

# The Denial of Death

In the morning I try to do a meditation from an app called Headspace. One of the meditations struck me in how it began. My teacher Andy said “Sometimes we might be fearful of death, assuming it’s radically different to life, but like a beautiful wave, eventually it has to return to the ocean. In truth, they were never separate at all...Each and every wave is different. It has its own root and own direction. There’s something about the way that wave is expressed that makes it unique. Yet ultimately, each and every wave goes back into the ocean. But the wave hasn’t been lost. The water is still the same but it’s gone back into the ocean. Something beautiful has been expressed, and yet nothing has been lost.”

One of the five shadows that Parker Palmer writes about, those things which hold us back, is the denial of death, whether it be our own mortality, the death of an idea or the fear of public failure or negative evaluation.

In looking at Parshat Metzora we see the closest one can get to death while in life-being afflicted by *tzaraat*. Rabbi Shai Held writes “Leviticus' focus on maintaining a stark divide between life and death is likely the key to understanding the laws governing the *metzora* (one afflicted with *tzara'at*). Bible scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky explains that ‘if the disease was at all similar to modern leprosy, its affect in an advanced state was similar to the decomposition of a corpse... The afflicted individual, like one who has been in contact with a corpse, might have been considered to be in a no-man's land between two realms which must be kept rigidly apart.’”<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Shai Held continues “When Miriam is afflicted with leprosy after speaking ill of her brother Moses, Aaron asks Moses to pray on her behalf, tellingly pleading that their sister “not be as one dead, who emerges from his mother's womb with half his flesh

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<sup>1</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism* (2006), pp. 330-331. Cf. also BT, Nedarim 64b, where we learn that a metzora is “considered as dead.” In Rabbi Shai Held, “Struggling with Stigma: Making Sense of the Metzora, Parshat Tazria-Metzora 5775.

eaten away."<sup>2</sup> For Leviticus, then, the *metzora* quite literally looks like death; the living dead conflate categories and blur boundaries - and are thus considered impure.<sup>3</sup>

Parshat Metzora is read close to Passover, the holiday of spring. The original Israel name of the month in which Passover fell is Aviv, or spring. Passover is always around the time of rebirth: buds growing, trees starting to bloom, baby animals being born. It is a time of rebirth in contrast to the conditions of one with Tzaraat, whose "clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left disheveled, and he shall cover his upper lip".<sup>4</sup> All three of these practices are associated with mourning. The Metzora is also isolated from all of Israel for 7 days, and he must cry out "Impure! Impure!"<sup>5</sup> According to the Talmud, he is bidden to call out "Impure! Impure!" not to remind others to stay away but to let

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 12:12

<sup>3</sup> Baruch Schwartz, "Leviticus," in Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds., *Jewish Study Bible* (2004), p. 237.

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 13:45

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

them "know of his suffering so that they pray for mercy on his behalf."<sup>6</sup>

The rabbis often teach that this is an example of *מדה כנגד מדה*, measure for measure: that one who said *לשון הרע* about others will get punished for his wayward tongue. This punishment, making this person like one who is dead, is meant to make him realize how precious life is and work to reform his behavior. It is meant to make him realize that one's actions matter and that they have consequences, rather than denying the impact of his deeds. At the same time, he recognizes that there is rebirth after death: after a period of isolation he will return to society at large and be able to try again. So too should it be with us: when we make a mistake, when we lose our job or when we are publicly humiliated or shamed let us not think this is the "end of the world" but rather that we can learn from this and experience a renaissance.

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<sup>6</sup> Babylonian Talmud Niddah 66a

My Grandma Lucille z”l often used to say that we live many lives. She did not mean that we have 9 lives like a cat but rather that we have many different stages in our lives. When one naturally comes to an end, that is not the time for denial or resistance but rather appreciating what was as well as understanding that what is to come will be different but will present us new opportunities for learning and for growth. When the last stage comes, it is again not time for resistance but rather for understanding that there is more to come. Death is not an end but the beginning of something new, like a wave returning to the ocean and then coming back in a new form. With that I wish everyone a Hag Aviv Sameach, a Happy Passover full of new beginnings and rebirths.