

PARSHAT METZORA SHABBAT HAGADOL

6-12 Nissan 5784
14-20 April 2024

Torah: Leviticus 14:1-15:33
Haftorah: Kings II 7:3-20

Calendar

Chaplains have monthly calendars available.

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
 2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!
- (Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Psalms Daily

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain/Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Adjusting to Holiness

Freedom from a mysterious illness is the opening topic of this week's Torah reading. A person who suffers from this condition is called a Metzora. This is often translated as "leper," but in fact the Metzora is not the leper of modern Africa or of Europe in the Middle Ages. Rather, he suffers from a condition (called Tzora'at in Hebrew) which has a spiritual origin, relating to the special task of the Jew and to his or her special relationship with G-d. One of the explanations given for this illness is that it is the result of speaking badly about other people—lashon hara. However, another explanation, found in the Kabbalah and Chasidic teachings, is rather different. The condition of being a Metzora is the product of an imbalance. In this it is similar to mild physical problems, such as acne, which might be caused by a hormone imbalance. This could be as a result of the natural process of maturation, such as during adolescence. In the case of the Metzora, the imbalance is spiritual in nature. In the physical condition of adolescent acne, the extra hormones which have caused the problem are actually something good. In time the body's system will adjust to them, balance will be restored, and the problem will disappear. The spiritual condition of the Metzora is similar. The person is actually being confronted with an intense burst of holiness. This is really a good thing. The problem is that the person is not yet able to absorb this holiness properly into his system. As a result, he shows symptoms of the spiritual illness which renders him a Metzora. Hopefully, he will gradually adjust to the increased holiness and regain his spiritual balance. He achieves this through the process described in this week's Torah reading. This involves being seen by the Kohen (priest), who spiritually helps the person absorb this intense holiness. There might also be a time of seclusion, as described in the haftorah, which tells of four Tzora'at sufferers who were staying outside the city of Samaria, and who helped end the famine caused by a siege. Finally, the person regains his or her spiritual balance and returns to their normal activities. In Temple times this was part of the pattern of Jewish life, precisely because of the great

intensity of spiritual awareness while the Temple stood in Jerusalem. After it was destroyed, our senses became more dulled. Although each individual has a close personal relationship with G-d and is given a tremendous task to achieve in order to reveal the divine in the world, a person no longer can become a Metzora. If we get white patches on our skin, we go to a doctor, not to a Kohen. Despite this, at the heart of the Jewish people the concept of the Metzora still exists. In a striking passage, the Talmud describes the Messiah as being a metzora. How can this be? Because the coming of the Messiah represents the fulfillment of the process of climbing to higher spiritual levels and the absorption of intense holiness. Using our earlier image, the "adolescent" Jewish people will suddenly mature, with smooth and healthy skin. There will be no more wars between nations, and each person will become focused on awareness of the divine and observance of G-d's law: for the Jew, the 613 mitzvot; for all humanity, the seven Noahide laws. We will adjust to and advance in the intensity of holiness, reaching the goal where "the world will be filled with knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the seabed.

By Tali Loewenthal

E Pluribus Unum? Unity Redefined

As part of his purification process, the Metzora (someone with a skin condition described in the Torah and resulting in ritual impurity) would offer an animal sacrifice on the altar in the Temple.

In its sensitivity, the Torah takes into account the financial standing of the Metzora: "But if he is poor and cannot afford [these sacrifices], he shall take one [male] lamb . . . and two turtledoves or two young doves, according to what he can afford." Moreover, the Torah allows for another Jew to sponsor the Metzora's sacrifice.

And here is where things get interesting:

In his Laws of Atonement Requirements, Maimonides writes: "When a rich man says, 'I take responsibility for the sacrifices of this Metzora,' and the afflicted person was poor, he must bring the sacrifices of a wealthy man, for the person who took the vow has the financial capacity." Now, how counterintuitive is that?

Up until the rich man got involved, the Metzora qualified for the Torah's price cut, so why should the cost go up just because his sponsor has a few extra bucks? Isn't the wealthy man just picking up someone else's discounted tab?

The far-reaching answer is that Jewish law does not view the rich man's financial aid as an act of generosity (alone), but as an act of unity. This isn't about one person helping another in need; it's about one person uncovering the other within himself. The bond revealed in these individuals is so strong that the sin of one is shared by the other, as is its rectification.

But how can the Torah—a system of thought that places emphasis on personal responsibility—allow one Jew to effectively absolve another from sin?

What motivates this allowance is not the notion of societal responsibility, where the privileged provide for the needy (proof of this is the fact that a poor person can pay for a wealthy man's sacrifice as well), but rather Judaism's unique understanding of community, where every Jew is essentially one with another. A lack in one is a lack in all.

An example of this powerful idea of shared identity is the Jewish prayerbook, produced by the sages, which features many prayers crafted in the plural. This was their way of declaring the needs of the entire community to be the needs of each individual.

And the same is true of personal shortcomings, which are transferred to the collective spiritual bank account belonging to the Jewish people as a whole.

An appropriate metaphor often employed to understand this kind of unity is the kosher status of a Torah scroll—the symbol of our nation's sanctity—which directly depends on the kashrut of each letter. If even one letter is disqualified, so is the entire scroll.

We Have Sinned

A case in point is the central Yom Kippur prayer of atonement titled Al Chet, which opens each statement of "confession" with the word Ashamnu, "We have transgressed." The seeming absurdity here, aside from the use of the plural "we" by the individual confessing, is the fact that this plea of forgiveness—which introduces such sins as incest, theft and gossip—is offered by even the most righteous among us, by those

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who couldn't be more removed from the iniquities to which they confess! But the underlying idea here is far from absurd, for during the elevated time of Yom Kippur, Jewish people have access to an elevated (and interchangeable) spirit, when their oneness is manifest, and when the spiritual deficiency of transgression in one is experienced and can be felt by all.

To return to our rich man. By choosing to pay for the sin-offering of his fellow Jew, he reveals his inner connection with the Metzora in question, whereby he discovers in himself the need for atonement. This explains why he pays according to his own financial capability; for at that level of peoplehood, it's not someone else's tab he is picking up, but his own.

The above sheds light on an alternate translation of a fundamental tenet in Judaism, simply translated as, "All of Israel is responsible [literally, are guarantors] for each other."

The word Arev, or "guarantor," can also mean "mixed together." This expression thus teaches that all of Israel are more than just guarantors for each other, where one person picks up another's tab; they are intrinsically interconnected.

A People United

This snippet of Jewish law helps illuminate the stark contrast between the Jewish and the Western democratic concepts of society.

"The only society that works today is also one founded on the recognition that we have a

responsibility (italics mine) collectively and individually to help each other." —Tony Blair "Provision for others is a fundamental responsibility (italics mine) of human life." —Woodrow Wilson

At the heart of the secular understanding of society is the principle of responsibility, from the Latin word for "respond," which charges all citizens of the world to heed the call of those more needy than themselves, whether for altruistic reasons or for the benefit of each individual as part of the whole, in line with social contract theory.

The Jewish concept of society, however, couldn't differ more. At its center is the notion of kehillah, which means "to unite," not just "to gather" (for which the Hebrew term is Asifah). The word "community" best captures this idea in English, as it is derived from the words "common" and "unity."

This perspective calls on the Jewish people to reveal their oneness, or commonality, and promotes the belief that at our core we are not one of many, but many that are one.

A Matter of Attitude

Two leading Jewish activists once attended a conference on issues critical to the integrity of Jewish education. Alas, their efforts to effect positive change for Jewish education did not bear fruit.

After the conference one of the men noticed his colleague looking distraught. "My friend," he said gently, trying to lift his spirits, "didn't we truly do

everything in our ability to better the situation? It's not our fault that things didn't work out this time, so why are you so inconsolable?"

The dejected activist replied, "I know that we did everything in our power and more, and also that it wasn't our fault that we failed. But the fact remains, 'az der inyan hot zich nisht ufgeton'—the objective wasn't realized!"

The first activist could rest because he had discharged his responsibility to the other; the second activist could not relax, because he viewed the need of the "other" as his own.

What's in It for Me?

On the global level: the way we respond to international natural disasters says a lot of about our attitudes and motivations. Are the tsunami, Katrina and Haiti still on our minds, or have we shifted our focus as soon as the media shifted theirs? We may have "done what we could," but there's so much more to do.

On the local level: do you view the challenges that face your local charity, synagogue or school as your own problem or theirs? Do you see the good causes you're involved with as your own, or someone else's that you merely contribute to? On the personal level: do you sympathize or empathize? When you listen to someone who is hurting, do you feel bad for them or with them? Now, don't feel guilty that you don't take every issue on the planet personally, but make sure that there is at least one issue that you do.

By Mendel Kalmenson

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Monday, April 15, 2024-7 Nissan, 5784

Jews Prepare to Enter Canaan (1273 BCE)

The Jewish nation mourned for thirty days following the passing of Moses. On the 7th of Nissan, the first day after the mourning period came to an end, Joshua instructed the Jews to stock up on provisions and prepare themselves to cross the Jordan river and begin the conquest of the Promised Land. This was the first time Joshua addressed the nation, and they unconditionally accepted him as their new leader. The actual crossing occurred on the 10th of Nissan.

Tuesday, April 16, 2024-8 Nissan, 5784

Feast Ended in Shushan (366 BCE)

The grand 180-day feast hosted by King Achashverosh came to an end on this day.

Martyrs of York (1190)

The Jewish community of York, England, consisting of 150 souls, was massacred by a bloodthirsty mob, including some burned alive in Clifford Tower. Among the martyrs was the renowned Talmudic scholar R. Yom Tov of Joigny.

Wednesday, April 17, 2024-9 Nissan, 5784

Seven Day Feast Begun (366 BCE)

King Achashverosh began a seven-day feast for his subjects living in Shushan, his capital. This feast ended with the death of his queen, Vashti.

Passing of R. Aryeh Levin, the "Tzaddik of Jerusalem" (1969)

R. Aryeh Levin, known as the "Tzaddik [saint] of Jerusalem," was legendary for his selfless dedication in assisting his fellow Jews, whether the sick, the poor, or those suffering under the British regime during the British Mandate of Palestine (1920–1948).

Thursday, April 18, 2024-10 Nissan, 5784

Miriam's Passing (1274 BCE)

Miriam, the sister of Moses, passed away at the age of 126 on the 10th of Nissan of the year 2487 (1274 BCE)

- 39 years after the Exodus, and exactly one year before the Children of Israel entered the Holy Land. It is in deference to her passing that the "Great Shabbat" is commemorated on the Shabbat before Passover rather than the calendar date of the miracle's occurrence.

Israelites Cross the Jordan River (1273 BCE)

Three days after the two spies dispatched by Joshua scouted the city of Jericho, the children of Israel were ready to enter the land promised by G-d to their ancestors as their eternal heritage. As they approached the Jordan with the Holy Ark carried by the Kohanim in their lead, the river parted for them, as the waters of the Red Sea had split when their fathers and mothers marched out of Egypt 40 years earlier.

Friday, April 19, 2024-11 Nissan, 5784

Mass Circumcision (1273 BCE)

Following the Jewish nation's crossing of the Jordan River into the land of Canaan (see entry for "Nissan 10"), and in preparation for the bringing of the Passover Offering, all the men were circumcised under the guidance of Joshua

Passing of Nachmanides (1270)

11 Nissan marks the passing of Nachmanides, a commentator of the Bible and Talmud from Spain.

Passing of Shaloh (1630)

Rabbi Isaiah Halevi Horowitz was a noted kabbalist, famous as the "Sheloh Hakodosh". He passed away in Tiberius, in the Land of Israel, at the age of 70.

Lubavitcher Rebbe Born (1902)

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory, was born on this date in 1902.

Education and Sharing Day USA (1978-Current)

To emphasize the vital role of education in society, the United States annually marks "Education and Sharing Day U.S.A.", established in 1978 by a joint Congressional resolution, on the anniversary of the

birth of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory.

Shabbat, April 20, 2024-12 Nissan, 5784

War of Egyptian Firstborns (1313 BCE)

On the Shabbat before the Exodus - Nissan 10th on that year - the first-born of Egypt, who occupied the senior positions in the priesthood and government, fought a bloody battle with Pharaoh's troops, in an effort to secure the release of the Israelites and prevent the Plague of the Firstborn. This "great miracle" is commemorated each year on the Shabbat before Passover, which is therefore called Shabbat HaGadol, "The Great Shabbat."

King Hezekiah Falls Ill (548 BCE)

On this day, King Hezekiah, the greatest of all the Judean kings, fell seriously ill, and was informed by the Prophet Isaiah that he would die, for G-d was displeased with the fact that Hezekiah had never married. Hezekiah had refused to get married because he had prophetically foreseen that his children would lead the Jewish people to sin. The king prayed to G-d, and his prayer was accepted. He recovered three days later, on the first day of Passover. The King later married Prophet Isaiah's daughter.

Ezra Departs Babylon (348 BCE)

A year following the building of the second Temple in Jerusalem, Ezra gathered many of the Jews who had remained in Babylon and began a journey to the land of Israel. Though he certainly wanted to go earlier, his teacher, Baruch ben Neriah was too frail to travel, and Ezra refused to leave him until his passing. Ezra was the head of the Sanhedrin (great Rabbinical court), who all traveled together with him. On the 12th of Nissan, Ezra departed from the River Ahava, the beginning of the long journey to the land of Israel which would last for nearly five months.