

PARASHAT METZORA

The Torah reading for this coming Shabbat is a double parsha. It is from Leviticus. If the family problems in Marc Plantt's movie "Rachel Getting Married" is Genesis, and the longing and travel in "Sleepless in Seattle" is Exodus, then these parts of Leviticus are like "Night of the Living Dead". Joel told you yesterday about the first parashat of the double, Tazriah. The second parashat is Metzorah. Both provide ancient purity rights which can seem extremely superstitious and far from our present day lives.

Metzorah is mostly concerned with the unfortunate person stricken with Tzara'at, a skin disease usually associated with leprosy. The parashat goes on to deal with other skin eruptions and then houses with what is apparently mold, though scholars question whether mold was even possible in a desert environment. Some even believe that the infliction on houses was a totally theoretical concept even in Biblical times.

In regard to leprosy, the parashat begins by discussing the end of the illness, when the leper has healed and the priest starts the purification process. It includes a list of offerings made by the priest, the process of cleansing the leper and then the sacrifices the healed leper must bring to rejoin the community. This is followed by a list of sacrifices for a poor person who has healed.

Thus, the wealthy person brings two male lambs without blemish, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish, three-tenths of a measure of choice

flower with oil mixed in and one log of oil while the poor person brings only one male lamb, one-tenth of a measure of choice flower and a log of oil, as well as two turtle doves or two pigeons, depending on that person's means.

What is striking is that this parashat is not about banishment, but focuses on how the leper can rejoin the community. The concern is for inclusion, not exclusion.

In our present-day agencies, few of our social workers deal with leprosy. But they do deal every day with persons who are isolated, outcast and excluded from the community. Our Jewish values demand that we make every effort to bring persons back to functioning lives and back into our community. Our agencies enable our communities to fulfill this important mission. Just as the priests of ancient days brought the Metzora back into Israel's encampment, our agencies recognize that each person, no matter how troubled, is in the divine image of G-d. It takes a lot more than turtle doves, but our social workers have the patience, skill and loving kindness to do the job.

The Talmud comments in regard to the distinction between wealthy and poor as to offerings, which are called Korban Oleh V'yored, translated as offerings of higher or lesser value. Of course, our agencies function similarly by charging a sliding scale of fees so that both rich and poor can be served. Our tireless fundraisers allow this to happen.

On behalf of the Conference Committee I want express our sincere hope that everything you've experienced over the last three days will allow you, as lay leaders, executives, social workers and fund raisers, to go back to your communities and fulfill our ancient values that ensure a high and effective social safety net within each Jewish community.