

Parashah Eighty-Five

Leviticus 14:1–57; 2Kings 7:1–20; Luke 17:11–19

notes by Tim Hegg

Restoration of the Outcast

In our Torah portion this Shabbat we have before us a most peculiar teaching. If the Torah speaks in ancient tones that seem distant from our modern world, this passage all the more. It is not so difficult to understand in one sense—the movements of the priest and the various ceremonies are quite clearly laid out. But the difficulty comes in wondering *why* such intricate ceremonies were prescribed. Modern scholars have pointed to similar rituals in pagan cultures and presume that Israel simply imported them. But this is unacceptable: the way of the evil one is to copy what HaShem has given, and attempt to turn it into evil. Rather, these rituals have specific revelational truths that HaShem expects us to see, appreciate and apply. Even as the previous section spoke of the manner in which *tzara'at* could separate a person or object from the community, so here the laws of purification show how the outcast can be received back.

The first thing we should note is that the one who had been sent out of the camp is treated as a corpse, at least in terms of ritual defilement. This is seen by the parallels between those purified from corpse defilement through the ashes of the Red Heifer (Num 19), and the purification in our text. Both rituals begin outside of the camp. Both rituals involve sprinkling blood, and both incorporate cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread, and both require a seven day period for cleansing. Since the person has been diagnosed with persistent *tzara'at*, he is treated as though dead. His return to the community, then, is a kind of “resurrection.”

But there is another most interesting parallel: the one who goes through this ritual purification is anointed after the fashion of the priest. Like Aaron and his sons, blood is put on his right earlobe, his right thumb and his right big toe. But whereas Aaron and his sons were anointed with oil on the head, here the anointing oil is once again applied to the ear, thumb and toe. Still, both are anointed with oil.

Finally, we cannot escape the parallel to the Nazirite, who, if defiled by a corpse during the period of his vow, must bring two turtledoves and shave his head on the seventh day, the day he becomes clean. Clearly the shaving of all hair draws a parallel to the Nazirite. Incredibly, when the outcast is made pure and returns to the camp, he bears some resemblance to both the priest and the Nazirite.

What are we to make of these parallels? It seems clear that the emphasis is one of holiness by which one has the ability to draw near to God, to be in the company of His dwelling. The Nazirite shares many commonalities with the priest: abstaining from wine/strong drink and not touching a corpse. The priest is also forbidden to shave his head, and the Nazirite is to do the same during his vow. In one sense, the vow of the Nazirite allowed the common man to experience the life of the priest. Both conformed to a high level of separation unto the Lord.

Now the fact that the one who returns from the defilement of *tzara'at*, someone who was treated as though dead, undergoes rituals similar to those of the Nazir and the Priest, indicates at least one important thing: the one who was as good as dead, whose defilement required utter separation from the community of God's dwelling, is now received back as completely clean—as one entirely holy and separated *unto* God, not *from* Him.

Torah regulations such as prescribed in our *parashah* provide the backdrop for the metaphoric language of the Apostles regarding one's separation from God on account of sin. That Paul could describe unbelievers as “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1) is graphically portrayed by the regulations of *tzara'at*. In the same way that someone with persistent *tzara'at* was banished, so every sinner is banished from the presence of God. Only a thorough cleansing could restore such a one. But once there is restoration, the one who was banished is received back as though he had never been unclean. He is accepted as cleansed in every way.

Our *parashah* may be divided into the following sections: the first section deals with the purification of a *tzara'at* individual quarantined outside of the camp. This purification involves three phases: First is the ritual (vv. 1-8) which happens outside of the camp. Second is the ritual of purification within the camp itself (vv. 8-32), and third, the right to return to one's own dwelling. The second section of our text describes the purification of a dwelling afflicted with *tzara'at* (vv. 33-53), which is in most ways parallel with the former ritual with only slight differences. The *parashah* ends (vv. 54-57) with a general summary statement.

Since the *metzarah* (one afflicted with *tzara'at*) has been quarantined outside of the camp, he is not allowed to come into the camp to request an inspection. If he believes the *tzara'at* has been healed, he must send word to the priest and the priest must come to him, outside of the camp. This initial movement of the priest from a place of purity to the place of impurity outside of the camp reminds us of the fundamental truth of Yeshua's incarnation. As those contaminated by sin, we have no ability to enter the *sanctum* of God's dwelling place. Our only hope is that the Priest should come to our sin-infected dwelling. We should not forget that the priest in the whole scope of the Tabernacle/Temple ritual represents the Mediator between God and man. When the priest goes outside of the camp to the impure place, he does so as the representative of the Holy One.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua HaMashiach, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. (2Cor 8:9)

There are no riches greater than communion with God, knowing that we will be received before Him as cleansed. Apart from His coming to us, outside of the camp, we would be left in our death—our sin, without hope, and without God. If there is any joy—any happiness—we have this because Yeshua, the very expression of God's love, came to us, outside of the camp.

The ritual performed outside of the camp is most interesting. First the text tells us that two living clean birds are to be taken. That the birds should be designated as “living” seems superfluous! All sacrificial animals must be living—a dead animal is unclean! What is the meaning? The Hebrew *שְׁתֵּי־צִפּוֹרִים חַיִּים טְהוֹרוֹת*, *shitei tziporim chayot t'horot* “two birds, living, clean” must be understood with the alternate meaning of *חַיִּים*, *chayot*, for the word *חַיָּה*, *chayah* can also mean “wild animal,” i.e., non-domesticated animals (cf. Ezek 33:27; Zeph 2:15; Ps 148:10; Job 37:8). We should thus translate “two birds, non-domesticated, clean.” The rabbinic commentaries agree, for the tradition has it that sparrows were used (m.*Negaim* 14:1, cf. *Sipra Neg.* Metzora 5:14; b.*Shabbat* 106a; b. *Betzah* 24a). Perhaps this informs Yeshua's statement in the Gospels (Matt. 10:29, 31; Luke 12:6-7) regarding how inexpensive sparrows were.

Why would wild birds be used? At first it appears that the one which is slain is a sacrifice for guilt or sin, and in some way makes expiation. And the second bird seems at first to indicate the freedom of the now cleansed *metzarah* to come back into the camp. But the symbolism fails, for the bird let go does not enter the camp but flies out into the field. What is more, the same two-bird offering is given for the house that is marked by *tzara'at*. The only explanation that satisfies the symbolism is that both birds are symbolic of the removal of impurity: the first one, whose life is taken, symbolizes the death of the impure person: he was considered a corpse—as good as dead. But the second bird symbolizes the utter removal of this death. And this is why the bird must be non-domesticated. As a wild bird, it will fly away from the camp, not back into it. The live bird

symbolizes that the impurity has been entirely removed from the *metzarah*, *never again to return*. The spiritual application is therefore obvious: the death of the sacrificial bird satisfies the holy requirements of God. It prefigures or anticipates the full guilt and sin offering to be offered in the second phase of the purification ritual. But the live bird, connected with the sacrificial bird through the sevenfold dipping in the blood mingled with “living water,” signals the removal of impurity for the subsequent life of the purified one. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12).

The particulars of the ceremony outside of the camp are carefully delineated. The priest takes one of the two birds and slaughters it into an earthenware vessel. This vessel must be clean, and never have had contracted impurities, for a clay vessel that becomes impure must be broken (Lev 11:33; 15:12). The bird is to be slaughtered into the earthenware vessel “over running water” (עַל־מַיִם חַיִּים, *al mayim chayim*). Does this mean that the earthenware vessel is held over a stream when the bird is slaughtered into it? Probably not. The meaning of the preposition עַל, *al*, “upon” or “over” must here mean “upon,” that is, water from a stream is put into the earthen vessel and the bird is slaughtered “upon it,” that is “over it” so that the blood flows into the water of the vessel. The blood of the bird (especially if it were a sparrow) might be less than sufficient for the complete ritual which required dipping the live bird, cedar, scarlet thread, and hyssop into blood, thus the need to mix it with “living water.” Once again, the theme is “life”—the *metzarah* has come from death to life, and so the whole ritual emphasizes this.

The addition of cedar wood (עֵץ הָאֶרֶז, *eitz ha'erez*), scarlet thread (שָׁנִי הַתּוֹלַעַת, *sh'ni hatola'at*), and hyssop (הָאִזּוֹב, *ha-eizov*) also emphasize the return to life. Cedar wood is red, connecting it with the blood. Blood in the Hebrew culture can also be a symbol of life. “The life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11,14; Deut. 12:23). Further, cedar wood has a natural preservative quality so that it withstands decay. Scarlet was a dye made from the *kermes biblicus* or “cochmal worm” (note כַּרְמִיל, *karmil*, 2Chron 2:6, 13; 3:14). The nature of the dye was that it was permanent. Once wool was dyed with scarlet, it could never again be made white. Isaiah speaks of sin as “red as scarlet” being made (against all possibilities) “as white as snow.” Thus, the use of the scarlet thread here may well signal the idea that the one being cleansed would have a permanent connection with the blood—the symbol of life. The life of the sacrificial substitute would permanently be his. Hyssop (the Sages are not agreed that the Hebrew designates “hyssop,” cf. b.*Shabbat* 109a, though most came to the conclusion that it did) was used as a “brush” because its fibers would easily collect liquid. It was used to apply the blood to the doorpost at Pesach, was added to the same elements (cedar and scarlet thread) in the ritual of the Red Heifer, as well as for sprinkling the water of purification upon those who had become impure through corpse defilement. Its connection in all of these rituals caused it to become synonymous with purification in general, so that the Psalmist could say: (Ps 51:7) “Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.” That hyssop was used to give Yeshua bitter wine while upon the execution stake has tremendous symbolic significance for John (John 19:29). The hyssop also contains herbal and medicinal qualities.

Having dipped the live bird together with the cedar, scarlet thread, and hyssop into the blood-water of the earthen vessel, the priest then sprinkles the *metzarah* seven times with the mixture. The symbolism is obvious: the *metzarah* is in every way (seven times signals completeness) identified with the objects of ritual purity. The priest then lets the live bird free in the field.

We should not miss the fact that all of this ritual is conducted outside of the camp, and thus not for the whole community to see. It is specifically done for the *metzarah* himself. Put yourself, if you can, into his place. There you are, having been abandoned to the outside of the camp, treated as one who was dead. Now, the very disease that had caused your trouble is being pronounced “gone,” “cured,” “no longer *metzarah*.” But do you believe it? Is it a dream from which you will awaken? Can you begin to live as you had before—without automatically calling out “unclean, unclean” whenever someone passes too near? The God of all mercy understands the weakness of our flesh—He knows that we would struggle with honestly believing we had been made clean and pure—able to come into the camp and fellowship with Him where He dwells. To prove the reality

of our new status as clean, HaShem gives repeated symbols—constant reminders of our having gone from death to life. All of the ritual: the death of the innocent wild bird, the gathering of cedar, scarlet, and hyssop, the living water and earthenware vessel, the sprinkling seven times, and releasing the living bird—all of it tells us over and over again: “pure,” “clean,” “worthy,” “accepted.” Imagine the sense of gratitude, joy, and relief as you watch the living bird carry the impurity away, never to return! This is redemption in all of its power and glory.

That the *metzarah* accepted his purity is evidenced by his own actions: he undergoes a *mikvah* (ritual bath), shaves off the hair of his head (just like the Nazir who has finished his vow) and reckons himself clean.

But the *former metzarah* is still outside of the camp. Entrance into the camp is the second phase. Here we see an important principle: full inclusion within the community comes *after* one has been made whole, not before. The community does not exist to harbor the *metzarah*, nor even to make him clean. Moreover, that community cannot declare the *metzarah* clean—only the priest can. Once the *metzarah* is declared clean through the divine rituals of purification administered by the priest, he can confidently come into the camp and join the community. This is a fitting illustration of how the body of Messiah is to function as a Torah community. The community itself is not the place to rehabilitate the unbeliever. Rather, the body of Messiah is comprised of those who have come to genuine faith, who have been made clean by the blood, and whose lives evidence this through faithfulness to God. The unbeliever must be approached “outside of the camp,” not within it.

Once the former *metzarah* enters the camp, further public rituals of sacrifice and purification are undertaken. Once he enters the camp he must wait seven days, during which he is not able to enter his own tent. Apparently he sets up a temporary dwelling just for himself. Though the text does not specify, it seems likely that this seven day period was a semi-quarantine for the sake of the community. They too must be convinced that he is clean. Then, after the seven days, he again shaves his head and in addition, all the hair on his body. This may be symbolic of a new start—a new life.

On the eighth day the public sacrifices required are given. Two male lambs and one ewe are chosen. The two male lambs are for the **אֲשָׁם**, *'asham* (guilt offering) and the **עֹלָה**, *'olah* (burnt offering). The female is for the **חַטָּאת**, *chat'at* (sin offering) in accordance with the previous descriptions of the sacrifices (cf. Lev 4:27-35). In addition to the animal sacrifices, a grain offering mixed with oil, and a libation are offered as part of the ritual.

Once again, the prescribed sacrifices and libation signal the full cleansing and acceptance of the former *metzarah*. The ritual that attended the sacrifice goes out of its way to identify the former *metzarah* as completely covered (atoned for) and clean in every way. The blood of the guilt offering is applied to the right earlobe (obedience), the right thumb (clean hands), and the right big toe (clean “walk” or life). The priest also does a special ritual with the oil. After pouring some into his left hand, he sprinkles with his right hand seven times “before the Lord,” then applies oil to the earlobe, thumb, and big toe of the former *metzarah*, *mingling the oil with the blood that he had first applied there*. Then he puts the remainder of the oil, which is in his hand, upon the head of the cleansed outcast. The ceremony is illustrative of the cooperative work of the Messiah and the Ruach in the enterprise of regeneration and redemption. If the blood is a foreshadow of Messiah’s death, then the oil foreshadows the work of the Spirit in awakening the soul to faith in the Messiah. Each place where the blood is applied, the oil is also applied, reminding us that apart from the work of the Ruach, the saving power of the blood is never realized. And finally, the remainder of the oil is put upon the head, foreshadowing the on-going work of the Spirit in sanctifying the life of the cleansed one.

After accomplishing this ritual in connection with the guilt offering, the priest proceeds to offer the sin offering and finally the whole burnt offering. The guilt offering spoke to the interruption of the *sanctum* of God’s holy dwelling. The *metzarah* had introduced death into the community, and as such was unable to glorify the Holy One, thus diminishing the glory He should receive. This is rectified by the guilt offering. The sin offering spoke to the whole connection of death and sin. Death is the result of sin, for the soul that sins must die. Harkening back to the penalty given to Adam

and Chavah, death and sin are always combined. Only sacrifice (life given for a life) can overcome the debt and the effects of sin. Finally, the whole burnt offering returns the former *metzarah* to his rightful place as one who glorifies the Almighty. Consumed in its entirety as worship to the Lord, the whole burnt offering signals the right and privilege of the purified one to join the congregation in their happy duty of honoring HaShem.

We should also note that the whole ceremony has taken place on the eighth day. As a mini-picture of the yearly festivals, in which the final festival of Sukkot pictures the eschatological (last-days) finale of God dwelling with man, so the former *metzarah* returns to his dwelling on the eighth day, completely purified and united with wife, family and community—a day of supreme joy!

The mercy of God in restoring the former *metzarah* is further emphasized in the provision for one who is too poor to bring the prescribed sacrifices. While the sacrifice of the guilt offering is not diminished, the sin offering and whole burnt offering may be clean fowl (turtledoves or pigeons) instead of the more costly sheep. And the oil libation is reduced to one-third, one tenth of a *hin* as over against three-tenths. Thus, one's economic status does not enter into the ability of the former *metzarah* to be restored.

Our text goes on to describe a similar ritual for any dwelling that is marked by *tzara'at*. Interestingly, the text indicates that it is HaShem Who marks the house with the “sign” of *tzara'at* (v. 34). Bringing the hidden uncleanness to light is a mercy of HaShem, not a curse. When that which renders one unclean is made visible, it is able to be dealt with. When hidden, it may have its deadly effect without recourse.

The *haftarah* (story of the lepers who first witnessed the victory of God against the Arameans) as well as the Apostolic portion (story of the 10 lepers met by Yeshua on the road) emphasize the plight of the outcast (*haftarah*) and the joy of restoration (Apostolic). Obviously, the whole issue of *tzara'at* (and at its worst, leprosy) is understood both in the Tanach as well as in the Apostolic Scriptures as a fitting picture of sin and the restoration that can only come from Divine atonement and forgiveness.

The personal applications we may make from this metaphor are many. But I would like to emphasize one above all others on this Shabbat: the reality of forgiveness of sins. Nothing is more potent in the arsenal of Satan's weapons than the weapon of guilt. Ravaged by the devastating effects of sin, we find ourselves nearly unable to believe that we have been fully and completely forgiven. Haunted and embarrassed by our waywardness, we think that never again could we be viewed by the Holy One as worthy. Indeed, we find it difficult to look at ourselves as fully accepted, and rather give in to the lie of the enemy, thinking that our own personal suffering could somehow clean away the filth that remains. But if we learn nothing else from this powerful picture of purification so beautifully portrayed in the Torah, we should learn that God has given us every symbol and ritual available to assure us of our full acceptance in the Son. We have seen the sacrifice, and watched the live bird fly away, never to return. We have been anointed with the blood, and the presence of the precious oil of the Ruach has reminded us that the blood has been applied to us personally, to every aspect of our being. We have been brought from death to life, and we walk in the light of His face (presence). We therefore enter boldly before His throne of *grace* and seek His strength and provision for all that to which He has called us. And we live a life of thankfulness, bringing our offerings of praise to the One Who has made us whole. We are children welcomed at the Father's table, where we fellowship in wholeness. And all of this is not the result of what we have accomplished, but what He has accomplished for us. “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are!” (1John 3:1)