

The Metzora and Pesach: A Spiritual Connection

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This year as in many others, the weekly Torah readings leading up to Pesach contain the details of the spiritual skin affliction of *tzara'at*, often mistranslated as leprosy, specifically in the *parshiyot Tazria* and *Metzora*. What is the connection between *tzara'at* and Pesach and *yitziyat mitzrayim*, the exodus from Egypt?

In parshat *Metzora* in *Sefer Vayikra*, the Torah explains the purification process for one who has contracted *tzara'at*:

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| <p>1 And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying:</p> | <p>א וַיְדַבֵּר יְיָ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.</p> |
| <p>2 This shall be the law of the leper in the day of his cleansing: he shall be brought unto the priest.</p> | <p>ב זֹאת תְּהִי־הַתּוֹרָה הַמְצַרֶּעַ בְּיוֹם טְהֻרָתוֹ וְהוֹבֵא אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן.</p> |
| <p>3 And the priest shall go forth out of the camp; and the priest shall look, and, behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed in the leper;</p> | <p>ג וַיֵּצֵא הַכֹּהֵן אֶל־מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן וְהִנֵּה נִרְפָּא נִגְעַת־הַצִּרְעָת מִן־הַצִּרְעִי.</p> |
| <p>4 then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two living clean birds, and cedar-wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.</p> | <p>ד וַיֹּצִיֵה הַכֹּהֵן וְלָקַח לַמְטַהֵר שְׁתֵּי־צִפְרִיִּים חַיִּוֹת שְׁהָרוֹת וְעֵץ אֲרֶז וְשֵׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבֵּי.</p> |
| <p>5 And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water.</p> | <p>ה וַיֹּצִיֵה הַכֹּהֵן וְשַׁחַט אֶת־הַצִּפּוֹר הָאֶחָד אֶל־כָּל־יַחַד עַל־מַיִם חַיִּים.</p> |
| <p>6 As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar-wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water.</p> | <p>ו אֶת־הַצִּפּוֹר הַחַיָּה יִקַּח אֹתָהּ וְאֶת־עֵץ הָאֲרֶז וְאֶת־שֵׁנִי הַתּוֹלַעַת וְאֶת־הָאֲזָבִי וְטָבַל אוֹתָם וְאֶת־הַצִּפּוֹר הַחַיָּה בְּדַם הַצִּפּוֹר הַשַּׁחֲטָה עַל הַמַּיִם הַחַיִּים.</p> |
| <p>7 And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him clean, and shall let go the living bird into the open field.</p> | <p>ז וְהִזָּה עַל הַמְטַהֵר מִן־הַצִּרְעָת שִׁבְעַת פְּעָמִים וְטָהַר וְשָׁלַח אֶת־הַצִּפּוֹר הַחַיָּה עַל־פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה.</p> |
| <p>8 And he that is to be cleansed shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair, and bathe himself in water, and he shall be clean; and after that he may come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days.</p> | <p>ח וְכִבֶּס הַמְטַהֵר אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְגִלַּח אֶת־כָּל־שְׂעָרוֹ וְרִחַץ בַּמַּיִם וְטָהַר וְאַחֵר יָבוֹא אֶל־הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֵּשֶׁב מַחוּץ לְאֹהֶלוֹ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים.</p> |
| <p>9 And it shall be on the seventh day, that he shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off; and he shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and he shall be clean.</p> | <p>ט וְהָיָה בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי יִגְלַח אֶת־כָּל־שְׂעָרוֹ אֶת־רֹאשׁוֹ וְאֶת־זָקְנוֹ וְאֶת גְּבוֹת עֵינָיו וְאֶת־כָּל־שְׂעָרוֹ יִגְלַח וְכִבֶּס אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְרִחַץ אֶת־בְּשָׂרוֹ בַּמַּיִם וְטָהַר.</p> |
| <p>10 And on the eighth day he shall take two he-lambs without blemish, and one ewe-lamb of the first year without blemish, and three tenth parts of an ephah of fine flour for</p> | <p>י וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁמִינִי יִקַּח שְׁנַיִם־כִּבְשִׁים תְּמִימִים וְכִבְשָׂה אֶחָד בֶּת־שָׁנָתָהּ תְּמִימָה וְשִׁלְשָׁה עֶשְׂרִינָיִם סֹלֶת מִנְחָה בְּלוּלָה בַשֶּׁמֶן וְלֵג אֶחָד שֶׁמֶן.</p> |

a meal-offering, mingled with oil, and one log of oil.

11 And the priest that cleanseth him shall set the man that is to be cleansed, and those things, before the LORD, at the door of the tent of meeting. יא וְהֶעֱמִיד הַכֹּהֵן הַמְטַהֵר אֶת הָאִישׁ הַמְטַהֵר וְאֵתֵם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה פְּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד.

This narrative has many literary allusions to the Pesach Mitzrayim story. There is the blood of the birds coloring the clean water-- allusions to Makat Dam, the first plague of blood coloring the water of the Nile. There is also hyssop being dipped into the blood and then spread over a piece of cedar wood-- allusions to the painting of the doorposts, the *mashkof*, with blood by the Jews in Egypt to keep the *malakh ha-mavet*, the angel of death, at bay. Similarly, after a period of seven days, the Metzora is allowed to re-enter the camp and rejoin the community. This echoes the seven days of the Pesach holiday when we re-enact our National narrative-the seven days in which we celebrate the birth of our people.

The Ramban quoting the Ibn Ezra noticed these parallels as well.

On the pasuk (Vayikra 14:4):

The priest shall order two live clean birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop to be brought for him who is to be cleansed וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וְלָקַח לְמִטְהָר שְׁתֵּי־צִפְרִים חַיִּים וְטָהוֹרוֹת וְעֵץ אֶרֶז וְשֵׁנִי תוֹלַעַת וְאַזְבֵּי:

the Ramban, quoting Ibn Ezra, states:

Thus the law of the metzora, and the law/teaching of the house stricken with tzara'at and the law of the Tuma'ah of a dead corpse are closely related and they are like Pesach mitzrayim. וְהִנֵּה הַמְצוֹרֵעַ וְתוֹרַת הַבַּיִת הַמְנוּגֵעַ וְטוֹמְאֵת הַמֵּת קְרוּבִים וְהִנֵּה הֵם כְּדַמוֹת פֶּסַח מְצַרִּים...

What Ramban (via Ibn Ezra) is saying is that in the same way that the Jews in Egypt used the Hyssop plant as the brush to paint the blood on the doorposts (which theoretically could have been cedar—a strong wood used for structures) to keep death from their homes, so too the metzora does the same thing to keep death at bay.

That of course begs the question- what death is the metzora being purified or redeemed from? There is somewhat of a consensus among the Sages that the metzora suffers a kind of spiritual death in that he becomes *ta'meh* (spiritually impure) and needs to leave the community. But, as Rabbi David Fohrman of Aleph Beta notes, after a period of seven days, the metzora experiences a rebirth and can rejoin the community. The Passover holiday lasts seven days as well, and with it we commemorate the time when we emerged as a community, as a nation.

The Haggadah also has the idea of spiritual death, separation, and rejoining the community as one of its themes. When we worshipped idols, it was as if we were spiritually dead. At the moment of Pesach Mitzrayim we have a national rebirth— along with extensive birth imagery, including blood, and moving from a dark place into the open. (It is no accident that Parashat Tazria, starts with a discussion of *tuma* and *tahara* regarding birth and immediately after that talks about *tuma* and *tahara* regarding the metzora.

At our Pesach Seders we traditionally celebrate our physical and historical redemption from Egypt.

But when we say—

'In every generation one is obligated to see בְּכָל־דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת־עַצְמוֹ כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יֵצֵא

oneself as if he had left Mitzrayim...'

ממצרים,

perhaps we should think about the times when we have experienced a spiritual death—the times we have done those things that have caused a part of our souls to die- whether it is speaking *Lashon Ha'Rah* or anything that takes us away from our best self, or simply anything that impedes our relationship to God.

Pesach gives us a time therefore to not only remember our physical redemption from Egypt but also gives us the opportunity each year to experience a spiritual rebirth-- a rebirth that connects us with our people but strengthens our bounds with God as well. With every Pesach, God gives us the tools, as alluded to in the *tzara'at* narrative, to redeem ourselves spiritually and join our community to pray for the ultimate redemption.



Rabbi Marianne Novak received her BA in Political Science from Barnard College and her JD from Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. She has served as the Endowment Director at the Jewish Federation of St. Louis and also helped start the Women's Tefillah Group at Bais Abraham. Marianne then moved to Skokie, Illinois, became a Gabbait for the Skokie Women's Tefillah Group, and taught Bat Mitzvah students. Marianne is an instructor and curriculum developer for the Florence Melton Adult School of Jewish Learning and taught Tanakh at Rochelle Zelle Jewish High School. She has lectured for many Jewish organizations and synagogues, and writes a blog for the Times of Israel. Marianne lives in Skokie with her husband Noam Stadlan and family.