

Unclean?

by David Segal • April 18th, 2007

Reading this week's Torah portion (*Tatzria-Metzorah*, Leviticus 12:1-15:33) as a 21st-century Jew, it is easy to be turned off. This section of biblical laws is a litany of unclean diseases and sacrifice to restore cleanness. It outlines a range of scaly skin afflictions as well as the uncleanness of menstruation. Then it defines the priestly prescriptions for identifying and then healing these outbreaks by ritually slaughtering lambs, doves, or pigeons. Nowadays we have doctors and ointments to deal with skin afflictions, and the suggestion that menstruation is somehow akin to leprosy is likely to offend or at least alienate the modern reader.

But for the reader willing to delve deeper into the text, there is much to learn from this apparently inaccessible portion. Though we may disagree with the particulars of the biblical conception of cleanliness, we may embrace the kernel of this idea: first, that we ought to care about what is clean and unclean in our community; second, that physical diseases and social ills are intimately and tragically connected; and third, that religious people are charged with the responsibility of healing these afflictions.

The biblical system outlined in this portion would require a highly specialized and attentive priesthood, for even a rash becomes a matter of religious import. In fact, it is not simply the priests but all the Israelites who are responsible for each other in this way: "You shall put the Israelites on guard against their uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Tabernacle which is among them" (Lev. 15:31). The priests are the trained specialists, but the entire community is responsible for ensuring each other's well-being.

How much do we need to hear this charge today! More than 40 million Americans – including more than 10 million children – lack health insurance. And for those Americans living in poverty, even those who have health insurance, certain life-saving procedures are prohibitively expensive or not covered by their insurance. Indeed, social ills and physical diseases are still intimately connected, and we have a responsibility as a society to provide adequate assistance to those who need it, even if they cannot fully afford it. The Torah mandates that an ill member of the community "whose means for his cleansing are limited" (Lev. 14:32) be allowed to bring items for sacrifice and, therefore, healing, "depending on his means" (Lev. 14:30).

The principle at the heart of this mandate is that everyone deserves the opportunity to be treated, healed, and cleansed – regardless of socio-economic status. It is a human right. But as a right it entails a human responsibility on the part of society to provide these opportunities. There has been much talk among our politicians about "compassionate politics" and universal health care. Let us hope that our leaders have the vision and courage to take up the charge to guard against the uncleanness of our communities. And may we have the strength to hold them and ourselves accountable for the social ills in our communities that go untreated, and the neighbors in need whose afflictions we ignore.

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