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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Metsora

Shabbat Hagadol

April 13, 2019 - 8 Nisan 5779



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Regaining a Sense of Health and Wholeness

Torah Reading: Leviticus 14:1 - 15:33

Haftarah Reading: Malachi 3:4 - 24, 23

"The priest shall then offer the purification offering and make expiation for the one being purified of his impurity...Then he shall be pure." (Leviticus 14:19-20)

Let's face it: the rituals described in this week's Torah reading to rid our bodies and our dwellings of contagion of various sorts are downright strange. The one exception is the attempt in these chapters to contain the contagion through quarantine of infected persons. That was still in use in the 1950s, when I had measles: the Milwaukee County Health Department quarantined our house so that my sister and I were stuck indoors for a month, and only our parents were allowed in and out of the house during that time. It is remarkable that some 2,500 years ago our ancestors knew to do the same thing to prevent the spread of a contagious disease.

Although the other methods the Torah uses to diagnose and cure maladies are odd and doubtfully effective, what is not at all strange is the feeling that we have under such conditions: like our ancestors, we desperately want to remove the infestation and return to safety and normality. Today,

however, we treat infections and other bodily maladies through medicine, and we repair rot in our houses in ways that experts in that process prescribe.

The Torah reading discusses not only our need to repair physical abnormalities. It also bespeaks a sense that we need atonement when bad things happen to our bodies or homes; we need not only “purification,” but “expiation” (*kapparah*). Presumably, that is because we believe that something we did wrong caused such maladies. This raises a much more serious issue – namely, the relationship between sin and suffering.

This is too deep and difficult a topic to be dealt with adequately in a short essay such as this, but two things should be obvious to us. First, as the biblical books of Job (c. 400 B.C.E.) and Kohelet (c. 250 B.C.E.) already assert, there is no one-to-one correspondence between sin and suffering. The Rabbis of the Talmud (*Berakhot 7a*) later say this bluntly: “The righteous suffer, and the wicked prosper” (*tzadik v’ra lo, rasha v’tov lo*).

Second, though, when we do sin, we deeply feel the need for a process of atonement to feel whole again. Here too our response to that need is different from what is described in several chapters of Leviticus. The Torah has us atone for sin through offering animal sacrifices; the Rabbis, after the destruction of the Second Temple, instead prescribe the process of return (*teshuvah*), in which we first admit that we did something wrong, we show remorse for that, we compensate the victim in whatever way we can, and we act differently the next time we are tempted to sin in this way again.

So both medically and morally, we feel the same needs as our ancestors felt to repair what is not right, but we respond to that need in new ways. May we succeed in repairing ourselves and our world medically, morally, and in every other way so that the wholeness of Shabbat can betoken the ideal world that it represents for us each week.

Shabbat shalom.

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