

Shabbat shalom and yashar koach, Molly and Zoey! You have both taught us beautiful and important Torah this morning about this difficult double parsha, Tazria-Metzora.

Molly, you taught us that when we talk about tzara'at, this skin disease, that it's not just something happening on the surface that needs to be dealt with. But that our pain, our impurity, reflects something happening deep inside of ourselves, and requires inner work to heal it.

And Zoey, you named that the laws about how to heal from tzara'at feel kind of antiquated and distant from who we are today. But you reminded us that, even still, this parsha teaches us that finding our way toward healing matters and is available to us - even if the tools we use today to heal are quite different from the ones you studied.

You both also correctly noted that this double portion is really very full of LAWS - like, meticulous and plentiful laws.

And that's a good call - because I want to suggest that your teachings and the vast amount of laws in this particular Torah portion is just the wisdom that we need most, at this moment in history. I'll explain.

See, this past Thursday was Law Day, observed this year for the first time with "The Rally for the Rule of Law," a gathering that was sponsored by the NY Bar Association. 1500 serious, buttoned up lawyers, CBE members among them, showed up together to reaffirm their oath to support and defend the constitution of the United States. They did this to speak out against the administration's unprecedented attacks on the integrity and independence of judges and lawyers and to affirm the importance of the rule of law - the notion that the law must be applied equally to all people, which has been violated many times in recent weeks. Traci Feit Love of Lawyers for Good Government reflected: "If *lawyers* are taking to the streets, it means something very serious ... is happening." And so it is: They went because the consequences of the degradation of the judiciary are so very dire.

As you may know, at CBE, we've been talking a lot about the law, probably more in the past three months than we ever have before. A lot about what's been happening to immigrants - some who have been kidnapped off the streets, some who are languishing in a terrible jail in El Salvador, and some **citizens** even, who have been removed from the country as children of immigrants - all without due process, which is the right to come before a judge and plead your case before you are punished in some way. These actions of the federal government have resulted in unspeakable cruelty, including the separation of families, disappeared loved ones, and the stoking of fear in communities across the country.

As a non-lawyer myself, a lot of this is new to me and I'm sure I'm still getting some of this language wrong, so I've been doing a lot of reading and asking questions to better understand the intricacies of our legal system in this most precarious moment. But it's also given me good reason to think about how Jewish tradition regarding law can inform this time and help us understand what is at stake here for all of us.

And that brings us back to the plentiful laws in this week's Torah portions.

Okay: So imagine that the person with tzara'at - which is this oozing and scary disease - visits the food market in the village, or strolls about town. We can guess how the people might have responded: Oh no! A disease! A contagion! Danger! We might imagine a mob gathering with pitchforks, seething with fear, eager to destroy this person who they see as a threat.

But instead of that happening, instead of devolving into an angry mob - our ancestors had these laws. A contagion? A disease? A threat? Go to the priest. He will look at you. There is a meticulous process.

See, Jewish text is full of stories and ideas that teach us the VALUES by which we want to live - teach us who we want to be and how we want to treat one another. But when things are very hot, or scary, or loaded - it's easy for our lizard brains to take over and to act in ways that do **not** reflect our values and are **not** who we want to be.

When we see a person who is sick, our Jewish values guide us toward being kind and caring and patient and compassionate. That's who we WANT to be. Our fear, though, can make us suspicious and impatient and even unkind. But a shared set of laws that require a practice of care lowers the temperature and guides us toward being our best selves, even when it's hard or we are afraid or reactive. That's part of why laws exist - to help us build and maintain the scaffolding and framework for the kind of society that we want to be. For in the absence of such laws, the most vulnerable would otherwise become victim to the whims of a cruel leader, a biased system, or an angry mob.

In fact, in Jewish tradition, the laws are not just a manifestation of any old values, but are actually an expression of LOVE. Earlier this morning, we prayed the words of Ahavah Rabbah - which is a prayer that thanks God for loving us and for expressing that love by giving us and teaching us the laws. Now, maybe some of us are thinking: isn't there some ancient conversation that positions **law** as the opposite of **love**? But that's not the case. In Jewish tradition, law expresses love between God and the people, and is a way to enact loving concern between the people and one another.

Consider how Torah teaches us our laws: You shall love your neighbor. You shall love the stranger. Love in Torah isn't just a feeling, but rather it's a series of required actions, laws, that put **love** into practice.

In fact, Medieval commentator, Ibn Ezra points out that the first time that the word *tzara'at* - the skin disease - is used in parshat Tazria: the verse doesn't ask "what should we do if a member of beit Yisrael, a Jewish person, has *tzara'at*?" but rather it says: *adam*. What should we do if a human being has *tzara'at*? How should we treat them? Why? Because, Ibn Ezra explains: the Book of Exodus teaches: *Torah achat y'hiyeh la'eizrach v'lager*. There shall be one law for the

citizen and the stranger alike. Why? Because that's what LOVE looks like in practice. Treating people equally, no matter who they are.

Listen, the system of applying the law in all cases can be inconvenient, annoying, it can slow down our natural human desires - but that is kind of the point. The president recently said: "We can't give everyone we want to deport a trial!" Because it would take too long. But the alternative is cruelty. And whether it is easier or faster to ignore the law, cruelty is not our most aspirational existence. This is when we most need to protect the rule of law in this country - when expelling or destroying the most vulnerable is more expedient if one were to go around the law. And that is the Torah of the plentiful laws around the person with tsara'at.

So when we witness the dismantling or manipulation or ignoring of the law, we can see what's at stake. It's everything. It's the safety of the most vulnerable, it's the slippery slope of expedient cruelty, and it's our very souls.

Ezra Klein recently noted that Kilmar Abrego Garcia and the 250 others who were flown to El Salvador without due process were taken there for a reason. It's a place where the law can't touch them. Last week was Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and we were reminded then that the first camps our ancestors were sent to were in Poland, because the government believed that there, German law couldn't even find them. Perhaps this is why the lawyers have taken to the street, and thank goodness that they did. For today, the rule of law - and all the values that are manifest within it - is being threatened and needs us paying close attention. Even when it gets wonky and weighty and confusing, I believe it is worthy of our time.

So where does this leave us?

Well, last night we blessed the members of this community who are lawyers. We are very proud of their moral courage and their compassionate hearts. If you are one, know that we see you and we are grateful for you. I know that many did not ask to be the frontline of this day, but they are carrying a great weight as they figure out this moment. As for CBE, we will also continue discerning the next ways that we, too, can protect the most vulnerable and the vital legal systems that help us live our most deeply held values, including love.

And as for our b'not mitzvah? Today, you take on the mantle of Jewish law and become responsible for doing your best, as we all do, to try to live by the values that are its foundation. Molly - you powerfully taught us that there is something much deeper going on - beneath the surface of our bodies. And in fact - your teaching is also a microcosm of what is true for our society - that there is something much deeper going on in our country than what we can see at the surface - and we must start doing the inner work that you have called us to. And Zoey, you reminded us that when it comes to a human being - we are called to find ways toward healing. This is absolutely true for each one of us and it is also profoundly true on a communal level - this whole country not just needs to, but can, and will, find our way toward healing - perhaps using the tools of law, and compassion, and seeing one another's humanity.

In these ways and in the light of your beautiful teachings this morning, you have already begun the work of what it means to be an adult in the eyes of the Jewish community - and we want you to know that we are very proud of you for all of this. May we not let you and your generation down as we reaffirm our values and our commitment to protecting them. Yashar Koach. And Shabbat shalom.