

Parashat Tazria-M'tzora, 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

There are times when beauty is so apparent, leaping up and declaring its presence, as the daffodils that appeared today for the first time, calling out to me as I turned into the driveway. My ears heard the prayer of my lips quietly emitted, "wow!" So too with meaning, easily felt and palpable at sacred moments of life's turning, or in the poetry of Creation that unfolds in *B'reishit*, calling us to go out into the world and experience that which emerges from the Beginning and yet is renewed every day. There are times when the reverse is true, when beauty and meaning seem to hide and there is only to search and seek. We know then through experience that comes of living how great the reward for faith and perseverance. The meaning is there, as it has been all along, waiting to be perceived. We only need to uncover our own hearts and eyes for the hidden to be revealed.

This is the way of this week's Torah portion, a double portion, *Tazria-M'tzora*. On the surface it can seem inscrutable, and yet even on the surface it pulsates with meaning when we realize that the text is a mirror in which to see our selves and others. In moments of life when we might wish to hide from our own view or avert our eyes from seeing others, the text cries out and says cry with me, and by the way, you are beautiful. It is perhaps the portion most dreaded by young people approaching Bar and Bas Mitzvah. Perhaps no less for us than them, a desire to skip over and avoid, not so much the text if truth be said, but the realities of life of which it speaks. And the fear, that this could be me, and in one way or another, at one time or another, so it is, and therein lies great hope. The *parsha* is filled with themes of yuck, of bodily oozings and flowings, of scabs and growths, discolorations of skin, of hair where it should and shouldn't be, of semen and blood, of mildew and mold. Wandering through these portions are people who so easily repel, of those with skin ailments and disfiguring illness, the leper, standing for all who have come to be shunned, those who suffer twice, with their illness and with their aloneness.

Strange to say, but I love these portions, *Tazria-M'tzora*, because they reflect facets of life we would most often prefer to avoid, and so we do. Drawn to look more closely at the text becomes a metaphor for looking more closely at people. Looking carefully at the portion as it unfolds, imagining people walking through difficult times, facing painful realities beyond their own control, this is about us. The text glimmers, pointing, pleading, asking us to look and not avert our eyes. There is beauty beneath the surface of text and skin. At the very beginning of these two portions there are verses concerning childbirth, a reminder of the beauty and awe, the innocence and purity, the miracle of becoming that surrounds the arrival of each one into life. And the very first word that leads

from the verses of birth into the painful twists and turns of life is the word *adam/human*, the one who from the beginning and ever since is created in the image of God.

In a verse so abused and used to abuse by those who claim to know God's word but are blind to the image of God in the pained face of another, of the leper we are told, as usually translated, *he shall cover himself down to the upper lip, and he shall call out: Unclean! Unclean!/v'tamei tamei yikra*. *Tamei* simply means one who is ritually impure, or as one in our Thursday morning Torah group says, one who is ritually unavailable, inaccessible, all in regard to bringing an offering to the Temple when it stood in Jerusalem. The word *tamei* is a noun, however, and can be read to refer to the person and not to their state. There is a vertical line between the two words that directs us in singing or reading to pause, as a rest in music. The words can then be read quite differently, *the one who is tamei | the one who is tamei shall call out!* This is the way the rabbis read this verse, saying that it teaches that *the one who is suffering needs to announce their pain to the many and the many are to seek compassion upon her or him, v'rabim m'vakshim alav rachamim*. In that call and response, from barely beneath the surface of text and skin, beauty rises with all the freshness of spring's first daffodils

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor