



THE ILLNESS, THE DIAGNOSIS, THE REMEDY

Tazria-Metzora 5781

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When the affliction appeared experts were called close to determine if it was a harmless, surface reaction, or a symptom of a dangerous illness taking root in a body already profoundly unwell. Today the experts-- those closest to the pain point—are unequivocal: the contagion of violence in our society is no surface rash. Police killings, mass shootings—these are not isolated incidents, individual tragedies. Those pulling the trigger are not lone gunmen, bad apples. A dangerous affliction has taken root in our nation, and it threatens to destroy the whole body if it's not rooted out.

Tazria-Metzora is IKAR's birthday *parasha*, the Torah portion of our first shabbat together.

I remember standing before a packed room in the Robertson arts studio in the spring of 2004, that very first shabbat, faced with the challenge of translating passages from Leviticus about contagious, erupting skin lesions into a message that would inspire us all to birth new kind of community, with an old-new way of practicing Judaism into the world. I had a kind of NY, NY attitude about it: if we can make it there, we'll make it anywhere. Genesis would be a breeze. This parasha will always be associated in my mind with the challenge of that birth moment.

Several years later, the prominent association with this Torah portion shifted for me from that birth moment to another moment: Hart Campbell's bar mitzvah. I will never forget Hart standing before our community, sharing his struggle with a Torah that compels the *metzora*, a person afflicted with a mysterious skin disease—*tzaraat*—to be shamed in front of the whole community, forced to publicly declare himself "Unwell! Unwell!" In the nearly two years since Hart and his big sister, Ruby, tragically died, as we grieved with Gail and Colin, and as we wrestled in unprecedented ways through the pandemic with illness and wellness, calamity and catastrophe, I have thought about Hart's struggle many times.

And I have thought about Hart's conclusion too, which I was so moved by that I shared last year at Kol Nidre, *b'shem amro*, in his name: that the public declaration not only makes sense but is an act of grace if we think of the *metzora* as a person dealing with anxiety, depression, OCD. Hart, who knew something about the human hearts and our struggles, could see how the stigma around mental illness might lead people who are suffering to withdraw, precisely when they need the most help. He realized that only when we step forward and share what we're struggling with, only when we declare "Unwell! Unwell! Broken! Broken!" might we be embraced with love and support. I still shiver at the thought of it.

Later this morning, you'll hear another interpretation from another brilliant and sensitive young person, Mateo Weill, who will add his own interpretation to Hart's and to those of our Rabbis.

With gratitude to Hart and Mateo, and to all those teachers who have wrestled with this difficult text, I add my interpretation today to theirs.

I will start near the beginning of the parasha, where we're first introduced to the strange illness, *tzaraat*, understood by our Rabbis to be an external indication, a warning, of some kind of internal problem.

Because it is a disease that can quickly spread through both the body and the community, early diagnosis is critical. Let us look at one particular moment in the evaluation of this mysterious affliction:

וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַנִּגַּע בְּעוֹר־הַבָּשָׂר וְשֵׁעָר בְּנִגַּע הַפֶּה | לִבָּן וּמִרְאָה הַנִּגַּע עֲמֹק מֵעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ נִגַּע צָרַעַת הוּא וְרָאָהוּ
הַכֹּהֵן וְטָמְא אֹתוֹ:

The priest shall examine the affection on the skin of his body: if hair in the affected patch has turned white and the affection appears to be deeper than the skin of his body, it is a leprous affection; when the priest sees it, he shall pronounce him unclean. (Lev 13:3)

A person who has a suspicious skin rupture, potential evidence of *tzaraat*, is brought before the *kohen*, the priest, for an assessment. Imagine going to your dermatologist for an assessment of a spot that appears on your skin. The *kohen's* role is simple: he is called to determine if the illness is surface, or more than skin deep.

He gets close and looks carefully. If he perceives it to be no more than a surface indicator, the case is dismissed. A simple topical ointment and you'll be fine.

But if the *kohen* determines that the affliction is עֲמֹק מֵעוֹר בְּשָׂרוֹ -- deeper than skin, then, and only then, the person is declared *tamei*, impure. Contaminated. Unwell.

Now—to state the obvious—if your doctor wrongly diagnoses the spot on your skin as non-cancerous, even when it is in fact cancer, you are still in danger. You still need treatment, and you ignore it at your own peril. In contrast, *tzaraat* is determined SOLELY on the basis of the *kohen's* proclamation. If he doesn't call it an affliction, it is not.

But if he declares your ailment *tzaraat*, your whole life turns upside down. Your clothing is rent, your hair is shaved, you wear the garments of a mourner (Lev. 13:45). And you are to publicly proclaim, as Hart noted: טָמֵא וְטָמֵא | unwell, unwell! And as long as the affliction persists, you are sent into isolation, forced to dwell outside the camp. There is no normal, once that declaration is made. The full force of the community is dedicated to addressing the problem and rooting out the illness lest it spread and infect us all.

How does the *kohen* make such an important decision? Rambam (*Hilkhot Tumat Tzaraat* 1:6) notes that the *kohen* has to look closely and carefully to determine just how deep the blemish reaches beneath the surface. Is it just a rash, or is it a menacing and life-altering affliction? How deeply embedded is the illness in the system? Is this something we can live with, or something that will kill us if we don't treat it?

Think about that, in light of these past couple of painful days. I saw, a few times, some version of this post this week:

We interrupt our coverage of the protests of the police murder of Daunte Wright
...which interrupted the trial of the police murder of George Floyd
...which interrupted the coverage of the mass shooting in Colorado
...which interrupted the coverage of the anti-Asian shooting spree in Atlanta
...to bring you coverage of the point blank police shooting of 13 year old Adam Toledo,
...which has now been interrupted to bring you the coverage of a mass shooting at a FedEx facility in Indianapolis. God help us.

This makes me think about Hart Campbell's take on the *parasha*. What if *tamei, tamei* is not an acknowledgment of guilt, but a cry for help?

This is one read offered by the Rabbis in the Talmud, in Moed Katan 5a. Unwell! Unwell! – this is the wail of a person in distress. An invitation to the community, to the public, to pray for mercy on behalf of the one who is in pain.

This is happening to me, the *metzora* says. Don't look away! I need you to see me! I need you to give a damn! I need your help. Your love.

In our time, the *metzora* has been walking through the streets for years now, crying out *Tamei! Tamei!* Unwell! Unwell! The system is broken! We are broken!

But don't we try so hard not to hear! The *metzora* approaches, and we avert our eyes. We change channels. Find another route home.

Until something happens—maybe one of these terrible shootings. Maybe the murder of the 13-year-old boy who so resembles my own 12-year-old boy. Or maybe so many things happen in rapid succession that at some point the chorus of pain grows so great that we simply can no longer ignore it. We have no choice but to engage.

Today there is no *kohen*, no one person who makes the ultimate determination of how serious the sickness is in our society. There's no one, definitive voice. Instead, there are thousands of competing voices, all fighting for their narrative to be heard. It's easy, in all the noise, to get lost. But the Torah insists: וְאַתֶּם תְּהִיוּ לִי מִמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים -- *We are a nation of priests* (Ex 19:6). Each

of us, charged to decipher between a surface cut or rash and a deep rooted, life threatening illness. So who and what we listen to matters.

This week, I'm listening to the mothers.

You probably heard by now that when Duante Wright saw that the police signaled for him to pull over, he called his mother, a woman named Katie Wright. She was on the phone with him seconds before he was shot and killed.

A few days later the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner came together to lift their voices to the tragedy and travesty of violence toward Black men and boys in our country, and to offer words of love and consolation to Katie: "To my sister you are not alone, we are here for you."

I'm hearing echoes of my friend Rev. Najuma Smith-Pollard, praying for all of the mothers who've lost children: "...The womb is crying! The womb is hemorrhaging! The womb is hurting!"

I'm listening to George Floyd's family, who stepped out of the courtroom this week to offer words of comfort to the Wright family: "We will stand in support with you."

I'm listening to Fred Guttenberg, the father of Jamie, 16 when she was shot down in Parkland, who writes of waking up to the horror of the mass shooting in Indianapolis, offering his love and strength to the families of the victims.

I'm listening to the voices of those who've taken to the street in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota. Those who are tired of having their neighbors, their friends, their sons shot. I'm hearing their rage. Their grief. Their exhaustion. I'm hearing their public lament. Their call to action.

I'm listening to the rage of Charles Blow, who wrote just [this morning](#) that the gun violence and police violence that erupted this week are not coincidental. "The police justify their militarization... by correctly observing that they can be outgunned by a public with such easy access to guns, including military-style guns."

These are the survivors. Those who have lost the most. They are closest to the wound, and able to see what others might not notice.

They're begging the rest of us to see that this is no surface rash. These are not isolated incidents. Individual tragedies. Lone gunmen. Bad apples.

This is a dangerous affliction, and it's taken root deep in the system. An illness that threatens to destroy the whole body if not rooted out.

What those closest to the illness see is a pattern of racism, violence, and disgraceful inaction.

What they are calling for is justice and accountability. They demand an honest reckoning around the contagion of violence—gun violence and police violence—so that it doesn't spread, costing more precious lives. So that it doesn't leave more grieving mothers and shattered hearts and broken families.

It's terrifying to contemplate honestly diagnosing the illnesses that afflict our society. It would mean confronting long held assumptions. It would mean reckoning with our own culpability and complicity. It would mean hearing voices we'd much rather marginalize, and seeing truths we do not want to see.

And yet the Torah is clear: when signs of the affliction appear, we have no choice but to investigate. To get close and assess. And root it out before it spreads, endangering everyone.

I bless us in the days ahead with consolation and with agitation. With hope and with rage. With love and with courage. It will take all that, and more, to eradicate this deep-rooted illness, and to begin to move on a life affirming journey toward healing.

In a moment we'll recite the Mourner's Kaddish, saying the names of all of our loved ones who are no longer here with us. Today we add to that litany of grief those whose lives were taken this past week, whose names are now etched in our collective conscience:

From Chicago, 13-year-old Adam Toledo.

From Brooklyn Center, MN, 20-year-old Daunte Wright

In Indianapolis 32-year-old Matthew R Alexander, 19-year-old Samaria Blackwell, 66-year-old Amarjeet Johal, 64-year-old Jasvinder Kaur, 68-year-old Jaswinder Singh, 48-year-old Amarjit Skhon, 19-year-old Karlie Smith, and 74-year-old John Weisert.

Zikhronam livrakha. May their memories be a blessing. May their memories be a revolution.