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Parashat Tazria-M'tzora
Saturday 25 April 2020

Different sorts of boundary

- 1 - It was sunny last week, so my wife and I went to sit in the garden. Due to the covid pandemic we were under strict instructions to stay home, but 'home' includes a garden. Well, we don't literally have a garden (we live in a flat), but there is a grubby parking space in the back yard of the closed-down shop that we live on top of. So we went to sit in it. Because we don't have access to the shop, we couldn't get to 'our' yard directly, so we had to go out of the front door and carry our folding chairs, on public streets, round the block to the back.
- 2 - This palaver put us in quite an ambiguous situation. The object of the lockdown is to limit contact between people from different households, to keep everyone in their own space, to turn the thresholds that we cross freely every day into rigid boundaries. But, in order for us to reach the back yard, which is 'sort of' our space, we had to pass through about 150 metres of public space.
- 3 - A lot of traditional Judaism is fixated on (we might almost say, obsessed with) rigid boundaries. Between right and wrong, pure

and impure, Shabbat and weekday, kosher and treif. This week's parashah, Tazria-M'tzora, is no exception. Infamous for its gorily detailed descriptions of skin disease, and ignored wherever possible by bar and bat mitzvah students, in 2020 these reviled passages of Torah have suddenly become relevant. And the Jewish approach to disease control absolutely fits the mould: it's all about boundaries.

- 4 - Professor Rachel Adler views our ancestors' fear of disease as being a visceral horror at the way that it infiltrates: "Societies dread invasion, attack, disintegration and inundation. Hence the extremities and borders of our nations and our bodies are places of concern, places where integrity may be breached and order overthrown. The entrances and exits of airports, office buildings, mouths; all are carefully monitored, and passage through them governed by rules. Human skin is a long continuous boundary that demarcates the most basic of borders, the border between the human body and the world outside it. Breaches in the skin are

attacks on the body's wholeness. This is what is frightening about tzara'at,"¹ the 'scaly affliction' of Leviticus.

5 - The Torah dictates that when someone loses control of their bodily boundaries, and is overtaken by disease, society wrests from them control of their social boundaries. That person is exiled to live outside the camp,² away from public space. In fact, even someone who was only possibly infected, over whom there was just a suspicion of disease, anyone whose bodily boundaries were ambiguous, would also be removed from public space.³ Any would result in expulsion from public space.

6 - It's very, very easy to see this horror of illness, and harsh absolutist treatment of the infected, as being uncaring, but that's not quite fair. Because we also have a story about what happened when Miriam developed a skin disease.

7 - What happened was, she was treated exactly the same as everyone else. She was sent to live, on her own, outside the camp, for seven days. The community waited for her. Instead of

¹ Rachel Adler. "Those who turn away their faces: tzara'at and stigma" in William Cutter (ed), *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: spiritual and practical perspectives on Judaism and health* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 142-159: 145.

² Leviticus 13:46

packing up their tents and carrying on with their journey, they all of them - all of them - stayed and waited patiently for her to get better. The rabbis tried to explain this by saying it was a reward for Miriam's own patience: in childhood she waited by the Nile watching over Moses, so the Israelites waited for her while she recuperated.⁴ But this doesn't explain why the Israelites always waited, for anyone suffering.

- 8 - Right now, every country in the world is gradually figuring out its own way of managing the horrors of a contagious disease. The fact that coronavirus is zoonotic - it jumped to humans from animals - reinforces the biblical horror of boundary-crossing ambiguity. We like there to be a clear division between us and animals, between us and the olden days of plague and the Black Death, but coronavirus has proved us wrong.
- 9 - And the response of our government and its advisors has been fairly biblical. Lockdown. Policing our boundaries to try to keep not just distance but also borders between infected and uninfected.

³ mNegaim 1:3

⁴ mSotah 1:9

10 - But we're also compassionate. We don't treat covid sufferers as if they're an unwanted burden. We don't pack up our tents and move on as a society, leaving behind those too sickly to take part in the national journey. Like the Israelites, we wait - all of us, we all put our normal lives on hold - to maintain cohesion and unity. For all the talk of boundaries, despite every line we draw between those who are infected and those who are healthy, we are still determined to stick together as society.

11 - Disease control without patience is easy. Patience is tricky. Patience holds us up as a society, it delays our journey and consumes our resources. But we're patient anyway.

12 - Parashat Tazria-M'tzora taught our ancestors to police their boundaries, but the way those ancestors treated Miriam teaches us not to be too rigid. Social and physical boundaries make very good sense when dealing with something as dangerous as coronavirus, but our moral boundaries are more complex. To maintain the integrity of our moral boundaries, such as compassion, we need to allow some trespass across our physical boundaries.

13 - To reach the glorious sunshine literally next to the place where we live, my wife and I had to walk through public space. To be

patient and hold up our national journey for valued members of society, we have to devote some public space and public energy to them too.

14 - Tazria-M'tzora is about policing boundaries, but it's also about relaxing them where necessary. We prefer to keep our synagogue spaces free from nasty graphic descriptions of rashes and sores. In 2020, we discover that we cannot afford to be too rigid about that.