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4th Year Sermon: *Parashat Tazria/M'tzora*
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“Fear of the Unknown: Embracing Our Shared Humanity in *Parashat Tazria/M'tzora*”

There is a recurring nightmare that plagues the minds of Jewish educators everywhere. You walk in to an office or a classroom, ready for a preliminary meeting with a family to begin preparations for their child's *b'nei mitzvah*. You see the nervous excitement on their faces as you enter the room, and you can't help but feel some of it yourself. The child is bright, curious, and eager to learn. The mother says to you, “We're really hoping to get a good Torah portion!” You give your usual response “Well, they're all good in their own way,” knowing it's a half-truth at best. Then you add: “And what's important is that this be a meaningful process for the whole family”.

After laying out what the process will look like, you ask the student, “So when is your birthday?” “April 15th!” The child responds with a smile. “Wonderful!” You open your calendar, trying to ignore the pit beginning to open in your stomach, “just give me one moment while I check with the Hebrew calendar...(gasp)” Suddenly all of the color leaves your face and the pit opens wider—you look up, hoping the family doesn't notice the profound dread that has descended upon you. “Well, (clears throat), it looks like your Torah portion will be, um, *Tazria/M'tzora* from the book of Leviticus.” “Leviticus?!” the mother responds as her eyes widen a bit. The child interjects, “Cool! So what's it about?”

Then you wake up.

The answer to that innocent yet important question, which we find so nerve-wracking, is that this week's double Torah portion, *Tazria/M'tzora*, is a collection of ritual laws addressing skin disease, menstruation, nocturnal emissions, and other bodily fluxes. Not exactly the easiest material to discuss with a soon-to-be teenager. In fact, these are topics

that make many of us uncomfortable regardless of age. We are left with the question: how can we expect such passages to be meaningful to our congregants and students when we're not sure of their relevance for our *own* Judaism?

The discomfort and anxiety that enshrouds these three chapters in Leviticus is not an eternal vestment of the Biblical text. In fact, I would propose that *Tazria/M'tzora* is a text well-suited to our world today. But first, we must take a closer look at why we feel the discomfort in the first place.

In *The Savage in Judaism*, Howard Eilberg Schwartz offers an anthropological analysis of the rituals and texts of ancient Israel. Eilberg-Schwartz explains that for years, scholars refused to apply the critical methods of anthropology to the Hebrew Bible. He points to the early stages of anthropology, when the objects of study were civilizations newly conquered or subjugated by European colonial powers. At that time, anthropologists presumed a position of cultural superiority in relation to these subjugated communities, labeling them as "primitive" or "savage". The beliefs and myths of these "savages" were categorized as "superstitions", in contrast to the "true" beliefs held by Enlightened Christian Europeans.

The presumption of this gap between "primitive" societies and the modernized culture of Europe created an invisible barrier around the ancient texts of the Hebrew Bible. Were they to subject the Biblical text to anthropology, they would tacitly acknowledge that the foundations of European civilization are simply *another* set of myths and superstitious rituals, rather than eternally binding divine truths.

Refusing to approach the Hebrew Bible as a "savage" text, scholars instead sought every which way to present it as an "Enlightened" text. At its most extreme, this meant finding the foundations of European rational thought and philosophy in the Biblical text. A more moderate approach, one that conceded a bit more to context, would claim that the thoughts and beliefs recorded in the Hebrew Bible were more "progressive" than those of their Ancient Near Eastern contemporaries. Either way, there was immense resistance to

viewing the Hebrew Bible anthropologically. Such an approach challenged the fundamental notion of the text's sanctity and universal truth value.

Today, we are more willing to incorporate diverse interpretive tools when reading Tanakh. Yet we still carry the hermeneutical baggage of the 19th and 20th centuries each time we approach passages like this week's parasha. Reform Jews in particular, have inherited a tradition that emphasizes the moral and ethical principles of the Hebrew Bible—lauding them as universal truths and celebrating them as the “essence” of Judaism. Although this has become more nuanced over time, we maintain an implicit expectation that each text we encounter within Tanakh entails some ethical lesson or moral teaching—whether it be via metaphor or the decoding of hidden meanings.

And here lies the dread in approaching *Tazria/M'tzora*: not only does it require interpretive somersaults to find a relevant ethical teaching, it also presents rituals and beliefs that, on the one hand, clash with our moral sensibilities, and on the other hand, discuss themes we typically prefer not to address in public.

Eilberg-Schwartz teaches us that we should develop different attitudes toward our text. Rather than force *Tazria/M'tzora* to fit within our thematic comfort-zone, we should instead embrace its “savage” or “primitive” aspects, because these aspects are fundamentally human reactions to the chaotic forces in the world that lie beyond our control. The authors of this text were addressing very real fears about invisible forces that present grave threats to our well-being. We now have a different understanding of the origins of the ailments that frightened them. But we share in the fear and anxiety that comes with confronting mysterious and destructive illnesses, now more than ever.

One of the fears that clearly motivates the Levitical authors is the spread of various forms of skin disease. Chapters thirteen and fourteen explain that any person found to have a certain type of skin infection must be physically isolated from the community for at least seven days. After each seven-day period, the priest would return to inspect the infection and see to what extent it has spread. If the infection goes away and the person recovers,

they are gradually brought back into the community upon performing a prescribed ritual. If it persists, they are deemed impure and forbidden from participating in various aspects of communal life.

Of course, we now know far beyond what our ancient ancestors could have imagined about disease, pathogens, bacteria, and how to mitigate them in our daily lives. While the authors of Leviticus could see the effect that diseases have on the human body, they were unable to detect their invisible causes, and there are few things scarier than a threat we cannot see. The Levitical system in *Tazria/M'tzora* addressed the practical concerns of safeguarding the community and the fear that lay beneath those concerns.

Thanks to recent technological advancements, much of invisible world that terrified the ancient Israelite priests is now visible to us. We not only *understand* how diseases operate, we can periodically cure and prevent them. Yet, even with our “enlightened” knowledge, today, we find ourselves vulnerable to a malicious, invisible force beyond our control—a virus that became a pandemic. For all of our cultural advancement and supposed superiority, we are still overcome by the same fears and anxieties that lie beneath the surface of our “savage” text.

Taking this anthropological perspective to heart, we interact with the text in new and meaningful ways. Given our experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic, we might better grasp what it meant for a person infected with skin disease to experience successive weeks of social isolation. Only for us, it is not only the sick but also the healthy who must remain quarantined. For many of us, this will be a temporary experience. But we must also consider people in our communities with compromised or weak immune systems for whom COVID-19, or another virus like it, present a grave danger. It's possible that in the future, they will never feel safe enough to participate in certain aspects of communal life—even after social distancing restrictions have been lifted. How can we, as builders of community, address these very real fears and anxieties? How can we be more cognizant of feelings of social isolation that *will* continue once this pandemic has passed? I do not have

all the answers to these questions, but they demonstrate the significant yield of approaching our tradition anthropologically.

Employing an anthropological approach to Judaism need not diminish or detract from a philosophical, ethical one. It is not a matter of either/or but of both/and. We should apply all of the interpretive tools available to us, while recognizing that certain tools are better suited to yield meaning from certain texts. In doing so, we may gain a renewed appreciation for the texts we hold as sacred.

Understanding *Tazria/M'tzora* as a response to fear and anxiety helps us to more clearly see the ways we respond to similar fears in our own lives. And perhaps, sometime in the future, the generations after *us* will study how we respond to the current moment as a way of better understanding their *own* fear in the face of chaotic, uncontrollable forces in the world.

So if you find yourself explaining *Tazria/M'tzora* to a new student of Torah, whether it be in dreams or in real life, through video chat or face-to-face, you might fondly reminisce on hearing this sermon over a ZOOM call during the 2020 COVID pandemic, or perhaps you might simply say, "They were scared of a danger that they couldn't see and couldn't control, and so are we."

(Shabbat Shalom)