors took, following the destruction of the Second Temple. They simply drifted away from any serious attempt to find relevance in a tradition so radically overturned by the cessation of the sacrificial cult. Fortunately we have a third option. We can hold onto Torah despite the fact that it contains objectionable or irrelevant material, and demand that Torah live up to its sacred intention. This requires using tools of modern scholarship to probe its meanings and reformulate its practices. That is the choice the rabbis who created Judaism made, and it is the choice that congregations like ours make, over and over again. Some parts will be rejected and others will be enhanced. Broadly speaking, this is usually the approach least taken, but in the case of Torah, when a small minority of defeated Israelites chose this path, they built the Judaism we practice. It worked.

In terms of today's parashah, specifically, though, if we want to be inspired, then typically we turn to midrash to extract a useful message, as I mentioned earlier,. However, I do believe there is something right in the parashah that we might take to heart today, and I would like to share it with you as one example of the Option 3 practice I have just promoted.

It turns out that the ritual for the healed metzora resembles two other rituals we read about over the last few weeks: the red heifer ritual of purification after contact with death, and the ear-finger-toe smearing that was part of the installation of the priests. The blending of those rituals points us toward an understanding that the ultimate goal of the purification process was not simply to eliminate impurity, but also to elevate a person toward holiness. We can build on the idea that a personal crisis might inspire us to live more intentionally, maybe with more tenderness and compassion than we felt before.

The rituals we read about today for a person newly healed of tzara'at involve a symbolic amputation of sin, purification from a near-death experience, and an elevation ritual. We, too, can contemplate what it would take to elevate our own lives from the places where we are living with rupture or brokenness.

As part of my own spiritual chametz removal, I sat with this idea over the past week. I asked myself: What does returning to relationship after a rupture, even if I feel I have been wronged, demand of me? And, how might my life be better if I meet those demands? Is there something I would do well to let go, because it drains, rather than gives life? Might I feel liberated by letting go of facts that may be true, in my view, but do not serve the relationship, or me, for good? And is there something I might offer, whether or not the other deserves it, as a way of preparing my own heart for renewed hope?

It does feel like some kind of amputation to stop perseverating on negative feelings when I believe I have plenty of good reason to feel them. It can feel out of place to make a sacrifice when we have suffered. But if we do those things, we just might find that we have liberated ourselves from draining patterns and made space for more good feelings.

We are people who believe we can get to a better place. Fundamentally that is one of the core messages of Pesach. We can come back from rupture and brokenness and be better than we were before.

That is my hope and prayer for all of us.

And whaddya know—that came straight out of this week's parashah. In this case, I hope you will agree, it was good Torah after all.

Shabbat shalom.