

Yashar koach, Aiden. You've done a wonderful job here today, especially grappling with such a difficult Torah portion. The double portion of Tazria Metzora is a challenge for anyone who takes it on - how do we understand ancient rituals of plagues and disease, of bodies and buildings, in a 2026 context? But you argued with the text with integrity. You gave the text room to have some good points to make, but you also challenged the text's apparent comfort with the gory and seemingly cruel rituals required of a person who has the skin affliction called *tzara'at*.

And I appreciate how you brought to the text your own lens - a body of literature that matters to you - dystopian science fiction - to help you make sense of what you were reading.

Now, as any good writer does, you had a few drafts of your thoughtful d'var Torah along the way so some of the things I'll respond to here are from your previous draft - which is totally fine. And most importantly, you, Aiden, will know what I'm referring to.

You noted that both in the books you talked about and in Leviticus, it often seems that the vulnerable few are asked to carry a very heavy burden or to make significant sacrifices for the sake of the majority. In the case of Leviticus, a person with *tzara'at*, who we call a *metzora*, was required to be part of a bloody ritual of birds, they might lose their home if the plague had entered their house, and they were exiled away from their family - all so that the rest of the community would not catch this disease. It was a very heavy burden for the *metzora*, to carry for the sake of the whole. And you wondered: Is that ever morally acceptable? Is that ever okay? For the few to bear such a great burden for the good of the whole? This is an important question.

So, first, it made me think about another science fiction character, though not from a dystopian world. This person said: "Logic clearly dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few . . . or the one." (Anyone recognize this?) That was Mr. Spock in The Wrath of Khan before sacrificing himself to save the Enterprise crew.

This is the kind of logic that was employed during the Covid pandemic. For the good of the many, sick people quarantined even if they didn't want to. And, **every** person was asked to trade out our own desires and needs for the sake of the whole. We gave up many important things those years - seeing grandparents, in-person graduations, fertility treatments, all sacrifices made by individuals to protect the bigger society around us. And it was hard. Like it was hard for the *metzora*.

In Jewish tradition, we might call this *tzimtzum*, a mystical term that describes a contraction of the self. A decision to take up a little less space so that someone else can also exist, even when that contracting is difficult. Largely, this is an act of love, of responsibility, humility, and of the ability to see the need for humanity as a whole to thrive.

But you pointed out some real challenges in this Tazria Metzora worldview. You questioned whether the immense injury experienced by the *metzora* was worth it for the good of the whole. You wondered: is this even ethical to do? To sacrifice the mental health or safety of the few for

the sake of the many. AND - you wisely suggested that, too often, what first appears to be good for the many, at the expense of just the few, ultimately often proves to be bad for everyone in the end. This is a truly relevant critique for today, too, Aiden.

For example, look at what's happening to immigrants in our country today. A great burden is being put on the vulnerable few. The claim that our leaders are making is that mass deportation is for the benefit of our country - they'd like us to believe that. They'd like us to forget the humanity of the few. But their actions are also gory and cruel, and like the rituals that you recoiled from in Tazria Meztora, their actions are also causing trauma among the few. And, ultimately, as you predicted, are crushingly destructive for the whole as well.

And we can look back in history, too. This week was Yom HaShoah, the commemoration of the Holocaust and the murder of 6 million Jews. The Germans were also told that the few, in this case, the Jews, needed to be sacrificed for the good of the whole. Not only was this darkest moment in history a profoundly immoral action in itself, but again, what was initially sold to the many to be good for them, at the expense of **just** the few, ended up being devastating for the whole world.

Now, I can't speak to the physical or mental injury that the person with *tzara'at* experienced. As you said - it's mostly something we read into the text. But we sure can see how you might be right that being forced to endure a gory ritual and being separated from your family or losing your home could cause trauma to a person and ultimately on the community as a whole as well.

So how do we know? How do we know if we're dealing with a Spock/Covid situation or a cruel mental injury abuse situation? How do we know if the burden carried by the few, or through individual sacrifice, for the good of the whole, is the right thing or is the beginning of a dystopian novel?

Perhaps the easiest lens to judge it by is whether the few or the individuals are making their own decision - **choosing** to make some kind of a sacrifice for the good of the whole. But what happens when a society's leaders are the ones to make such a decision - which is pretty much what you described in each book you shared, and is often the way this happens. What then?

Well, there's this text written by the Kli Yakar. He writes that the *metzora* needs to be brought to the priest - which we know - but specifically **only** to the priest. Why? Because of the kind of person the priest was known to be. He names three attributes that the priest had, three traits that he upheld. One was the trait of peace. So when the *metzora* came to him for treatment, the priest didn't see his role as punisher or his treatment as retribution. He sought to bring *shalom*, peace, and *shleimut*, wholeness, to this most vulnerable of the few. The second was that the priest had a trait of humility. So when the *metzora* came to him, he didn't try to belittle him or humiliate him. He saw him as a fellow human being who he could help. And third, the priest had the trait of contentment - he was not a person "whose entire purpose was to accumulate and

hoard.” So his intention with the *metzora* was not to extort him or make a buck off him, but just to help him.

The Kli Yakar paints this picture of a leader, whose intention is to care deeply for the vulnerable minority, even as, especially as, they had to undergo this difficult trial for the health of the whole.

When it came to Spock, he chose his situation. But if a person is not acting on their own free will, then it seems that what is necessary, as a baseline, for any laws that require a sacrifice of the few for the sake of the whole is a leadership that the people can trust to act compassionately in the interests of the minority as well as the majority. And not for their own sake, but for the sake of the people.

Today, we don't have that trust with our leaders. And so we watch as the minority - most often these days immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees - suffer. In Leviticus, we can only read this ancient text and hope that the Kli Yakar got it right - that the priests were trustworthy and loving in such difficult times, even as we hold with you, Aiden, the real possibility that the trauma on the *metzora* was lasting.

Exploring Tazria Metzora through the lens of dystopian science fiction was fascinating, Aiden. AND, I want to add to your reading list, or even watching list, if you feel so moved. Actually - this is good for all of us. There's a related concept in literature being talked about these days. Not dystopian fiction, but also not Utopian fiction. Instead, it's called protopian thinking. It's a middle way - not toward an apocalyptic future, and also not toward a perfect pristine creepy future either. But a future that takes into consideration the needs of all people - the few, the many, the vulnerable, the powerful - and attempts to imagine a system that really does work for everyone. One recent expression of protopian imagination appeared in the Marvel movie Black Panther. The country known as Wakanda is an expression of a harmonious future. It's not perfect, as we know, but it is possible to imagine a world where the needs of the few and the good of the many are met by leaders acting in the best interests of the social whole. Just as dystopian fiction gives us an imagination for the worst it could be, these kinds of culture points give us an imagination for a truly desirable future.

Aiden, you gave us a lot to think about this morning and you showed up here and you taught us from your heart how to see the humanity behind the text. We're really quite proud of you and we look forward to your helping to shape the better futures that we need. Yashar koach and mazal tov!