

Ilana Mills
4th year Sermon
HUC-JIR
Parshah Tazria
March 31, 2011

Seven years after her husband died, Helen decided to become a grief group volunteer at Our House Grief Support Center. She talked about how for the first two weeks after her husband's death, her house with filled with people. So many people, she didn't know what to do with them all. They came in the morning. They came in the afternoon. They always came at night. They seemed to be there for her whenever she neede them. And the food they brought was overflowing.

After about 3-4 weeks, the people disappeared and Helen felt she did as well. People stopped calling, stopped asking about her husband and stopped inviting her over. She mused that maybe it was because they didn't know what to say, or how to ask about her husband, or they were sick of hearing about him. She felt she had something to say, but she didn't know what it was. Even if she did, there was nobody there to listen. She remembers feeling utterly alone and pushed away by society.

This isolation and humiliation is echoed in this week's parsha. Today we heard about the experience of Israelites with Tzraat, which is often translated as leprosy. Jacob Milgrom explains tzraat was more like "scale disease" and presented a very gruesome picture of it. Leviticus 13:45-46 explains some of the requirements for the person with tzraat. The text states

“his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip [ie. wear a veil], and he shall call out, “unclean, unclean!” He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Lev 13:45-46)

I can only imagine the utter embarrassment felt by the person with Tzraat. Not only did one suffer from the pain of swelling, oozing, and erupting skin, but also from the humiliation of publically ensuring that everyone know of the disease. Worst of all, the person with Tzraat had to leave his or her home and dwell outside of the camp, isolated from the community.

Milgrom explains that the banishment came from the community’s fear the disease was contagious. They took these drastic steps to protect themselves. He compares it to the reaction to AIDS in the 1980s. Dr. Rachel Adler notes that this type of fear of contagion fits into pollution thinking. When a culture deems something impure, that thing becomes a pollutant that threatens the purity of the entire society. Therefore, the society separates the pollutant out.

Helen, the volunteer from Our House Grief Support Center, tried to guess why people stopped reaching out to her. She smiled sadly with a short laugh when she said, “maybe the wives were threatened by my new single status.” Then her smile faded and there was just sadness when she stated, “worse yet, maybe they are worried, I will pass my widow status on to them and their husbands would be next.” She described a different type of contagion, one that threatened the way we order our society.

Mary Douglas explains that the Leviticus authors imagined that the world should look like it did in Genesis 1 – ordered, neat, easy to understand and with clear boundaries. However, the reality is that the world doesn't look that way. Leviticus tries to restore order in a world full of chaos through rituals. Dr Adler notes that tzraat threatens the order because it shows that our bodies are vulnerable and have the potential to break down and die. The person suffering from tzraat is isolated to protect us from the sign of our own physical weakness and death.

Dr. Adler is among many to link Tzraat with death or grief. In fact, in Moed Katan 14-16, the Talmud draws a direct line with between tzraat and mourning. Moed Katan contains a litany of areas comparing a mourner to a leper: washing clothes, covering head, studying Torah, wearing t'fillin. It appears that in any place a mourner is required to act differently or forbidden from something so, too, is a person with tzraat. It is clear that the rabbis would treat the leper the way they do a mourner. My question is the opposite: do we see and treat mourners the way we treat lepers?

For the grievers, the restrictions on actions in the first weeks after death are in place to help. They were intended to provide support in the acute pain immediately following the death. Yet, I see two problems. First, many in our community do not know about the rituals surrounding death until someone close to them dies. Sometimes, people are in search of rituals and don't realize what they mean or how to act. What is someone supposed to do during shiva? Furthermore, friends don't know how to support them and don't know what they are "supposed"

to do either. Second, the restrictions that are intended for the first few weeks may be ignored, but severe isolation may come when the person needs it most, when the reality of the death sets in weeks or months later.

We are in a place as HUC students, faculty, and staff when we can help our communities support grievors both during and after the rituals of shiva and shloshim. A year ago, the New Yorker ran a piece about the changing experience of death over the past 150 years. For thousands of years, mourning was a public and community based event. Megan O'Rourke, the reporter explained that aside from truly notable people, grieving has moved from a public to private event. We experienced public grieving this year with Debbie Friedman. However, our experience was and is the exception, not the rule. Many people feel they have to face the death of a loved one completely alone. We have the ability to help bring our communities together to support a griever long after the first 30 days are over.

First, we can be aware of our own reactions to stories about death. When we hear a story about a death, what does it bring up? How do we react? What are the hardest stories for us to hear? How do we understand and about death? We need to become aware of our own reactions to death.

Second, we can educate ourselves that grief, life tzraat, can be messy, ugly, scary, and may remind us of our own mortality. We may hold a notion that people go through grief in a

series of neat and ordered stages – from one to the other. However, that is usually not the case. Two articles are available on the tables in the back of the room. They are both great tools. They can be used in teaching about grief and how to support someone who is grieving. They can help us learn about our own complicated feelings about grief.

Third, we then can learn the different Jewish rituals surrounding death, and teach others. O' Rouke in her New Yorker article wrote “without rituals to follow, I felt abandoned, adrift.” We have the rituals, we just need to teach them. People don't need to experience this alone.

Fourth, we can help others understand how to ask questions to grievers. Asking questions about a person who died won't cause the mourner any pain. They are already in pain. It will help them talk about that person, stay connected, and honor that person. Along with the articles, there are also pamphlets from Our House Grief Support Center about ways to ask questions about death.

Fifth, we can include grief, grieving, the end of life, and illness in aspect of our teaching and preaching. Every time the Bible states **יָמוּת מוֹת** “surely you will die” it is an opening for us to invite some of those difficult conversations, because surely you will.

In Biblical times, they isolated the person with tzraat out of fear of the disease spreading. Today sometimes a person who is grieving feels that same isolation. We can invite them back in to our camp. We can let Helen know that she does not have to feel alone and neither do we.