

Parashat Tazria – Shacharit – April 25 2020 – Dr. Brian Doyle

If someone in the camp develops a dry persistent cough and is running a temperature, or if they are short of breath, they shall report it by telephone to their local GP or one of their assistants, the doctors.

The doctor shall assess their symptoms by phone. This is a triage before the Eternal. And if the doctor thinks there are signs of a deeper issue, they shall insist on isolation from the community. The person shall withdraw into their home and stay at a safe distance – at least 2 meters – from all the community for a period of isolation – up to 15 days.

If the person gets worse they shall be removed from the camp into complete isolation for a period of intensive care under the supervision of senior specialists

And if the person’s symptoms improve they shall continue to isolate themselves at home nevertheless for 15 more days.

While this danger to the community persists, the community shall remain in lockdown and those who ignore physical distancing rules shall be stoned!

Back in the day, they had to deal with infections of all sorts, and the High Priests were the doctors – they did the triage – and they decided when it was safe to interact with the community again. When it was safe for the *community*.

At first sight, our parashah is all about ritual purity, starting with the purity of a woman after childbirth then moving on to disease and how it affects a person’s ritual purity. It seems to focus on disease that has an external, identifiable symptom, like a skin disease. But what about symptoms you can’t see?

I was led in my explorations for today’s drasha to a book called *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* by Arthur Kleinman.¹ Kleinman makes an important distinction between *illness* and *disease*.

“*Illness*,” he says “refers to how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability. *Illness* is the lived experience [...]. We can say of *illness* experience that it is always culturally

¹ Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and the Human Condition* (New York: Basic, 1989).

shaped [...]. *Disease*, however, is what the practitioner creates in the recasting of illness in terms of theories of disorder.”²

Our *parashah* makes this distinction very clearly when it describes the laws related to what is called *tzaraat*, a skin affliction wrongly identified for a long time as ‘leprosy’.

The priests-doctors explore all the symptoms to the very last detail. And like most doctors they want to know how the person contracted the *disease* in the first place. They’re not so much concerned with the person and their community, their wider social network, with the *illness*. They’re concerned rather with the *disease* and they examine the patient and make a diagnosis: Unclean! That’s the *disease*!

It’s just like saying: ‘... you have the flu or measles or Covid-19.’ ‘Unclean’ is priestly medical language. ‘You’ve got a bad case of Unclean!’ But how did the person contract ‘Unclean’?

In the world of the text, the ancient world of our biblical ancestors, being ill didn’t have its roots in something natural or human. Disease had to come from God. And the rabbis who commented on these texts in the Midrash (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 16:1-6) related the word *tzaraat* – which is used here (mistakenly perhaps) for leprosy – to another use of the same term *tzaraat*, in Numbers 12, where Miriam is said to have been struck with (again perhaps mistakenly) leprosy. Why was she inflicted in this way? Because she (and Aaron) had spoken badly of Moses and his foreign Kushite wife – what we commonly refer to as *lashon ha’ra*. This was what our *chachamim* suggested as the cause for the disease.

Our contemporary world no longer attributes the causes of illness in this way, although there is a human residue when we ask ‘what have I done to deserve this?’ and it’s not easy to shake the sense that the cause of the bad things that happen to us is related to some misstep in the past.

Covid-19 can be seen as a disease, with symptoms and causes. But what about the *illness* aspect and its effects? What about the sick person’s relations to the outside

² *The Illness Narratives*, pp. 3-5. Italics mine.

world, to family, to the community. Sometimes in the Torah we read that exclusion was the response to certain illnesses – the *treatment* for ‘Unclean’ was exclusion, isolation. Illness of any kind can be very isolating. People are confined to home or bed or a hospital room – they feel untouchable, and not only when their illness is visible on the surface like the skin diseases in today’s parashah.

Our tradition tells us that we should visit the sick, *bikur cholim*, and break their isolation. The Talmud even says that visiting a sick person takes away 1/60th of the person’s illness with every visit (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava M’tzia*, 30b). This means we have to visit this ‘liminal zone’ – this place of isolation, this strange land between life and death.

How do we break the isolation when we too are isolated?

There’s a short story in the Talmud (*Berachot* 5b) about Rabbi Yohanan – supposed to be a very strong and healthy man, and very handsome too.

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba fell ill. Rabbi Yohanan entered to visit him and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Hiyya said to him: Neither this suffering nor its reward. Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Give me your hand. Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba gave him his hand, and Rabbi Yohanan helped him rise.

Rabbi Yohanan fell ill. Rabbi Hanina entered to visit him and said to him: Is your suffering dear to you? Rabbi Yohanan said to him: Neither this nor its reward. Rabbi Hanina said to him: Give me your hand. He gave him his hand, and Rabbi Hanina helped him rise.

Yohanan and Hanina are major rabbinical figures, men who were attributed with power to work miracles, but that’s not what’s happening here. Here they go into the liminal space – the strange world between life and death – where the sick person is in isolation. They break the isolation and then do something very simple. They ask:

‘give me your hand’. And in the touch of the hand both rabbis are raised – they experience healing.

All we have these days are virtual hands – but let’s hold them out to each other all the same – while we wait for the opportunity for real touch and the healing it brings.