

22 – Tazria-Metzora & Joshua 20-21 – Outline

Tazria-Metzora Names

- “Tazria” = “when she sows” (when a woman gives birth)
- “Metzora” = “leper” (one who has contracted tzara’at)

On Ritual Impurity and Impurity from Giving Birth

- ritual impurity: being ritually unclean means that one is forbidden from entering the Temple
 - the Temple is a way of connecting with God, so this is weighty
 - on the other hand, we don’t have a Temple today
- what do the various situations that cause ritual impurity have in common?
 - ritual impurity results when we experience an encounter with death or when the potential for life slips by without producing life (also a kind of death)
 - “touching death” makes us unclean
 - if we draw near to God, we can’t have the “stench” of death on us; drawing near when unclean would be a form of taking God lightly
 - we wear our “best clothes” for an audience with the king
- what does giving birth have to do with death?
 - several answers:
 - giving birth focuses us on our mortality and can result in paralysis and depression
 - a new baby means that the parents have to dismiss the old life (a kind of death)
 - loss of blood = loss of life
 - Grant: a mother’s length of impurity after bearing a boy is less than after bearing a girl because the boy, himself, sheds blood at his circumcision, and this is innocent blood, a picture of the Messiah (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruWYjlbugfQ>)
 - some deeper ideas
 - “sowing seed” begins with death – the seed separates from the mother plant, and then the seed, itself, must die (John 12:23-25)
 - the child has to be separated from the mother
 - the spirit that indwells the child must separate from the upper realm
 - women inherently have a kind of connection to death that men do not have
 - because women are more deeply connected to the physical world, and the physical world, initially, separates us from God (and separation is death)
 - women are masters of space and time
 - space: they make a house a home

- time: their bodies are connected to the moon, from which we get the calendar and count time
 - women create fixed, physical bodies for spirits to indwell – creation of the physical “from nothing”
- this deeper “grounding” of the woman is both a blessing and a curse
 - if they are able to gain mastery of the physical, then they have this great potential to develop in their relationship with God
 - they are masters of creating physical vessels for spiritual purposes
 - if they are not walking with the Lord, then they can easily fall away into base physicality
 - to some degree, we’re seeing especially women fall prey to the lies spreading in our society
 - it is through a woman that the serpent brought death into the world, but it is through a woman that the Messiah was born
- because of their deeper “grounding” in physicality, women will run up against ritual impurity more often than men, just by virtue of being a woman
 - and perhaps this is why a girl child causes a longer ritual impurity, because she has the potential to create the physical realm as her mother does

Month of Iyar and Counting of the Omer

- starts tonight (April 20, 2023)
- Gaining an understanding of the type of growth God is specially making available in this spiritual season will help us to understand why we’re reading about these topics now in these Torah portions
- “Iyar” = “blossom” in the original Akkadian, but in Hebrew is connected to the idea of light
 - sounds like the Hebrew “or,” “light”
 - the Torah uses “Ziv” for this month, meaning “radiance”
 - the physical light is increasing this month
- Omer count spans the whole month – only month with a special mitzvah each night
 - a kind of training for the animal soul
- mazal of Iyar: the bull, Taurus
 - has a willful strength (picture a fighting bull)
 - we’re moving from the lamb (Aries) to the bull – from an animal that is passive and easily led, to one that is willful

- a child's greatest lesson is learning how to submit his or her will to the will of the parents
 - Dorothy Nolte: "If a child lives with approval, he learns to live with himself." – we don't want to learn to live with ourselves
 - God is providing opportunities for us at this time to learn how to submit our will to His
 - the child is being asked to submit without much understanding
 - obedience from fear and then duty – necessary steps in obedience; later, God will open our understanding, which activates the heart, and we will obey from love
- period of the Counting of the Omer has complexities
 - positives:
 - helps to build our anticipation for Shavuot and the giving of the Torah
 - a month of spiritual and physical healing
 - "Iyyar" said to be an acronym for "I am God your healer."
 - spring is setting in in the N. Hemisphere
 - R'Trugman: The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that there is something very joyous about this month, and that is because the chush of this month is "chirchor/machshevah" "thought," and "machshevah" can be permuted to "b'simchah," "in joy." And so the idea is that during this period of the Omer, the way we are rectifying our middot, our personality, our characteristics, our very nature through the 49 days is through putting joy into every aspect of our lives.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KH0pLJS_Tg&list=PLYztuC2svll7X5sbSV1gXW0UO8NftfkIF&index=13 10:30m)
 - negatives:
 - developed into a period of semi-mourning because of the deaths of tens of thousands of R' Akiva's students during the Omer
 - explanations:
 - they died in a plague because they didn't respect each other properly
 - they died from persecution
 - perhaps they died in the Bar Kokhba revolt
 - also, many events in the Crusades during the Middle Ages happened during this Omer period

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KH0pLJS_Tg&list=PLYztuC2svll7X5sbSV1gXW0UO8NftfkIF&index=13)
 - bringing these complexities together
 - whenever God does a work of raising us up to a new level (as at Passover), what happens next is that He shines a "light" that enables us to see the darkness within; this is the beginning of healing and helps us see our need for a deeper work of salvation, the next step of which will be Shavuot, the giving of the Torah
 - an important principle: when God does a work of elevating us to a higher level, what follows is a cleansing of the vessel, and this cleansing requires a kind of death

- Isaiah 66:20 (from the haftarah): “And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the lord, just as the israelites bring their grain offering in a CLEAN VESSEL to the house of the LORD”
- the real focus of the Passover season is Unleavened Bread (7 days), which is focused on death
 - Unleavened Bread sets the tone for the season, dying
- we can always be about the business of asking God to shine a light on the darkness that remains, but the point of studying the calendar is learning how to get in step with the emphasis of each season, the energy He is providing for a particular kind of growth

Connecting Iyar to Tazria-Metzorah

- to put it simply, in these portions that deal especially with the condition of tzara’at, WE ARE SEEING IN A GRAPHIC WAY HOW GOD HELPS US SEE OUR INNER IMPURITY on the outside so that we can begin dealing with it
- about tzara’at (which is not “leprosy,” or Hansen’s disease)
 - not leprosy
 - it can affect clothing and houses
 - if the person’s entire body is covered with it, he or she is pure
 - it’s a spiritual disease
 - Kehot Chumash: “*Tzara’at* is neither any disease with which we are familiar today nor any natural disease that was ever known to humanity. It is a physical condition directly and miraculously resulting from some spiritual flaw, rather than one contracted by a lack of hygiene or by exposure to any physical contagium.”
 - a defining characteristic: the mark appears to be DEEPER THAN THE SKIN, i.e., spiritual
- the metzora is a walking picture of death
 - white skin is lacking blood – dead
 - one who turns entirely white is pure because they are effectively dead – their opportunity for growth has passed, and they either entirely transcended or “descended”
 - either way, they are not a danger to the community, as an entirely sinful person is not taken seriously, and one who has entirely repented no longer has the spiritual problem
- it’s a double portion about spiritual impurity that becomes manifested on the outside so that we can see it, particularly in the case of tzara’at
 - God shining the light into the vessel to see the darkness there
 - it is God’s graciousness, this gift of temporary death that leads us to work on our souls
 - the portion could not illustrate better what this spiritual season is all about

- fascinating that when Israel was a young nation, God used this type of rather obvious spiritual manifestation as a teaching tool, but in latter years, He withdrew it
 - an example of how God can work more openly at early stages, when we are younger, and how He becomes more hidden at later times as we mature
 - even just the study of tzara'at today puts some healthy fear in us and inspiration to change

The Specific Spiritual Malady: Lashon Hara

- what exactly are the spiritual maladies that result in tzara'at?
 - haughtiness
 - lashon hara, "evil speech"
 - deadly for a community
 - "metzora" = contraction of "motzi ra," one who spreads evil or slander
 - it's the practice of speaking TRUE things about people that are negative when others don't need to know
 - maybe we think they need to know so they "know who they're dealing with"
 - maybe we use as our excuse for spreading gossip: "Let's pray for so-and-so..."
 - it's an unmasking of someone, an undressing of them in front of others
 - lashon hara creates walls between people; we find it hard to see people in their inner purity when we know their sin; we tend to see their flesh rather than the inner person from that point onward
 - usually, speaking true things that are negative is simply not necessary
 - if there is a safety concern, we must speak
 - if someone is making an important decision, such as marriage, we might need to say the negative thing about the one they are thinking about marrying
 - it's considered one of the most damaging things we can do in the world
 - we're also not allowed to listen to lashon hara, and if we can't help but hear it, we're supposed to disbelieve what we are hearing
 - we need to review the topic periodically to build up again our resistance to it
 - Chofetz Chaim Daily Companion is the definitive resource
 - our words have great power
 - Chana Weisberg: "Never tell your child that she is a failure. She will begin to see herself as incapable and unworthy. She will see it futile to even try. Never tell your spouse that he is a loser, stupid, or clumsy. Your words will become self-fulfilling prophecies."

(https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/5870982/jewish/For-Your-Tazria-Metzorah-Study-Group-PDF.htm)

- we also shouldn't tell children they are "a good boy" or "a bad girl;" there's no such thing. We are all pure spirits wrapped in the flesh. We should emphasize the kids' decisions for life or death rather than placing labels on them that they internalize so profoundly
- beyond refraining from speaking negatively about each other, let's focus at this time on actively overlooking the flaws in others, within reason, and speaking out the positive we see
 - empowers the good in people rather than increasing the burdens on people when we speak negatively

Yeshua

- Yeshua is pictured in the various instruments used to cleanse a metzora and also a house cleansed of tzara'at: two clean birds, a cedar stick, a scarlet string, and hyssop
 - bird that is slain – as Yeshua was slain
 - cedar stick – He is slain on a tree
 - scarlet string – His blood flows down
 - hyssop – the blood is a covering that passes us from death to life, like the blood of the Passover lamb (applied to the doorways with hyssop)
 - the bird that is allowed to go free – could have been chosen to die, but it was pardoned, having its life returned to it; this is like Yeshua's resurrection
 - and we are resurrected with Him
- fascinatingly, the Jews have a strong tradition of connecting the Messiah to the metzora, the leper
 - Kehot Chumash: "...the sages of the Talmud say that the Messiah's epithet is "the *Metzora* of the House of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince," citing the verse, "In truth, it was our illnesses that he bore and our pains that he carried, but we regarded him as a *metzora*, smitten by God and afflicted."
(https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2170736/jewish/Kehot-Chumash.htm)

Joshua 20-21

- establishing of 6 cities of refuge, 3 west of the Jordan, and 3 east, and the allocation of cities for the Levites
- first point: we have here another example of 1) God elevates, followed by 2) cleansing
 - they cross the Jordan at Passover (a time for being elevated)
 - they go about cleansing the Land from the impurities there (the Canaanite squatters)
- second point: the death of the High Priest being required before an unintentional manslayer can return home is the principle of the metzora, the idea that the Messiah,

Who is our Heavenly High Priest, bears upon His shoulders the sins of the nation, and with His death, He takes away the sins of the people

- what happens in Israel under the High Priest's watch, under his authority (he being the de facto "king" before Israel had kings), IMPARTS SOME CULPABILITY to him, some measure of guilt. And when he passes away, he takes that culpability with him.

22 – Tazria-Metzora & Joshua 20-21 – Transcript (not exact)

Welcome to Beth Tikkun and this series called “Spiritual Seasons,” where we are discussing how each of the weekly Torah portions fits into the calendar and the general pattern of salvation. This week we are in the double portion of Tazria-Metzora, four chapters altogether, Leviticus 12 through 15.

In recent lessons, we have been talking about the state of childhood connected to the rebirth of Passover. With that in mind, I thought I’d start with this little story today that helps us to appreciate the wonder of a child. It’s a little incident that happened when many left home and family to strike it rich out west. “During gold rush days in California, a lady took her infant to the theater one evening and it started crying just as the orchestra began to play. ‘Stop those fiddles and let the baby cry,’ called a man in the pit. ‘I haven’t heard such a sound in ten years!’ The audience applauded the sentiment wildly, the orchestra was stopped, and the baby continued his performance amid unbounded enthusiasm.” Infancy and childhood are precious, and we find ourselves in the calendar in just that sort of a condition right now in a spiritual sense.

Tazria-Metzora Summary

Let’s move to the portion now with a summary. “Tazria” means “when she sows,” meaning when a woman gives birth. The first section deals with the ritual defilement that a woman incurs as a result of child- birth; the second part of Tazria discusses the defilement contracted by a person or garment afflicted with the condition known as tzara’at, which is sometimes translated as “leprosy,” though it’s not leprosy, or “Hansen’s Disease,” as leprosy is called these days. We’ll address this more later.

Metzora is named for the person who has contracted tzara’at. The word is usually translated “leper.” The verse that provides the name of the portion is actually focused on the HEALING of the metzora. The portion starts: “This shall be the law of the metzora for the day of his cleansing” (Leviticus 14:2). And the haftarah in Isaiah is also focused on the HEALING of Israel. When the metzora is recovered, there are certain procedures God commands to do before actually pronouncing him or her clean and allowing the person back into the community. In fact, the person is not healed until the priest makes this pronouncement; even if the symptoms are all gone, the person remains a metzora until the priest pronounces him or her clean. Part of the procedure for making this pronouncement is the taking of two birds to the metzora outside the camp. One bird is killed, and the other is set free. The procedure also involves the use of a stick of cedar, scarlet yarn, and hyssop. These components, including the birds, are also used when pronouncing a house to be clean after the house had been cleansed of tzara’at, which is the next topic in parsha Metzora. The final topic in the portion is male and female emissions that render each unclean, including how the people are made clean again.

On Ritual Impurity and Impurity from Giving Birth

Before we move into the main topics for today, I’d like to consider the idea of ritual uncleanness and apply that idea to the impurity that results from giving birth. First of all, let’s address what ritual impurity means: being ritually unclean means that one is forbidden from

entering the Temple and taking part in that central aspect of the life of Israel. The Temple is designed to connect us to God, our Maker, our Father, the Lover of Our Soul. It is a weighty consequence to not be able to draw near to Him. On the other hand, we should note that since we do not have a Temple now, these consequences are somewhat muted in our day.

Now another important question: what do the various situations that cause ritual impurity have in common? Why does something that may seem to be a very natural part of human life like giving birth or a woman's monthly cycle render someone unclean in this way? The answer from the Sages is that ritual impurity results when we experience an encounter with death or when the potential for life slips by without producing life, which is also a kind of death. Touching death makes us unclean. We are to be a people who rise above death, who transcend death, and we don't go back to that place where death reigns. God is the Source of life, and if we are to draw near to Him, we must not have the stench of death on us. When we come before the king, we wear the best clothes. We wouldn't go before the king in the ripped jeans we wear to mow the lawn. If we present ourselves like that, it means that we are taking the king lightly, and we must never imply that we take lightly the King of the Universe. So ritual impurity prevents one from entering the Temple grounds.

Now, having said that ritual uncleanness results from a nearness to death, let's ask what giving birth has to do with death? I think there are many answers that apply here. Some say that giving birth focuses us on our mortality and can even at times lead to a kind of paralysis and depression. When a woman gives birth to a child, the parents have to dismiss the old life. The family is changed forever. There is a releasing and separating from that old life and that old person that needs to happen, and that separation is death.

And too, giving birth is associated with loss of blood, and loss of blood is closely connected to ritual impurity because the blood carries life in a special way, by God's design. In Grant and Robin's parsha discussion this week, they wrestle a bit with why it should be that when a woman gives birth to a girl, her impurity lasts twice as long as when she gives birth to a boy. Why does giving birth to a girl make her unclean twice as long? Grant explains that the difference is that the boy's own blood is spilled on the eighth day at his circumcision, and this is innocent blood. This spilling of innocent blood pictures the Messiah and acts to lessen the mother's impurity. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruWYjIbugfQ>)

I want to suggest some reasons for the mother's impurity that go even a bit deeper. The next few minutes will be a bit in the weeds, but then we'll move on to other topics. There are some foundational ideas here to parse out if we can muster the patience for them.

Let's start by noticing that the Hebrew for giving birth is connected to the idea of sowing seed, "tazria." "Seed" in Hebrew is "zarah." The mother giving birth is the sowing of seed. When seed is sown, the process begins with death. Yeshua focuses on this idea connecting sowing to death. In John 12 Yeshua says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will

keep it for eternal life” (John 12:23-25). Sowing starts with death, the separation of the seed from the mother plant followed by the death of the seed, itself. And in the case of giving birth, the child has to separate from the mother. Again, separation is death. More than that, the spirit that fills the child’s body that the mother has created has to separate from the spiritual realm to enter that newly created body, so this is another kind of death connected to the birth of a child. But neither of these explanations quite answers why a mother is rendered twice as impure when she gives birth to a girl versus a boy.

So let’s go one step deeper. Beyond the baby separating from the mother, and beyond the spirit separating from the upper realm to come to the lower realm, the woman inherently has A KIND OF CONNECTION TO DEATH that the man does not have, and so she also has this closer connection to ritual impurity, since ritual impurity results from contact with death. Let me explain that. God has given women an inherently deeper connection to THE PHYSICAL WORLD, and THE PHYSICAL WORLD IS INITIALLY A SEPARATION BETWEEN US AND GOD. It’s a separation WE ARE MEANT TO OVERCOME. But AT FIRST, the physical is allowed to rule over us, and in a very real way, it does separate us from God.

Why do I say that women are given a deeper connection to physicality? Consider these facts: to the woman has been gifted mastery of space and time, and space and time are the two main dimensions of physicality. Women take the space of a house and make it a home. They have that gift and are specially associated with the home in Jewish thought and in Jewish life. And women have a special connection to time, too, in that their bodies are connected to the cycle of the moon, and the moon dictates the calendar and the passage of time. Even more, women create physical bodies for spirits to indwell so that they can come down to the physical realm. Within the woman’s body, the FIXED vessel is created for an infinite spirit to indwell. And too, women are generally more connected to their emotions than men are, and the emotions are connected to the nephesh, which is the lower side of the soul. So they have a stronger connection to this lower side of the soul.

Now, let me be quick to say the woman’s gift of connection to physicality can be both a blessing and a curse. Our task here is to overcome the domination of the physical and, in that way, we grow in our relationship with God. This means that if women start out with a deeper grounding in physicality, if they are able to gain mastery of it, then they have this great potential to develop in their relationship with God. They are masterful at creating physical vessels for doing the work of the spirit. However, if they are not walking with the Lord, then they can easily fall away into base physicality. And how many women are being led astray right now by the lies that are spreading like cancer in our society now? We’re seeing now that it is more often the women than the men who are out there screaming their support of the humanist religion these days and voting for that agenda politically – lots of men, too, of course, but it’s the women who are rising up to be especially vocal as many come under the sway of these lies.

So the woman has this great potential to go either way. On the one hand, it is through a woman that the serpent brought death into the world, but on the other hand, it is through a woman that the Messiah was born.

So because the woman has this greater connection to the physical, and because the physical is initially connected to death, the woman is going to run up against ritual impurity more often than the man just by being a woman. Giving birth is creating a physical vessel for a spirit. It's creating from nothing. It's adding to this physical world, and the physical world initially separates us from God. And so any birth renders the woman impure because she has contacted death through this act of creating a physical body. And let me suggest that this is also why giving birth to a girl results in a higher degree of ritual impurity, because the little girl brings with her a greater potential for creating in this same way.

Month of Iyar and the Counting of the Omer

Let's move on to another topic now. Before we go further with the Torah portion, we need to talk about the new month that starts tonight, the second month, called "Iyar," and this special period of the Counting of the Omer. Gaining an understanding of the type of growth God is specially making available in this spiritual season will help us to understand why we're reading about these topics now in these Torah portions.

"Iyar" (aleph-yud-yud-resh) seems to mean "blossom" in the original Akkadian, but in Hebrew, the word is very similar to "or," "light" (which is aleph-vav-resh). The name for this month in the Torah is "Ziv," which means "radiance." In other words, the name of the month is very connected to the increasing light of this month.

The Counting of the Omer spans the whole length of Iyar, making it the only month that has a special (calendar-related) mitzvah every night of the month. Every night during Iyar we count the Omer. In recent teachings, we have been comparing these Omer weeks to the early steps of a child and childhood in general. This nightly count is a kind of training. We gain a kind of foundational strength from it, a measure of self-control over the animal soul as we focus on God and His commandments as each new night takes hold.

Going along with this idea of childhood connected to this season, the mazal of Iyar teaches us something about the special challenge of childhood. The mazal of the second month is the bull, Taurus. The mazal of Nissan was Aries, the lamb. We are moving now from the lamb that is passively led to the bull that has a strong will of its own – think of a fighting bull. A child has to learn how to submit its will to the parents' will. This is a great struggle for children, and we can maybe say that learning to submit to authority is the greatest lesson a child needs to learn. Dorothy Nolte has said, "If a child lives with approval, he learns to live with himself." We don't want easy approval such that we learn to live with ourselves. Parents need to be sometimes expressing the kind of disapproval that causes a child to learn to submit.

In this time of the year, God is providing situations for us that help us learn how to submit our will to His will. It is possible even for a bull to learn how to do this. Submitting the will is a challenge particularly for children because a child lacks understanding and even the capacity to understand. Without understanding, we don't really obey with our hearts. So, the child is being asked to obey without understanding and without the conviction of the heart that what they're

being asked to do makes sense. The obedience of a child is firstly obedience from fear and a bit later obedience from duty. And these are necessary stages. Later in the process of maturity, God will open our understanding too, and at that time, the heart will be activated and obedience will come from a place of love rather than fear or duty. BUT WE START WITH FEAR. The heart will come later.

Beyond these associations with childhood and early youth, this period of the Counting of the Omer has some complex layers to it, both positive associations and negative ones. We're going to try to bring these together.

The Counting of the Omer is a positive thing in that it connects the great spring mo'edim, the Passover season to Shavuot, so it's a time that helps us to build our anticipation for Shavuot. Unleavened Bread in the Passover season and Shavuot are two of the three pilgrimage festivals and harvest celebration times, so there's a lot of joy associated with each of them. Iyar is also known as the month of healing. The letters of "Iyyar" are said to be an acronym for the phrase, "I am God, your Healer." This is when spring is really strongly taking hold in the Northern Hemisphere, although in Israel in particular, the winter rains are ending and the land is beginning to dry out again. But it's still a very pleasant time in Israel now. Iyar is known as an important time for not only spiritual but also physical healing. So these are some of the positives of the month wherein we count most of the Omer. Also: R'Trugman: The Ba'al Shem Tov taught that there is something very joyous about this month, and that is because the chush of this month is "chirchor/machshevah" "thought," and "machshevah" can be permuted to "b'simchah," "in joy." And so the idea is that during this period of the Omer, the way we are rectifying our middot, our personality, our characteristics, our very nature through the 49 days is through putting joy into every aspect of our lives.

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KH0pLJS_Tg&list=PLYztuC2svII7X5sbSV1gXW0U08NftfkiF&index=13 10:30m)

On the other side, this Omer period of the calendar has actually developed into a period of semi-mourning connected to a specific tragedy in Jewish history, the deaths of tens of thousands of the great leader Rabbi Akiva's students in the second century. They are said to have died during the Counting of the Omer. Some say they died in a plague because they didn't honor each other properly, and some say they died from persecution. There is also speculation that they died in the Bar Kokhba revolt, which happened in the second century and resulted in heavy losses for the Jewish people. Also, many events in the Crusades during the Middle Ages happened during this Omer period

(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9KH0pLJS_Tg&list=PLYztuC2svII7X5sbSV1gXW0U08NftfkiF&index=13)

How can we understand how the complexities of this season fit together, this time of anticipation of Shavuot and growing light and healing and also this mourning over the tragic loss of life at this time? The answer is that whenever God does a work of raising us up to a new level, what happens next is that He opens our eyes to the work that remains to be done in us. This means God allows the light to illuminate the remaining darkness that needs to be dealt with. It's one thing to take a vessel out of the darkness and set it in the light. But it's something else to take the lid off and let that light shine inside. So the month is named for light. And it is

known for healing because this work of seeing inwardly is the BEGINNING of healing, as painful as it is. And that painful seeing of how we are falling short is connected to this horrific historical event in Rabbi Akiva's time. Such a loss of life FORCES AN INWARD LOOK and primes the nation for a great work of salvation to come. And so this pain of seeing ourselves is particularly important at this time of year because God is preparing us to receive the Torah anew, which will greatly further our salvation journey. How is He preparing us for this great moment? He prepares us by showing us our NEED for the Torah. He shows us the darkness inside that needs correcting. He is growing our hunger for a deeper work. And this is the beginning of healing.

The way the salvation process is playing out here reveals an important principle that we need to restate here: when God does a work of elevating us to a higher level, what follows is a cleansing of the vessel, and this cleansing requires a kind of death. A verse stood out at me from the haftarah reading in Isaiah because it mentions the cleansed vessel. In Isaiah 66, it says, "And they shall bring all your brothers from all the nations as an offering to the LORD, on horses and in chariots and in litters and on mules and on dromedaries, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, says the LORD, JUST AS THE ISRAELITES BRING THEIR GRAIN OFFERING IN A CLEAN VESSEL to the house of the LORD" (Isaiah 66:20). First elevation, then cleansing the vessel. Remember that the real focus of the Passover season is the second in that group of three mo'edim, Unleavened Bread. It is Unleavened Bread that stretches out for 7 days. In the Passover teaching, we connected Unleavened Bread to emptying out that which fills the vessel, like emptying out the air, the spirit, from the bread. It's a focus on death, and more than the other two mo'edim in the Passover season, Unleavened Bread sets the tone for this part of the calendar. It's about God showing us what to empty out and beginning that cleansing process, the cleansing of the vessel so that it can be filled with a new spirit, as we see the matzah of Passover changed to the leavened loaves offered on the altar at Shavuot.

Let me summarize some of these thoughts about Iyar before we return to the Torah portion. The word "Iyar" and the second month have close connections to the idea of "light." "Light" means illumination, shining a light on something. This is a time for introspection, for looking inward, and for the beginning of cleansing the vessel. After being elevated spiritually, as we are learning to walk in this new cycle, God is helping us to lift the lid and let the light inside. It is exposing the darkness there that He will help us address in this cycle of salvation. This is the beginning of healing.

Of course we can ALWAYS be about this business of asking God to shine the light on the areas He is bringing deliverance for in our lives, not just in the month of Iyar. One of the points of studying the calendar, though, is that we want to get in tune with the emphasis of each season of growth because this is when it's easiest to grow in this particular way, when God is providing a special energy for that specific kind of growth. In a way, the whole bright half of the year is helping us to see inside ourselves, and the giving of the Torah at Shavuot will kick this up a notch, leading eventually to an even deeper repentance in the fall.

Connecting Iyar to Tazria-Metzorah

With this background now for the month of Iyar and the Counting of the Omer, let's turn now to connecting the portions of Tazria and Metzora to the calendar and Iyar, in particular. To put it simply, in these portions that deal especially with the condition of tzara'at, WE ARE SEEING IN A GRAPHIC WAY HOW GOD HELPS US SEE OUR INNER IMPURITY on the outside so that we can begin dealing with it.

Let's talk for a minute about this disease called "tzara'at" that is usually translated as "leprosy." Once again, "tzara'at" is not leprosy. For one thing, it can affect clothing and houses. Also, unlike leprosy, if the person's entire body is covered with it, he or she is pure. Tzara'at is understood to be first and foremost a spiritual disease. The Kehot Chumash says this: "*Tzara'at* is neither any disease with which we are familiar today nor any natural disease that was ever known to humanity. It is a physical condition directly and miraculously resulting from some spiritual flaw, rather than one contracted by a lack of hygiene or by exposure to any physical contagium."

In support of this view that tzara'at is first a spiritual malady, notice that in the text one of the defining characteristics that is mentioned over and over for identifying tzara'at is that it appears to be DEEPER than the skin. Again, tzara'at is an indication of a DEEPER problem, an inner problem, a spiritual problem that goes deeper than the external skin.

Remember that ritual uncleanness results from coming close to death. The metzora is a walking picture of death. Tzara'at physically pictures death in that the skin turns the color of a corpse, white, meaning it is drained of blood, and the life is in the blood. With tzara'at, patches appear on the skin wherein it would seem the pigment is lost.

This implies something interesting, by the way, for the odd law that someone entirely covered in tzara'at over their whole body is pronounced "pure;" they are pure because they are effectively dead, and this implies that their judgment has come and they either transcended or descended, one or the other. Either way, there is no point any longer in separating such a person from the community because their opportunity for personal growth is passed – they either grabbed ahold and repented, or they didn't. And either way they are not a big danger to the community – either they are so given over to sin that no one takes them seriously, or they are cured.

So, getting back to what these portions have to do with Iyar, this is a double portion about spiritual impurity that becomes manifested on the outside so that we can see it, particularly in the case of tzara'at, which is the majority of the reading. Iyar is about God shining the light into the vessel to see the darkness there. And now we are reading about how God exposes inner darkness by making it visible as tzara'at. His purpose for exposing it is to bring the afflicted one to repentance. It is God's graciousness to us that He would allow such a thing to manifest. This positive view of tzara'at, that it is the gift of inner vision, is why a portion dedicated to spiritual disease can be called "Tazria," which is about sowing. It seems like a life-affirming name and, at first, a strange choice for the title of this section of Scripture. In truth, if we view it with the right eyes, this portion is focused not on tzara'at but on being cured of tzara'at, and the initial

contraction of this spiritual disease is a gift that leads us to new life, greater life. Tzara'at is a gift of temporary death, a separation from the community life and the Temple life, that leads us to work on the soul, to cleanse it with God's help, and this, in the end, leads to a greater connection to God and others than we had BEFORE the tzara'at manifested. And connection is life. The portion could not illustrate better what this spiritual season is all about.

Again, when God raises us up to a higher level, this is followed by cleansing. We have just been elevated at Passover, and now we're reading about cleansing the vessel in these portions. One point to take away here is that GOD WILL BRING ABOUT WHAT IS REQUIRED FOR THAT CLEANSING TO HAPPEN. God will give us the gift of tzara'at. And He makes it clear that the process for making clean is also within our reach. Being led to repentance is truly a work of God's grace.

It's fascinating that when Israel was a young nation, God used this type of rather obvious spiritual manifestation as a teaching tool, but in latter years, He withdrew it. We don't have tzara'at today. This is an example of how God can work more openly at early stages, when we are younger, and how He becomes more hidden at later times as we mature. Though we seem to not have this condition in modern times, here we are at least reading about it now, studying it in this early part of the yearly calendar, and even just studying it has an effect on us. You can't read through these portions and not feel a bit queezy. It puts some fear in us. Who knows if God will bring such a thing back eventually? I don't want to be the first to have tzara'at again. It's an encouragement to me to avoid whatever the Sages say causes tzara'at.

The Specific Spiritual Malady: Lashon Hara

With that said, let's move on to what spiritual ailments the Sages do attribute to causing tzara'at? One is haughtiness, which the Sages connect to the cedar stick used in the process of pronouncing the metzora clean. But the main sin connected to tzara'at is evil speech, lashon hara, which the Sages connect to the two birds used in the cleansing process. Birds are always chattering, and if our tongues are always working like that, we are bound to slip up and misuse them.

Lashon hara is absolutely deadly and will ravage a community like fire spreading through a dry forest. The Sages say that the word "metzora" is a contraction of the Hebrew words "motzi ra," someone who spreads evil or slander (Erachin 15b). Lashon hara is the practice of speaking TRUE things about people that are negative when others don't need to know. We tend to think that if what we're saying is true, it's okay to say because some other person needs to know. Maybe we think people should "know who they're dealing with" when they engage with them. Or maybe we preface our juicy gossip with, "We need to be praying for poor so-and-so. Did you hear the mess he got himself into?" In truth, it's almost always better if people DON'T know the faults of others. Lashon hara is the UNMASKING of someone, the UNDESSING of someone in front of others. Usually, speaking true things that are negative is simply not necessary.

Now if there's a safety concern, then speak it out. If someone's about to hire a babysitter who has a history of putting kids in jeopardy, you need to tell that person what you know. If

someone's about to get married and what you know might sway their decision, you probably need to tell them.

But usually, we simply don't need to be parading others' nakedness in front of other people. It's considered one of the most damaging things we can do in the world. And we're not allowed to listen to someone else speaking lashon hara either. If we are trapped in a plane next to someone who won't stop speaking lashon hara, we are supposed to disbelieve them. We assume what they're saying is exaggerated or that they misunderstood the person or what they're saying is simply untrue. In that way we can protect the person being talked about.

We need to review this topic periodically and intentionally build up again a resistance to speaking lashon hara because our resistance to this form of evil fades. Lashon hara is all around us, and hardly anything else will cause separation within a community faster than this specific evil. Many find the Chofetz Chaim's Daily Companion a critical resource in helping us turn away from lashon hara. We have copies in the BT library.

Because lashon hara is so deadly to a community, the metzora must be completely isolated outside the camp, even isolated from other metzoras. And, too, they are separated to experience what they did to others, because what they did caused death, separation. It is said that the sin of lashon hara kills three: the speaker, the listener, and the one who is spoken about (Erachin 15a). Being put outside the camp is not retribution, though; it's designed to bring awakening and repentance.

Lashon hara creates walls between people; when you know a juicy bit of gossip about someone, moving forward it's hard to see that person for the bright spiritual essence they are; instead, we will always be pushed to see the sin rather than the person, the fallen flesh. So lashon hara blocks us from really seeing people, seeing the true identity under the flesh, and we end up relating to people coldly rather than warmly.

Our words have great power to shape our reality. Chana Weisberg writes: "Never tell your child that she is a failure. She will begin to see herself as incapable and unworthy. She will see it futile to even try. Never tell your spouse that he is a loser, stupid, or clumsy. Your words will become self-fulfilling prophecies." (https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/5870982/jewish/For-Your-Tazria-Metzorah-Study-Group-PDF.htm)

And I would add that we shouldn't be telling children that they are good kids or bad kids. There's no such thing. Such labels make a huge impression on kids. How damaging is it for a child to internalize the idea that they are a "bad" kid? Rather than talking about good kids and bad kids, we should be praising the good choices they make and reproofing the poor choices. We are all pure spirits wrapped in the fallen flesh, and we're making choices all the time for life or for death. We have to take great care to emphasize the child's ability to make good choices rather than putting on them a label that will shape them from that moment onward.

Beyond refraining from speaking negatively about each other, let's focus at this time on actively overlooking the flaws in others, within reason. We want to make a special effort now to see the

good in others and to speak THAT out. When we speak forth what is good in others, we EMPOWER that good in them. We make them want to even more fully live up to that goodness you have seen in them. If, instead, we point out how they are not measuring up, the effect of speaking that out into the world is to give it more weight. We increase the burdens on peoples' shoulders when we speak out this kind of negativity, and even when we think it.

Yeshua

Let's turn now to a more direct focus on Yeshua regarding the topics we're talking about today. First, let's notice in the text the various instruments used to cleanse a metzora and also a house cleansed of tzara'at: two clean birds, a cedar stick, a scarlet string, and hyssop. We see the Messiah here in these tools of cleansing. Yeshua is first of all the bird that is slain. And how is He slain? He is killed on the wooden cross, the cedar stick. And it is there that His blood flows down, the scarlet string. And that blood is applied to us as a covering that passes us from death to life, which is the hyssop that was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the individual doorways, each home, each family. And finally, Yeshua is the bird that is allowed to go free. This bird could have been the one chosen to die, but it was pardoned, and so its life was returned to it. This is a picture of the resurrection of the Messiah, whose life was returned to Him, as well. The metzora is cleansed through none other than the work and the blood of Yeshua the Messiah, as all healing comes through Him.

I have one other point to add here directly connected to Yeshua. It's fascinating that the Jews have a strong tradition of connecting the Messiah not so much to the instruments of cleansing but to the metzora, the leper. And this is also true. The Believer can make this connection rather quickly. We understand that Yeshua on the cross took upon Himself the sins of the world, and, in that way, became unclean, as unclean as anyone ever could be or would be. But what's fascinating to me is that the Jews ALSO recognize this quality in the Messiah. Let me read a quote directly from the Kehot Chumash, which is a Chabad-produced commentary drawn from the teachings of the Rebbe, R'Menachem Schneerson, who has been one of the most influential rabbis in modern times. Here is what this ultra-orthodox Jewish commentary says:

"...the sages of the Talmud say that the Messiah's epithet is "the *Metzora* of the House of Rabbi Yehudah the Prince," citing the verse, "In truth, it was our illnesses that he bore and our pains that he carried, but we regarded him as a *metzora*, smitten by God and afflicted."

So this commentary actually quotes this famous prophecy from Isaiah that speaks so readily to Yeshua. I think our Jewish brothers and sisters are not far from seeing Yeshua for Who He is. We need to keep praying that God would reveal Him to them.

Joshua 20-21

Finally today, let's turn briefly to Joshua chapters 20 and 21. Here we read about the establishing of 6 cities of refuge, 3 west of the Jordan, and 3 east. We also read about the allocation of cities for the Levites.

First, let me just point out once again the pattern of God's act of elevation being followed by an act of cleansing. In bringing Israel across the Jordan, that was an act of elevating Israel. And when did that happen? It happened near Passover. They celebrate the Passover right after crossing over and undergoing the second circumcision. Passover is the time for this kind of elevation. And we have been reading in Joshua about the whole phase of cleansing the vessel that follows that act of elevation, the battles to rid the Land of the squatters who do not have the right to be there, the Canaanites. The Canaanites are the uncleanness in the vessel of the Land.

The other point I want to make here today revolves around the question of why the unintentional manslayer has to wait until the death of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, before he can return home from a city of refuge, assuming he has been previously proven innocent when he stood trial. What does the High Priest have to do with the situation?

Recall that at this point in Jewish history, when Joshua was written, there was no Israeli king. So at this point, the Kohen Gadol is the earthly head of the nation. As such, what happens in Israel under his watch, under his authority, IMPARTS SOME CULPABILITY to him, some measure of guilt. And when he passes away, he takes that culpability with him.

And is this not a picture of the Messiah Who is the Metzarah? What we're seeing here in this obscure law referenced here in Joshua is an example of the principle of the metzarah, the idea that the Messiah, Who is our Heavenly High Priest, bears upon His shoulders the sins of the nation, and with His death, He takes away the sins of the people. This also explains why the Torah becomes so focused on the kings of Israel and their leadership. As the head goes, so goes the nation. And a connected idea here is that if we are elevated to leadership, we better be willing to take responsibility for what goes wrong under our leadership. We see here that God imparts at least some of that guilt to the leader, the head.

Well, we'll have to stop there for today. Thank you so much for listening. May God make us a people who do not shy away when He shines that bright light into our souls. May we embrace his humbling corrective measures in our lives and be quick to repent. May we be the kind of people who hate speaking negativity about others. And may we rise up to be the people God has made us to be. Shalom.