

Shabbat Tazria 5784

April 13, 2024

Responding to Rose Genn and Sydelle Uretsky

Sydelle and Rose, yasher koach on working with one of the least pleasant parashiot in Torah, and emerging with two really important lessons for us in this time: the right of every person to quality health care and the need to bring outsiders back into the community. Both of you were concerned with the exclusion of the person with tzara'at from the people, recognizing as you said, Rose, when we isolate people who aren't contagious out of fear, "it can leave that person feeling lonely, ashamed, and dehumanized." And this is the essence of both of your divrei Torah: the desire to never exclude others, never to shame others, never to dehumanize others.

Your divrei Torah touch on one of the core concepts in Judaism: honoring human life. Honoring the lives of our people and honoring the lives of other people.

But before I say more about that, I want to point out that the parasha really talks about two sets of people who were isolated in ancient Israelite society – the metzora, the person with the skin disease tzara'at, and women who just gave birth. Both groups were considered impure, which wasn't impure in the way we understand it today, but was a Biblical category that signified danger. And the danger both of these groups represented was the liminal space, the grey area, between life and death. Maternal and infant mortality were common, and the blood of childbirth represented that fragility and liminality to our ancient ancestors. Biblical scholar Frank Gorman says, "The woman manifests the loss of life in the act of bringing forth a new life. It is the woman's location in this ambiguous state that generates her [impurity]. She holds together in her own body the realm of life and the realm of death." Baruch Levine adds, "by declaring the mother impure, susceptible, the community sought to protect and shelter her." There are other, less feminist, interpretations of maternal and infant isolation after childbirth, and we know that as Jewish tradition developed, the status of impurity assigned to women was used by some authorities to deny women access to full equality, but all agree that it is something about blood and the nexus between life and death that causes fear which causes isolation.

Same with the metzora, whose body is seen by the tradition as both living and dead. When Miriam is afflicted with this disease in the book of Numbers, Aaron asks Moses to pray for her so that their sister “will not be as one dead.” We can see that the metzora is required to act like a mourner, tearing their garment, as if they are mourning their own death. This in-between state leads to fear which leads to isolation. But, as my teacher Rabbi Dr. Tamara Eskenazi teaches, “after isolation, Leviticus... also concentrates on reconnecting the persons who have been isolated and on bringing them back to the center. The more marginalized the ill persons have been, the greater the effort to bring them back into the fold.” Dr. Eskenazi points out that the ritual for bringing the metzora back into the community is the same ritual as the ordination of the high priest. She says that the Torah “illustrates the tremendous investment in the social and religious reconnection and rehabilitation of persons formerly stigmatized and excluded.”

All of this – the anxiety about the liminal space between life and death, the isolation of the one who might be endangered or dangerous, and the tremendous effort to restore their belonging among the people – reflects the paramount priority of our people: honoring and embracing life.

The lives of our people and the lives of all people. This shows up in priests acting like mobile medical care units traveling outside the camp to care for and bring back the metzora. It looks like visiting the sick to give them hope and love and life, as you taught us Rose, and it looks like welcoming the stranger and not oppressing the stranger and treating the stranger as an equal, as you taught us, Sydelle. That means bringing immigrants, refugees, all diverse members of the Jewish community, and new kids at school— anyone who might feel like an outsider into the center of things, just as the priests did in the time of our ancestors. And it means to stand against all forms of exclusion, humiliation, and especially dehumanization.

I have given 19 sermons about the war since October 7, and today for the first time, I can't bring myself to give another one. I do not have words anymore. If you want to know what I have to say, all of my sermons including a big one I gave last week are on the CBE website. Today, your messages Rose and Sydelle, return us to the central idea of all of my sermons since October 7. This is the most important and enduring message we could possibly offer. In the face of all forms of dehumanization — dehumanization of Israelis, dehumanization of

Palestinians, we stand for honoring life. Honoring, saving, protecting, healing, desperately returning home (please Gd let it not be too late) all Israeli life. Honoring, saving, protecting, providing for the urgent and desperate needs and restoring the dignity of innocent Palestinian life. We stand simply and directly, beyond all of the many complexities, for honoring life.

This is also the central idea of the Exodus story, which is of course featured in Passover, our most defining holiday which arrives in just nine days. Pharaoh is the villain of the story because he devalues human life. Because he does not know us, he enslaves us and tries to kill us through harsh labor and then by killing our baby boys. All of the heroes in the story – G-d, who hears the cry of the oppressed Israelites, Shifra and Puah, the midwives who would not kill the babies, Yochevet, Moses's mother who saves his life with a basket on the river, Miriam, Moses's sister who saves his life by following that basket, Batya (Pharaoh's daughter) who adopts this slave child, Moses, who interrupts a taskmaster from beating a slave. They are the heroes of the story because they hear and see the humanity in others and act to save human life.

And, year after year, we emerge from the telling of the Passover story recommitted to this central Jewish idea – that our people's lives and all people's lives have inestimable value, that all lives deserve to be safe and all lives deserve to be free. May that, please G-d, be realized in our day.

Shabbat Shalom.