Shabbat shalom!

I am so honored and humbled to serve as the rabbinic intern here at CBE.

It's a special kind of internship, because -

If I were, say, a Hollywood intern, I'd be spending my day schlepping coffees and room-temperature waters to and fro to big execs.

Or, if I were, a banking intern, I'd be up at 6am in the office, cleaning spreadsheets, and doing other grunt work.

But, as the *rabbinic* intern, I get to teach the Torah portion on seminal emissions and leprosy.

Tazria-Metzora is notoriously macabre, but I often find that the more unrelatable and seemingly archaic a portion is, the more potential for creative interpretation.

In Pirkei Avot, Ben Bag Bag says of Torah ,הַפֵּךְ בָּהּ וַהֲפֵךְ בָּהּ, דִּכֹּלָּא בָהּ. "turn it, turn it, for everything is in it."

In this sense, I read Torah as the most entrancing and provocative kind of Rohrschach test.

Yes, a Rohrschach test [pantomime with hands]: those wet inkblots that you fold over to make a random image,

And psychologists then use to ask their patients, "what do you see?"

One person might say, "It looks like a cute bunny."

And someone else might say of the same image, "It looks just like my heartless stepbrother."

A teacher of mine, Rabbi Michael Marmur, calls this, an *aspaklaria*, a personal lens, which he derives from an argument in Leviticus Rabbah on whether Moses or the prophets had the greater vision. Marmur writes, "The two ways of seeing epitomized here represent two versions of vision: the univocal and the multifocal, the all (Moses) and the each (the later prophets). One approach offers immediacy and clarity, the other nuance and depth."

In this spirit, I'd like to briefly share a couple *aspaklariot* of Tazria-Metzora before sharing my own, to give you a sense of what this week's Biblical inkblot might conjure.

A few years ago, I was working at Tivnu, a Jewish social justice gap year program in Portland, Oregon, and part of my role was helping students write divrei torah for our Friday services. Tazria-Metzora was assigned to Sarah:

Whip smart, politically conscious, a ton of pep in her high-heel Doc Marten step, soon to matriculate at Smith College, called herself a 5th wave feminist, but I think she just made that up.

Sarah was really struck by chapter 12, verse 5:

וְאִם־נְקֵבָה תֵּלֵד וְטָמְאָה שְׁבֻעַיִם כְּנִדָּתָהּ וְשִׁשִּׁים יוֹם וְשֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תֵּשֵׁב עַל־דְּמֵי טָהֳרָהּ׃

“If [a woman] bears a female [baby], she shall be impure for two weeks as during her menstruation, and she shall remain in [an isolated] state of blood purification for sixty-six days.”

At first, we had some interpretive stalemate, but as Sarah and I started to really drash into it, we realized another angle.

This verse legislates a kind of proto- paid maternity leave.

Separation isn’t necessarily bad or undesirable.

In fact, it can be precisely what’s needed, but hard to acquire, at certain life junctures.

So, Sarah ended up giving this tremendous sermon on maternity rights.

Another example:

I’ve been working on this portion with tomorrow’s Bar Mitzvah-to-be, and in our first conversation, I asked him what he likes to learn in school.

Like many middle schoolers, he said every subject was “boring, boring, boring.” So I asked, is there any topic you *do* find interesting?

He said, “There’s one thing I like, and that’s dystopian fiction novels.”

I thought, wow, God must have had a hand in this one, because Tazria-Metzora is, like, the most dystopian fictional portion of them all.

Next, I asked him to make a venn diagram of the portion and his favorite novels, and I won't say anything more so as to not spoil it, but the number of overlapping symbols for social infection between these novels and the Torah is remarkable.

One more: a few weeks ago, a classmate of mine was workshopping a sermon that she's giving tonight - probably right now - and *her* inquiry is how this portion creates an institution for dealing with public shame.

With this variety in mind, *I* come to this portion with a timely *aspaklaria*.

I just returned from a long silent meditation retreat.

Like my student Sarah, I don't read separation as punishment.

Silence, stillness, solitude - these are life-giving, rejuvenative -

And, in our modern times, we carry a deficit of these qualities, which is spiritually debilitating to the individual as much as the collective.

In Chasidism, the practice of *hitbodedut*, "self-seclusion," in particular, going into the woods alone to speak aloud with God - this is considered one of the keenest ways to ground and unify oneself with the world.

Now, you're very lucky, I'm going to save you ten days of meditation with a Cliffnotes of the retreat.

Of course, you would have to *do* the retreat, to really *get* it, but here's what was taught, in short:

Body and mind are inseparable.

In all our lives, things happen. Things change.

These happenings and changes are mostly out of our control.

Naturally, we don't like what we have, and we want what we can't get.

Biblically, these are the first two missteps of humankind:

Eve eats the forbidden fruit; Cain spurns his assigned labor.

Thus, our mind accumulates countless cravings and aversions - cravings for what we don't have, aversions from what we do - and in turn, these manifest as *impurities* in the body, often as chronic pain or discomfort. In Sanskrit, these impurities are called "sankaras."

The method of meditation, then, is to sit completely still for a long time, slowly scan your body from head to toe and back, observe the subtlest sensations in every crevice, and no matter if a sensation is pleasant or unpleasant, instead of craving or averting, you just observe it with equanimity, and carry on scanning.

When you do this over and over again, you start to realize, experientially, that pain is only painful because of your aversion to it.

And when you uproot this habit pattern of mind, you "purify" the sankaras and they pass away permanently.

Which, as Kohelet teaches us, is the fate of all things.

I find this very illuminating, especially for the often misconstrued Hebrew of *tamei* and *tahor*. This concept is crucial to understanding Leviticus, and to a larger extent, crucial to understanding the thrust of Jewish ritual.

Like many key Hebrew terms fraught with context, tamei and tahor are untranslatable, but they're most often rendered: "pure" and "impure."

Consider, even if we accept this translation, pure and impure do not mean good and bad.

Pure does not mean ethical or virtuous.

"Pure" simply means 100% of a thing.

Apple juice, squeezed right from the fruit, is pure. It is 100% pure apple juice. It is Tahor.

Maybe pure apple juice is too sweet for you, so you add some water and a spritz of lemon.

Then, you have *impure* apple juice. It is tamei.

In this way, in Judaism, we become temporarily tamei when we encounter an inevitable part of life that shakes us up, that makes us not 100% ourselves.

Like, touching a dead body.

I'm a volunteer with the chevre kadisha here, to conduct the ritual of tahara, and during my training, Rabbi Alissa Platcow described tamei as the disruption, not a discretely physical or mental or spiritual disruption, but the holistic off-ness you carry after spending 2 hours washing and clothing a dead person.

Personally speaking, I cancel any plans I have after doing tahara, because I am, well, *tamei*.

Now, regarding Leviticus 12:5, I personally have never been pregnant, but I take the word of others who say it is quite the experience.

Pregnancy seems like the most biologically and emotionally rollercoaster-ish of life chapters.

To be completely 100% oneself right after giving birth, being *tahor*, seems unlikely.

So, rereading tamei and tahor in this light, let's go one step further and consider, what really are these "impurities," metzora and tzarat?

"Tzarat," mistranslated as "leprosy," can show up on a body, a piece of clothing, or a house.

I'm dubious that this is an ancient misunderstanding of plague biology; rather, a tzarat is a contagious spiritual impurity.

Tzarat and metzora have the same root - tzadi, resh, ayin.

This is where things get juicy.

Many Hebrew words work like a portmanteau, with two roots hinging together on the joint of one common letter, combining for a more complex meaning.

The first two letters make tzar, which means narrowness, constriction, dire straits.

The latter two letters, rah, mean wicked.

Tzarah is an evil tightness. Perhaps, inflammation from stress.

Just a couple weeks ago, we all went out from Egypt again, and Egypt is *mitzrayim*.

Same root - tzar - Mitzrayim is the narrow place.

In the first semester of Reform seminary, we take a course on Biblical archaeology, and on the first day of class, we learn that there is no archaeological evidence that the ancient Hebrews ever stepped foot in Egypt.

The Exodus story doesn't have a shred of history in it.

Which is fine, because Exodus is a tale of *internal* liberation, an allegory of Yisrael - a wrestling, seeking, tenacious group consciousness - escaping from the clutches of Mitzrayim, a consciousness of totalizing constriction.

Despite our merry singing of Dayenu, it's not happily ever after.

The Israelites repeatedly cry out aversion to their wandering and craving for their former mitzrayim.

Again, I'm reading this through my very timely *aspaklaria*, but I propose that the Sanskrit concept of sankara, in Hebrew, is *metzora*:

A residual wicked tension in the body, born of the former trauma of a narrow mind.

Torah repeatedly instructs us that the cure for a metzora is ample time in self-seclusion.

Now, I'm not going to close by telling you to go on a retreat or come to my Wednesday night meditation here (but I won't not endorse it).

I've spoken of *undoing*, of *responding* to metzora and tzarat, but Rabbinic Judaism offers a way to *preclude* them - daily blessings.

In the first 20 minutes of my day, from opening my eyes in bed to walking out the door, I have blessed God 14 times, for individual necessities that have been provided outside my control, and in turn I am blessed 14 times. I continue hollowing out these micro-sanctuaries in time throughout the day, and no metzora can form. Conscious gratitude loosens at the root.

What greater and more regular and seamless opportunity for stillness, silence and solitude, in this great rat race, than blessing before and after meals?

Candidly, these emphatic, pregnant pauses make my day.

Descartes said, cogito ergo sum, I think, therefore I am.

Judaism says, I *thank*, therefore *we are*.

Look:

Every year there's a new watershed study on the singular cause of all maladies:

It's stress; it's sugar; it's pace of life; it's your gut microbiome; yada yada yada.

I'm not qualified to publicly comment on any of those theories.

But I do preach that, inseparable from personal and communal well-being, is whether everything you do creates a self-consciousness of mere cost-benefit analysis, building brick upon brick of a personal mitzrayim;

Or, whether everything you do creates a self-consciousness that *knows*, obviously, that you were made to dance with the cosmos, and the cosmos was made to dance with you - Yisrael.

Here's the *aspaklaria* I'm looking through right now:

Let's stop asking, "Do you *believe* in God?"

It's the wrong question.

"Belief" in God is a Christian framework.

There's nothing wrong with it, but Jews don't "believe" in God.

Instead, ask "Do you *thank* God?"

It's concrete, it's based in practice - either you sanctify daily time to thank God, or you don't.

Doing so will cut a new lens, a new *aspaklaria* -

Sharper, more perceptive to the subtlest sensations and miracles arising and passing -

Through which we might really understand, experientially, might feel,

Tahor, pure, 100% ourselves,

Indivisible from all selves.

Shabbat Shalom.