

# BREAKING UP THE PLAGUE OF ETHICAL INPUNY UPON ALL OUR HOUSES

A commentary on *Parashat Metzora*  
By David Brown

Read plainly this Parasha highlights the primitive ritualistic context of our treasured text. The details of animal offerings and blood based cleansing for leprosy present anthropological intrigue or instinctive disgust.

For me, Judaism is not exclusively ritual or religious practice, nor is it solely offering values that address issues such as refugees, war, or wasteful destruction of our planet's ability to sustain life. Combining practice and principle, Judaism can imbue those it touches with a profound spiritual and material purpose – not forced dogma or narrow expectations – but a vast, varied and vibrant framework for a life of meaning and connection with others.

So what does a Parasha grossly detailing the biblical cleansing process for an affliction we today treat medically offer our scientific and developed society?

## Financial hardship shouldn't exclude you from social healing

*“And if he be poor, and his means suffice not, then he shall take one he-lamb for a guilt-offering to be waved, to make atonement for him ... or two young pigeons, such as his means suffice for; and the one shall be a sin-offering, and the other a burnt-offering.”*

This contrasts with a more expansive list for the usual process. However primitive we may view this society, they had the awareness to allow for alternatives for those with fewer means.

## It takes some serious and collective scrubbing to remove a spiritual stain

*“And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times ... shall wash his clothes, and shave off all his hair; and bathe himself in water ... he may come into the camp, but shall dwell outside his tent seven days ... on the seventh day, that he shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off; and he shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water ... the priest that cleanseth him shall set the man that is to be cleansed, and those things, before the LORD, at the door of the tent of meeting.”*

The text continues with animal offerings, burnt offerings, sets of seven cleansing right and left ears with blood and what I imagine most modern readers would find bizarre.

Setting aside our distance from this context, accepting this was a society that viewed this particular affliction as physically unclean and requiring spiritual atonement, it presents a model for personal and social healing. This biblical society tackled its social ills with a staged process, deployed significant resources, and required individual responsibility and collective intervention.

Many of our social ills are far more complex than a particular physical affliction, yet how many of our responses acknowledge all the elements involved in thoroughly responding to them? Much current political discourse is squeamish about the steps, time and resources necessary. Moreover, as pragmatism is trumped by populists on the left and right, the need for personal agency and societal action is ignored by those peddling simplistic solutions to our most complex challenges.

## Ethical disgust is infectious

*“behold, if the plague be spread in the house, it is a malignant leprosy in the house ... he shall break down the house, the stones of it, and the timber thereof ... and he shall carry them forth out of the city into an unclean place. Moreover he that goeth into the house ... shall be unclean”*

Every person and every physical object that came into contact with this impurity was infected. Instead of this particular impurity, consider the many Jewish values on providing for the stranger, the widow, or the orphan, as well as those connected to the environment or ethical consumption, as being necessary for a pure life. The same contagious spreading of impurity could be present by the contravening of those values in the food we eat, the clothes we wear and the air we breathe.

Putting our values into practice requires taking apart the foundations of much of how we live, and in contrast to moving our impurity from within to some other place, in our interconnected world where much that is impure requires a global effort, we not only have to breakdown our unclean habits and habitats, but build in their place a society where all can live, survive and hopefully thrive.

*Many of our social ills are far more complex than a particular physical affliction, yet how many of our responses acknowledge all the elements involved in thoroughly responding to them? Much current political discourse is squeamish about the steps, time and resources necessary*