

## The *Metzora*, the Priest, and the Prophet

Shabbat Hagadol 2024

Rabbi Matthew Kaufman, PhD

The topic of our Torah reading this week is the recovery process for the *metzora*, the person who contracts the mysterious disease of *tzara'at*.

The procedure for cleansing is in the hands of the priest. Why the priest? Because the affliction is seen as a source of impurity. And we know that in the context of the ancient Israelites, the practical social impact of impurity is separation. Only that which is considered to be pure can come into contact with things that have to do with the Israelite cult. Impurity has to be kept apart. And so someone afflicted with what may have been simply a case of eczema is told to separate themselves until their flareup goes away.

What is interesting is that after they are fully healed, they have to offer up a particular kind of sacrifice – an *asham*. An *Asham* in English is a guilt offering. It is the kind of offering made to atone for some wrongdoing where perhaps you don't know exactly what you did but you must have done something wrong. This is different from a *Chatat* offering, or a sin offering, which is offered to atone for something you know you did wrong.

Last week Mark brought up the Talmudic elaboration upon what a *metzora* is – a *motzi shem ra*. In other words, a gossip, a tale-bearer, someone who speaks ill of others and slanders them. That is the kind of sin that often escapes the ability of the legal system to identify and prosecute. It is conceivable that the

offending person didn't even know the damage that he or she did. And so it is God who inflicts this punishment, and the person has to go through a process that involves a penance.

The Torah portion goes to great lengths to explain the centrally important role that the priest plays in all of this. The priest is the one who declares a person impure, and the priest must declare them pure. What this helps to clarify for us is the social role of the priest. They are tasked with maintaining a healthy equilibrium between the Divine Presence and Israelite society. They may not be prophets who are in direct contact with God, as Moses was, but it is they who sustain an ongoing healthy relationship with the Divine. They therefore occupy a role at the center of Israelite society.

The role of the prophet is quite different. The role of the prophet is not to sustain equilibrium, but to disrupt it. The prophet does so by living on the margins. They live outside of society, and their voices usually arise at a time of great social unrest and distress. They function as moral gadflies, calling for repentance or a grand social readjustment, or they foresee a time of a future restoration. Just as we saw with Malachi in our haftarah reading. In fact, in the case of Malachi, who some think may have been Ezra the Scribe, he was all about restoring the priesthood to its proper function. He was looking forward to a time when the priest could once again fulfill his role of maintaining a proper equilibrium.

Or, in the case of Elisha, who is the unnamed prophet hinted at in the regular haftarah reading for the parsha, the prophet is someone who channels God's will to work miracles and effect salvation from an imminent threat. Elisha

miraculously resurrects a dead boy, saves another man from terrible embarrassment by making an ax-head float in water, and predicts an end to famine during the siege of Samaria by the King of Aram.

The haftarah for metzorah tells the story of that siege. There was a miracle that caused the Arameans to flee their camps, but the Israelite king didn't know that the threat had gone because he was holed up in the city. The interesting thing about the haftarah, and that which connects it to our Torah reading, is the presence of *metzoraim*. These social outcasts, these impure ones, are the very ones whose role it is to bear witness to the salvation of Samaria. They discover the enemy camp is empty, and after they loot it a bit, they rather fearfully decide that they should probably let the King know the good news.

For me the kicker is that the *metzora* here is not the one who engages in bad speech. They are the bearers of good news. It is from their mouths that King Yehoram learns the good tidings.

It is ironic also that while the Israelites are essentially prisoners in the city, the ones who are free are the *metzoraim*. They freed themselves through their bold action. The narrator needed these marginalized outsiders to be the intermediaries, rather than directly hearing from the prophet. One might have expected Elisha the prophet to work a miracle and heal them, but for whatever reason the narrator dispenses with the *metzoraim* after this incident and they disappear entirely from the narrative.

The Christian Gospel of Matthew, however, revisits the metzora and has Jesus heal him directly. Jesus seems to be a prophetic figure modeled after the Elisha. Here's how Matthew narrates Jesus's healing of the *metzora*:

## **Matthew 1:40-43 - Jesus Heals a Man With Leprosy**

<sup>40</sup> A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, “If you are willing, you can make me clean.”

<sup>41</sup> Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. “I am willing,” he said. “Be clean!” <sup>42</sup> Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed.

<sup>43</sup> Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: <sup>44</sup> “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.” <sup>45</sup> Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

I think this passage is interesting. It appears to have been written right after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And here it tells a story that effectively supplants the role of the priest which would have been operative just a few short years prior. Jesus’s direct intervention renders the Toraitic priestly role superfluous. There is no need for purification rituals, and the fact that Jesus now declares the man ready to offer up a sacrifice as commanded by Moses is very subversive. The priest had been the only one authorized to order a sacrifice. Now the narrator has Jesus bypassing the priest, making the declarations of pure and impure by himself, and then commanding the man to rub it in the priest’s face by offering up the requisite sacrifice not with the intention of it being an Asham but as “a testimony to them”, which sounds an

awful lot like saying that by doing this I am publicly demonstrating insubordination to your priestly authority.

To my mind, the reworking of the story of Elisha into a narrative that blends that prophetic function with a rebellious twist remakes the *metzora* into a symbol of freedom from authority.

This is of course exactly the path that Christianity took. In rejecting the structures of communal authority in Judean life, they paved a new path from impurity to purity, and toward spiritual freedom.

The emerging rabbinite movement, which would shortly come to establish the beginnings of what we call Judaism, were also concerned with spiritual freedom.

The rabbis composed the Haggadah, telling the story of freedom, at a very early stage in their development as an institution. It is one of the oldest texts that we have. And in its own way it is a subversive text. It is in a sense a Reconstructionist text that models the idea of respect for tradition but a willingness to boldly innovate. It creates a meal structured after a Greek symposium, but one replete with references to Israelite history and Temple ritual. It creates ritual that is repeated generation after generation, but at the same time has a kind of jazz-like improvisation built in.

The move from impurity to purity, and toward spiritual freedom, comes about not through new allegiance to a prophetic-figure-cum-Messiah, but through communal engagement. It is a profoundly social act.

Perhaps this explains why the American Jewish community challenges the American ideal of radical individualism. That kind of freedom is not the Jewish way. Individualism needs always to be considered in its social context.

For Jews, freedom does not signify an individual rights-based approach that celebrates separation from the structures of communal authority. It requires a social consciousness, self-restraint, and a contributory ethic. This undergirds the biblical injunction to love your neighbor as yourself.

The figure of the *metzora* exists in the backdrop to all of this. The Haggadah tells us, *Kol dichfin yetei veyechol* – let all who are hungry come and eat. There is no qualification here that only certain deserving ones can come and eat. I think that we need to think about ways in which we are still living with the category of the *metzora* – the one who is to be kept apart from a pure core. It is a social concept with profound political implications. I think it brings up new questions that we might ask ourselves in place of the traditional questions asked at the seder table. Because the way impurity and purity functions in civil society today is reflected in attitudes people hold towards different groups. For decades, American Jews thought themselves well integrated into the fabric of American society – we were pure. Now the place of American Jews feels called into question by many. Are we now like the *metzora*, impure? How does that impact our sense of freedom here? What about immigrants, labeled as impure and less than human by the right – what about our obligations in that regard? What about how we think about life in Israel? There is arguably a segment of Israeli Jewish society that look upon Palestinian Arabs as a kind of *metzora*. How does this inflect politics there,

and could a discussion about this help to ensure that what is a morally just war also be fought justly?

As provocative and perhaps unanswerable as these questions are, we should also remember that the Seder is designed to take us to a place of freedom and joy. The seder has built into its structure a brilliant mechanism – it says that we cannot stay stuck in the Maggid section – we cannot simply continue ad infinitum to try to answer unanswerable questions. We visit them, we reflect on them, and then we eat and we sing because we also must remember that we are deserving of joy and happiness. Because this is the experience of freedom, and we must take care to move ourselves that spiritual space as well.