

There are stories we tell about the survivors in our lives—survivors of cancer, major accidents, or more recently—even natural disasters. Then there are stories we tell about those we have *loved* and lost. But there is a story that we tell far less often—and that is the story the Metzora—of those who live between life and death –black and white.

As we learned in last week's parashah-----Tzra'at" is a complex skin condition that renders someone impure. While this disease defies a medical diagnoses, this unknown entity certainly created enough fear among the Israelites to produce a *whole* chapter devoted to the spiritual care of the Metzora. According to the rabbis, this is because the Metzora represents something utterly unique.

First, Tzara'at was likened to death—as the Rabbis said in Masechet Nedarim 64B:“A limb inflicted with Tzar'at is like a corpse.” Therefore, this disease was not only a *physical* ailment; but also, an overarching symbol of death and decay. Second, the rabbis ask in Midrash Tanhuma:ⁱ

מה נשתנה קרבנו משאר קרבנות ?

How is this sacrifice different from all other sacrifices?! In all other sacrifices—both birds are slaughtered. But in this case -- only one bird is slaughtered. So what does this sacrificial anomaly mean? According to the rabbis, setting the live bird free reflects the patient's desire to see his disease set free. Yet, I would like to offer another possibility.

Let us imagine the ritual at hand: The priest takes the living bird and dips it into the blood of the dead bird and then sprinkles this blood onto the Metzora 7 times. With blood still dripping from the live bird.... it is then set free into the wild. Not only is this a stark image, but the wording of the text is also quite telling. The priest brings two live birds, tzippurim chayot and slaughters it over living water -- mayyim chayyim.ⁱⁱ

What is so remarkable about this—is that in a chapter about death and decay--- the word CHAYYIM, “LIFE,” appears 6 times in the first 7 verses. Plus, the phrase “mayyim chayyim,” which appears only 12 times in the entire Tanakh, appears 6 times in this week’s portion.

So... by literally mixing the live bird with the *dead* bird-- and by emphasizing the word *chayyim*, the Torah teaches us that healing can *only* take place when we are able to confront the liminality of our lives. This graphic ritual forces us to confront an *undeniable truth*: As human beings we are constantly straddling life & death, vitality & decay, stability & chaos. Yet, this ritual—which is something known in the face of the *unknown* – enables the community to cope with this fundamental reality.

As biblical scholar Anthony Cothey suggests, this ritual is not meant to heal the afflicted person; but rather, it is meant to mitigate its most damaging effects. In other words, by placing the Metzora within the realm of what is known and recognizable the Torah attempts to diminish the emotional paralysis of the community.

While as Jewish leaders we no longer deal with the Metzora-- we will help our congregants through life and death situations. Therefore, in a world without sacrifices, how can we imbue our communities with a message of life in the face of death?

As Josef Caro teaches in the Shulchan Arukh: “A sick person should be encouraged to settle his affairs.” And yet, if a sick person--- who is weak and vulnerable---is encouraged to

settle his affairs, then KAL V'CHOMER, even the more so, this mitzvah should apply when we are of sound mind and body. Because the truth IS... if we don't prepare ourselves before this critical moment, how will we ever handle it when it arrives?

However, I realize that this is much easier said than done! I have been carrying around this document for the past two years, and for two years and it has remained the same--blank. This document, which is an *advance directive*, encourages us to confront our own liminality and it enables us to make sacred end-of-life decisions.

I was first introduced to this document while working as a Chaplain at Children's Hospital two years ago. A 16 year old boy entered the ER after being thrown from a car. Though not injured in limb, the damage to his brain was irreversible. Upon hearing the news, Jose's parents were hysterical. While one tragedy would have been enough, the decisions that they were forced to make—from life support to organ donation—literally tore his family in half. As I shuttled between opposite ends of the hospital because the parents *refused* to even look at one another, my heart wept...as I realized that it is never too soon to discuss what we fear the most.

Unfortunately, this story is not unique to Jose . Only 30% of Americans have an advance directive of some sort. By a show of hands, how many people in this room have a living will or advanced directive?

Therefore, my goal is that this sermon becomes a catalyst for communal action. Number One: Please take the document underneath your seat and fill out the attached card. Before you leave, please place this card in the *basket* at the back of the sanctuary. Number Two: Between now and the end of Passover, take a moment to discuss this form with at least 1 other person—be it a loved, a friend, or a family member. Number Three: Join me for a discussion with Dr. Neil Wenger--- the Chair of UCLA's Medical Ethics Committee--- on Sunday, May 8th. Through the

help of the Kalsman Institute, Dr. Wenger has graciously agreed to meet with us in order to answer any questions we may have about this process.

In the end, just as the ritual of the Metzarah is concrete action in the face of the unknown—I am asking all of us to embrace action, and not just words. By ritualizing the notion of an advance directive we provide ourselves, and our community, with an opportunity to *honor* life in the face of the unknown. By doing so, we too can transform *fear* and *loss* into *hope* and *recovery*.

And last but not least, on a theological level, our tradition teaches us that confronting our own mortality is *also* a path to God. As Franz Rosensweig taught: “*It is only through the fear of death that we begin to perceive who God really is.*”ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, I pray... that as a community we move from fear to action and from paralysis to encounter. And through this movement may we find ourselves closer to God and the great mystery of life.

ⁱ Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Metzarah, Siman Gimmel

ⁱⁱ Lev. 14:4-7

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosensweig, Franz. Star of Redemption, pg. 1.