



Sickness and Sin: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Tazria* Leviticus 12:1 - 13:59

In the world of *Tazria* those who suffer from a scary illness are isolated. Scaly, raw, and oozing pustules called *tzara'at* erupt on the skin and spread impurity through the camp. The word used in Leviticus to describe this skin ailment is *nega*, which specifically means a plague sent by God as punishment, as in: “Adonai plagued (*naga*) Pharaoh with mighty plagues (*n'ga'im*)” (Genesis 12:17).

In the bible, it is unclear what personal failings cause *tzara'at*. However, the Midrash remembers that Miriam was inflicted with *tzara'at* (often misleadingly translated as leprosy) after she speaks ill of Moses's wife in Numbers 12, so the rabbis imagined that *tzara'at* was a punishment for gossip or destructive speech (*Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 16:1-6).

It makes sense that in the pre-modern world, illness would feel like a punishment from God: impossible to comprehend, quickly spreading, demanding explanation. However, in the 21st century we understand so much more about disease. We know that germs and wayward cells behave in complex ways, few of them in our control. You would think that a view of illness based on personal failings would have all but disappeared in 2022, and yet it's still going strong. In modern times we talk about “defeating cancer,” “battling disease,” “overcoming disabilities” and even “succumbing to Covid.” And wherever there are winners, there must be losers. These metaphors all imply that to be sick, or to remain sick, is to be a loser.

Recently a client of mine died feeling guilty. Many people die with regrets, but this situation was particularly painful, as her regrets were not about having done anything wrong. She was consumed with guilt for not being able to “defeat” cancer through positive thinking. Sadly, this situation is not unique; people often die feeling guilty and burdensome due to their illness.

I can understand how they feel. As a chronically ill person, I'm regularly asked by well-intentioned community members if I couldn't somehow cure my *incurable* conditions if only I tried a little harder, thought more positively, drank more kale smoothies, tried another experimental medication, or meditated more deeply.

Only a few years ago, there was an effort to undermine a key part of the longstanding, landmark civil rights law protecting people with disabilities—the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)—by making it much easier to discriminate against people with disabilities in public.

Underlying some of the attitudes expressed during debates in Congress is a Levitical view of illness. One senator advocated the dismantling of the Affordable Care Act so insurance companies could reduce “the cost to those people **who lead good lives, they’re healthy, they’ve done the things to keep their bodies healthy** [*emphasis added*]. And right now, those are the people who have done things the **right way** that are seeing their costs skyrocketing.”

In an unusual Talmud passage, the Sages take turns being sick and visiting each other. At the end, Rabbi Eleazar is old, ill, and approaching death. He is weeping in his room when Rabbi Yoḥanan comes to visit and asks him if he is weeping due to regret. Does he regret how he lived his life? R. Eleazar explains that he lived a full life and he has no regrets: “I am weeping,” he says, “on account of this beauty [our bodies which are in the image of God] that will [eventually] rot in the earth.” Rabbi Yoḥanan replies: “On that account you surely have a reason to weep,” and they both wept (Talmud *Brachot* 5b).

This text offers a very different view of illness than the world of *Tazria* or American politics. In this text, we each have times of being sick; illness and decline are parts of life, not punishments for bad decisions. Here, a body that’s old and sick is seen as beautiful, and made in the image of God. The loss of that beautiful body, no matter how disabled, is always worth weeping for.

Letting go of the Levitical view of illness is a gradual unlearning, a leaning away from all the subtle ways we see illness and aging as failing. “The body is not an apology,” writes Sonya Renee Taylor in a poem that led to a book and a blog. “The body is not calamity. The body is not a math test. The body is not a wrong answer. The body is not a failed class. You are not failing. The body is not an apology.”

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This Torah Reflection was written by former BAJHC rabbi Elliot Kukla, now a faculty member of SVARA: A Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, where he also directs the Communal Loss and Adaptation Project (CLAP). Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.