

Yoni woke up at dawn with the feel of a warm breeze on his face. It did not take long for the sun to start heating the air south of the ruined city of Jericho. His arm was slightly numb, since Chana was still sleeping close to him with her head resting on his shoulder. He loved his Chana. She was sweet, devoted. She was the mother of his two children, Geula and Gaddi who were still asleep in the corner of the tent. And Yoni couldn't think of another woman better at carrying firewood or milking goats than Chana. Yoni felt blessed. His life was full of promise. He had witnessed Moses' speech on mount Nebo. He and his tribesmen grieved deeply when Moses died, but their grief turned to hope as they rallied to support their new leader Joshua. He was bursting with pride to think that he was the 180th warrior to cross the Jordan River. 180 was a lucky number. And to witness a miracle like the River Jordan parting. "Surely God is in this place, and I know it. Surely God is with me. Surely God keeps His promises to kol b'nei Yisrael." Chana stirred and got off Yoni's shoulder, so he quickly withdrew his arm and pulled the sleeves of his robe down. He covered those nagging, itchy patches of skin that were mostly red, but were sometimes covered with a white scaly layer that sometimes sloughed off like, like it was ... well, it was dead skin.

Today was an important day. Yosef of the Kohanim had planned to visit. Perhaps his son Binyamin had interest in his oldest child, his daughter Geula. That would be something. He would make sure Chana made her special mixture of roasted almonds, figs and honey to spread on her fresh flatbread. He could taste the sweetness already. Yosef will know what a fine family my daughter is from.

But Yosef's visit was not what Yoni thought it would be. Yosef was nervous and uncomfortable throughout lunch, and after the meal, he looked around their dwelling, looking at the walls, glancing at the corners and the places where the floor met the walls. Then Yosef asked if he could speak with Yoni.

"Yoni," said Yosef, "I come to you today officially as a priest of Israel. It is my job to separate the holy from the profane. To root out impurity. To ensure that the codes of holiness are followed throughout the House of Israel. Take off your robe and let me see you, for you are plagued with *tzaraat*."

"What?"

"Take off your robe and let me see you, for you are plagued with tzaraat."

Yosef did his best to explain the laws of *tzaraat* to Yoni, but they were bewilderingly complex. Yoni knew that touching a dead body made one impure. He knew that a woman was impure for 33 days after birthing a boy, 66 days for a girl. He knew that a woman was impure during her time of the month. And Yosef also told him about the many plagues of the skin. How Yoni would have to be alone for week, outside the camp, and then he would be reexamined. And if things got better, after another week, he could make sacrifices and return to the people in purity and holiness. But if things remained impure, Yoni would be declared a *metzora* and be banished.

But as the days went on, outside the camp, Yoni's skin did not get better. He even thought of seeing the Canaanite women. One had promised him a cure - a stinky poultice made from the liver of a swine, the ground claw of the red tailed hawk, four long legged spiders and the black ink from a soft eight-armed creature from the sea. It might work, but not even Yoni dared such a profanity.

In time, Yoni's time was up. The plague on his skin continued without change. The next day, before all Israel, the priest would declare him unclean. Yoni's clothing would be torn, his hair would remain uncut, he would have to cover his face and call out "Unclean, Unclean" whenever he encountered people. And he would have to dwell outside the camp. He and Chana lay in their bed together, with Chana resting her head on Yoni's shoulder. Their children lay peacefully sleeping in their corner of the tent. In the morning, Yosef and the other Kohanim would come and publicly, before kol bnei Yisrael, declare him tameh, impure, metzora and banish him from the camp.

"I'm sorry Chana."

"I'll stay with you Yoni."

"I'm sorry Chana."

"I love you Yoni."

"But our children."

"I know."

"But what did I do?"

"What did I do?"

D'var Torah for Clergy Appreciation Shabbat - Parashat Tazria

"I've made sacrifices. Olah, burnt offerings, Mincha, meal offerings, Zevach Shelamim, the Sacrifice of well being, Chatat the sin offering, lambs, goats, pigeons, turtledoves, bread."

"I know, Yoni."

"I fought for our people. I was the 180th man across the Jordan. I have followed the laws. I mean I've broken a few rules, but not the big ones. No one is perfect. What did I do?"

"Yoni."

"I have loved Adonai. I love Adonai."

"I love Adonai too . . . and I love you, Yoni."

"I thought that I would love Adonai forever."

"Yoni, you are going to have to decide if forever has come to an end."

Well, *Tazria* is a notorious *parasha* for B'nei Mitzvah students, considered simultaneously arcane, complicated, yucky, irrelevant, boring and controversial. I agree. But a good *d'var torah* must, well a notable Rabbi, a Rabbi Zepul, Zepelo, oh, I'll just call him Rabbi Z, wrote that a good *d'var torah* should "seek to answer at least one (if not more) of ... three central concerns of life:

- Why am I here? What is the meaning of my life?
- Does my life have a sense of purpose or direction? What kind of person do I want to be, and how can I make that manifest in the way I live each day?
- Am I alone, or can my life be connected to something beyond myself?

Three issues—meaning, purpose, and connection.

How are we supposed to make meaning, take purpose and make connection to this *parasha*? To an imagined tale of Yoni? The *tzaraat* in the Torah describes a wide range of "afflictions," some of which today we don't consider afflictions at all. The *tzaraat* is a physical manifestation of impurity and the unholy. What brings it about? What actions, speech or thought? The text is silent. But it can affect people's skin, clothing, even the walls of a house. *Tazria* is not a biblical medical text. The priest is not providing a scientific diagnosis or a cure, and the *metzora*, the afflicted person is only considered impure after the priest delivers his verdict. *Tazria* is not a TV episode of This Old Tent,

telling homeowners how to rid themselves of mold and mildew, though I'm sure Norm Abrams would have been invaluable in building the *mishkan*. The *parasha* also describes the impurity of a woman, though it is not a Procter & Gamble commercial for a product to help women on "those days." As the early Hebrews sought to create Holiness and bring themselves closer to God, they separated the pure from the impure - sometimes even by banishing people. As modern day followers of liberal Judaism, we do not view the walls of our houses or the skin of our bodies as physical manifestations of spiritual impurity. The extensive scholarship explaining the *tzaraat*, equating corpses, dead skin, and even menstruation with the unholy and impure and even with *lashon hara* is interesting but it resonates more as historical scholarship and metaphor, than as a living connection.

Tearing down a moldy tent? OK. Giving someone a week or two to let a skin condition clear up? Not totally unreasonable. Special sanctions on women and their bodies? Sexist, and by our standards unjust. But banishment for a non-contagious skin problem?

So I have chosen to focus on the sufferer. Hence my story about Yoni. That resonates today. Let us beware if our insistence of rules and purity does more harm than we know. What *Tazria* does teach us is that there are rituals of purification that allow us to accept the sufferer back into our tribe. Sacrifice a goat or two birds? Perhaps that worked in 500 BCE, but today we need rituals that make the sufferer feel accepted and re-purified. Yoni faced banishment and ruin for his family. He needed a *Kohen* to strengthen his connection to God and the Jewish people, not to amplify his questions and doubts. The rituals of *Tazria* work, so far as they ritualize the reacceptance of those temporarily impure, temporarily out of sync. But ritualized banishment does not serve us today.

So, "Why am I here and what is the meaning of my life?" What gives my life meaning is my connection to other people, to my family, to my friends, to my students, to my teachers, to my colleagues, to my congregation, to *klal Yisrael*, to my nation, to humankind. Build connections. Build them among the various streams of Judaism, and between Jews and other people. Do we ritualize connections among Jews? Is there a formal day for that? Lord knows we are a people of rituals, but each separate group of Jews goes off and practices their rituals in their own ways -- and usually says that the other group isn't doing it right. Build more connections. Welcome Jews by choice and embrace interfaith families. How do we deal with people with HIV and AIDS? The aged?

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The mentally or emotionally challenged? The disfigured? Staring for as long as we dare and then getting as far away as possible doesn't work for them or for us.

"Does my life have a sense of purpose or direction? What kind of person do I want to be, and how can I make that manifest in the way I live each day?" I try. I teach. I eat lunch with a group of 12-year old students every day. People think I must be nuts for being in love with teaching seventh graders. This past Wednesday, one of my faves, I'll call her Judith, came rushing in to tell me that she got an A- in Math. She held up her hand to ask for a high five, so I switched my Diet Dr. Pepper from my not so bad right hand to my deformed left hand, so I could give her the high five with my better hand. Judith smiled at me and said, "you don't have to do that Mr. A, your left hand is fine with me." God I love that kid. She gets it. Too bad Yoni didn't know her.

"Am I alone, or can my life be connected to something beyond myself?" *Tazria* highlights the need for us to build connections with others and something greater than ourselves - to reach toward the holy and to God. We need to stop calling out *Tameh, tameh* - impure, impure - and keep rising on our tiptoes and saying *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*. Well, why else are we here in this room? Why else do so many of you schlep to Torah study early in the morning? Why is this one of the healthiest congregations in our movement? Well, this is clergy appreciation Shabbat, and part of the answer to that question is Irwin Zepelowitz, Ben Sternman, Claire Franco and now David Fromer. Yes your sermons move us, your singing is superb, your teaching is excellent, and sometimes you comfort us. But what you do that is harder to describe is connect with us and make us feel and believe that you share our journey to find meaning in our lives, to find purpose and direction and to connect us not only to each other but to something beyond ourselves. To something holy. To something pure. Rabbi Zepelowitz, Cantor Franco, you and Rene Edelman connected with us when our congregation suffered from a sort of blight, a tzaraat of the spirit. And you helped our tribe grow stronger.

I give thanks for the ways all of you have enriched my life, and I pray that we will all reach to strengthen our connections to our clergy, to each other and to the holy.