

Dear Chavraya,

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria-M'tzora*, is one of the more emotionally difficult portions in the Torah to read. Dealing with matters of ritual purity and impurity specifically in relation to the *Beys Hamikdosh*, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, this double portion begins with a woman's separation from communal life following childbirth. It then continues for the entire two portions to address various skin ailments and bodily emissions and attendant rites of purification.

Read on the surface, to the sensitive soul *Tazria-M'tzora* is repugnant. But that is not how we are meant to read Torah, these portions or any other. The *p'shat*, the simple or surface meaning, is only the starting point. If we stayed there, stunted in moral and intellectual development, we would hardly be the people of the Book, whose reading of Torah has spawned oceans of commentary and debate. The Written Torah is meant to be read with the wisdom and understanding of Oral Torah, which fills in the blanks and completes God's thoughts, as it were, with human insight and initiative. The dance of written and oral Torah is where God and people meet on the page of text and life, a sacred interaction in which we are God's partners. The Oral Torah illumines the deeper meaning that flows beneath the surface of the Written Torah.

Parashat Tazria-M'tzora itself becomes a metaphor. Repelled, we are tempted to step back and avoid engagement. That is exactly the response that on the surface, on the *p'shat* level, appears to be the nature of relationship with the leper, the one of afflicted body and soul who wanders through these portions. The nature of our reading and engaging Torah is meant to remind us of the way we are to read and engage human beings, each one carrying the sacred torah/teaching of their own life experience, each one a living, breathing, feeling torah of life. Precisely in these portions that we are tempted to turn away from there is an affirmation of human dignity. How much the more so, however tempted through weakness or prejudice, dare we not turn away from any human being, each one created in the image of God.

The Slonimer Rebbe points to the very first word that introduces the entire enumeration of physical ailments in these portions. In an unusual grammatical construction that places the object of the sentence first, the Torah says, *adam ki y'hiyeh v'or b'saro.../a human being, upon the skin of whose flesh there appears....* The first human, referred to as both male and female by the rabbis, is called *adam*, one who is of *adamah*, the earth. Of all the words that could be used to refer to a person, the Slonimer teaches that *adam* refers to the highest spiritual level; as it is written, "for in God's image did God create the adam/the human /ki b'tzelem Elokim asah et ha'adam." At the outset, we are reminded that all of the people we are about to encounter, here in the text as in life, are created *b'tzelem Elokim/in the image of God*.

Even as we often learn of human dignity from those we would at first turn away from, through the lens of Oral Torah our eyes are opened to see in *Tazria-M'tzora*, on the surface a most unlikely context, a shining affirmation of human dignity. For now to share one instance, that of the leper, whose *garments shall be rent, whose head shall remain unshorn, who shall be covered down to the upper lip, and who*

shall cry out: "Impure! Impure!". The cruel implication is that the leper shall warn away others, that they not become contaminated. There is another way to read the verse, however, which rests upon a simple grammatical mark, and on the fact that *tamei/impure* can refer either to a state of impurity or to the person in that state. Between the two words, there is a small vertical line called a *p'sik*. The *p'sik* tells the reader or chanter to pause between the words, much like the pause indicated by a rest in music. Conveying a very different sense, the two words can thus be read, *v'tamei | tamei yikra, and the impure | the impure shall cry out.*

With this reading in mind, the Talmud, the embodiment of Oral Torah, says, *This teaches that a person needs to share their pain with others, so that others will seek compassion on behalf of the one who suffers.* A sensitive nineteenth century commentator, Boruch HaLevi Epshtein, known as the *Torah T'mimah*, after the title of his commentary, adds to the message of comfort: *As it is written in the Book of Lamentations, "She shall surely weep at night." Why at night? Because the voice of one who cries at night will surely be heard. Whoever hears will cry with them, and seek compassion on their behalf.*

By pausing for a moment before uttering the next word a new understanding emerges. In taking time to pause, reflection can challenge assumption and the pained cry of another can be heard. Beneath the surface of a challenging verse of Torah is a tender message of hope and compassion that speaks to all of us. In our hearing and responding, human dignity – our own and that of others – is affirmed.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor