

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## Parashat M'tzora

LEVITICUS 14:1–15:33

Study Guide written by Rabbi Stephanie Bernstein

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### *Parashat M'tzora Study Guide Themes*

Theme 1: Healing the Individual to Keep the Community Whole

Theme 2: Maintaining Ritual Purity through the Laws of Menstruation

### INTRODUCTION



*Parashat M'tzora* is the second of two sections in Leviticus that deal with the laws of ritual impurity. The underlying principle behind the Torah's laws concerning impurity is that certain actions and physical conditions create dangerous, invisible airborne pollution that can invade God's earthly dwelling place, the Sanctuary. Impurity that is not properly contained and disposed of could cause God to abandon the Sanctuary, leading to a national catastrophe. Both *Tazria* (Leviticus 12–13) and *M'tzora* (Leviticus 14–15) contain the rules for individuals afflicted with *nega tzaraat* (scaly disease). *Parashat M'tzora* focuses as well on genital discharges, including rules about abnormal male discharges, seminal emissions, and menstruation. Leviticus 15 is one of several biblical texts that helped shape attitudes toward menstruation in Jewish tradition. As *M'tzora* describes in detail the purification rituals for those with *nega tzaraat* and those with genital discharge, it outlines the steps necessary for these individuals to return fully to the community and to their lives. Thus, the laws in *M'tzora* protect the Sanctuary, ensuring God's continuous presence among the people and allowing communal life to endure.

### BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction to the Central Commentary on pages 657–658 and/or survey the outline on page 658. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this parashah and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine

the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

## THEME 1: HEALING THE INDIVIDUAL TO KEEP THE COMMUNITY WHOLE



In Parashat M'tzora the person afflicted with *nega tzaraat* (scaly disease) moves from ritual impurity to ritual purity through a series of steps. These measures keep the individual's impurity from endangering the Sanctuary and allow the individual to rejoin the community once the impurity is eradicated. A person with *nega tzaraat* is rehabilitated through a process that includes verification by the priest that the individual is cured, personal purification rituals, and sacrifices the person brings to the Sanctuary. This process recognizes the way the individual and the community are inextricably bound, and acknowledges that—in order to keep God's presence with the people—both the individual and the community must be whole.

1. Read Leviticus 14:1–9, which describes the ritual for the *m'tzora*, a person afflicted with *tzaraat*.
  - a. To what does the term *m'tzora* (translated as “leper” in v. 1) refer? What is the difference between the condition the text describes and leprosy? According to the Central Commentary, why has the traditional translation of *m'tzora* as “leprosy” been retained?
  - b. What is the status of the *m'tzora* once the purification rituals have been completed and the person has been healed of *tzaraat*?
  - c. What, according to 14:1–9, is the priest's role in relation to the *m'tzora*? How does the priest's role differ from that of a healer?
  - d. In 14:7 we read that one of the two live birds required for the purification ritual is “set free in the open country.” Compare this to Leviticus 16:21, which describes a ritual connected with the Day of Atonement. What are the similarities between these rituals? What, in your view, is the function of these rituals?
  - e. The Hebrew words *chai*, *chayim*, and *chayah/chayot* (“alive,” “live,” “living”) are repeated throughout these verses (14:4–7). What is the significance of the repetition of these words in this passage? How does the ritual described in these verses symbolically restore the *m'tzora* to life? Why is it important for the individual to undergo this process?
2. Read Leviticus 14:10–20, which describes the sacrifice that must be made by the person afflicted with *tzaraat*.
  - a. Where and by whom, according to 14:11, should the sacrifice be presented? How does this differ from the purification rituals described in verses 1–9? What, in your view, accounts for these differences?

- b. According to the Central Commentary (p. 657), what is the Torah's view of the dangers posed by polluting actions and physical conditions? How does this reflect the theology of the Biblical writers?
  - c. Leviticus 14:2–9 does not mention God. In verses 10–20, however, the phrase “before *YHVH*” is repeated four times. What, in your view, accounts for this?
  - d. Verse 14 describes what the priest should do with the blood of the reparation offering. On which body parts of the afflicted person does the priest place the blood? As noted in the Central Commentary, the right side was preferred in biblical and ancient Near Eastern cultures. Why do you think this might have been so? What is the significance of putting the blood on three different parts of the body?
  - e. The ritual in verse 14 is similar to ceremonies in Leviticus 8 and Exodus 29 that describe the ordination of priests, the only other case in which this ritual is required. What, in your opinion, is the connection between the ritual of the sacrifice made by the *m'tzora* and the ordination of priests?
  - f. Leviticus 14:21–32 describes the sacrifice made by an afflicted person who is poor and does not have the means to make the sacrifice described in verses 10–20. What is the significance of having a ritual designated for the poor? What does this tell us about the values and sensitivities underlying these detailed rituals?
3. Read the Another View section, by Rachel Havrelock (p. 672).
- a. In *Parashat M'tzora*, the person afflicted with *tzaraat* moves from ritual impurity to ritual purity through a series of steps. This indicates, according to Havrelock, that the person's ritual impurity is transitional and that, over the course of life, the body may pass in and out of these stages. How does this insight help us understand the need for the purification rituals in this parashah?
  - b. What inference about the status of the impure state does Havrelock draw from the time-bound nature of each step in the purification ritual?
  - c. According to Havrelock, what is the relationship between the idea that the body and its status are changeable and the prophetic idea that sinful actions can be reversed before dire consequences occur? What role, in your view, does God have in this process?
  - d. Havrelock notes that the body, through illness, trauma, and childbirth, is a “vessel of memory.” If you have given birth to a child, suffered a trauma, or experienced a major illness, how does your body “remember” these occurrences? In your view, what is the significance of these bodily “memories”?

4. Read the first entry in *Post-biblical Interpretations*, by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert (p. 672).
  - a. How, according to Fonrobert, did the Rabbis interpret the word *m'tzora*?
  - b. What was the relationship, according to the Rabbis, between *tzaraat* and slander?
  - c. What are the consequences, in your view, of slander—both in interpersonal and intra-communal relations? What can we learn from this parashah about the importance of healing the damage to a community caused by slander?
  
5. Read “Otwock II” by Kadya Molodowsky, in *Voices* (p. 676).  
 (Otwock is a town in central Poland where the Nazis committed numerous atrocities during World War II, including euthanizing patients at a psychiatric hospital. When the Otwock ghetto was liquidated in 1942, three-quarters of Otwock’s approximately eight thousand Jews were transported to the extermination camps of Treblinka and Auschwitz. Those Jews who remained in Otwock were shot.)
  - a. How does the speaker in the poem describe herself and her compatriots? What does this tell us about her status?
  - b. How does the poet’s description of the trees “with their fat trunks / And millennial lives” contrast with the way the speaker describes herself and her compatriots? How does this compare with the use of the words “alive,” “live,” and “living” in Leviticus 14:1–9?
  - c. What is the relationship between how the trees in the forest position themselves in relation to the speaker and the trees’ desire to “shun us, shun us” and the treatment of the *m'tzora* in this parashah?
  - d. How does pairing this poem with Leviticus 14 enhance your understanding of the biblical text?

## THEME 2: MAINTAINING RITUAL PURITY THROUGH THE LAWS OF MENSTRUATION



The laws pertaining to menstruation in *Parashat M'tzora* do not stigmatize the menstruating woman, as is the case in other biblical passages. The somewhat neutral attitude toward menstruation in this parashah can be seen in the fact that a man and woman are equally impure if they have sexual relations when the woman is menstruating. The laws regarding menstruation in *M'tzora* allow the menstruant to continue with her life, as they permit fairly normal family and social relationships. As with the laws pertaining to *nega tzaraat* (scaly disease), Leviticus separates the menstruating woman from the sacred, thus protecting the Sanctuary from possible contamination.

1. Read Leviticus 15:19–24, which describes the laws about menstruation.
  - a. Hebrew roots with the letter combination n-d are found

repeatedly in these verses and refer to the primary term for menstruation in the Hebrew Bible (*niddah*). What is the attitude of the biblical text toward the menstruant in these verses? According to the Central Commentary, how is the term *niddah* used in later biblical texts? How does the attitude toward the menstruant in these verses compare with that in other cultures?

- b. What is the length of time a menstruating woman remains impure? According to the Central Commentary, how does this differ from rabbinic practice?
  - c. According to these verses, how can a menstruating woman's impurity be transferred?
  - d. What are the similarities and differences between the rules concerning the menstruating woman and those that apply to the man with genital discharge in 15:2–15?
  - e. What are the implications of these laws for the duties that the menstruant must perform for her family?
  - f. What is the length of impurity for a man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman? According to the Central Commentary, what accounts for the difference between this length of time and that of other kinds of contact with the menstruating woman or her belongings? How does this compare with the consequences for sexual relations with a menstruating woman in Leviticus 20:18?
  - g. According to these verses, how does the ritual impurity of a man who has sexual relations with a menstruating woman compare with the ritual impurity of a menstruating woman who has sexual relations?
2. Read Leviticus 15:25–30, which describes the laws concerning abnormal discharge of blood.
    - a. To what kinds of abnormal discharge do these laws apply?
    - b. What rules apply to a woman in these situations? How do these rules compare with the rules for normal menstruation?
    - c. What must the woman do in order to become pure? How do the rules for the sacrifice the woman must bring compare with those for the *zav* (15:14–15)? In your view, what accounts for this similarity?
  3. Read from the passage on “When a woman has a discharge” to the end in *Post-biblical Interpretations*, by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert (p. 673).
    - a. How did the Rabbis' view of purity and impurity compare with that of the authors of the biblical text in this parashah?
    - b. Although the rules of purity and impurity in this parashah concern ritual access to the Tabernacle, the Mishnah uses them to establish ritual status

with regard to access to the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple, these rules were no longer necessary. According to Fonrobert, how did the Rabbis use the rules in this parashah, along with Leviticus 18:19 and 20:18, to regulate the sexual relations of married couples?

- c. In what role does BT *Niddah*, the Talmudic tractate that contains the regulations regarding menstruating women, place the rabbinic sage? How does this role compare with the role of the priest in this parashah?
  - d. How does the Talmud merge the biblical categories of regular and irregular bleeding?
  - e. To whom does the Talmud attribute the more stringent interpretation of the biblical rule? What is your view of Fonrobert's suggestion of how women throughout history have used the laws of *niddah* for their own needs?
4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Elyse Goldstein (pp. 674–75).
- a. What is your reaction to the view that society sends negative messages to women about the “expected perfection” of their bodies and the “disappointments of any flaws in the female form”? What is the relationship, in your opinion, between this view and the rules regarding menstruation in this parashah?
  - b. What are the meanings of the terms *tamei* and *tahor* in the Torah? What is the purpose of these designations in the Torah? Why are “impure” (*tamei*) and “pure” (*tahor*) more accurate translations of these words than “unclean” and “clean”?
  - c. How does the taboo associated with things considered *tamei* inspire both fear and respect? How is this mixed message reflected in the Torah's passages about blood?
  - d. What are your reactions to Goldstein's view that we should explore the positive and sacred aspects of menstrual blood by developing liturgy to mark the coming and going of menstruation?
  - e. In Goldstein's view, how does menstruation symbolize women's covenantal blood? What are your reactions to the parallel Goldstein draws between menstruation and *b'rit milah*?
5. Read “The Curse” by Sue Hubbard, in *Voices* (p. 678).
- a. How does the poet describe the changed relationship between herself and her daughter in the first stanza?
  - b. What is the poet's attitude toward her daughter's first menses, as expressed in the second stanza?
  - c. How does the view of menstruation in this poem compare with the view of menstruation in this parashah? In what ways do the attitudes toward menstruation

- in this parashah reflect contemporary attitudes toward menstruation?
- d. In what ways does the onset of her daughter's menses add to the connections between mother and daughter?
  - e. How does the poet's attitude toward menstruation differ from that of her mother? What is the relationship between this and the poet's wishes for her daughter?
  - f. What attitudes toward menstruation did your mother convey to you? If you have a daughter, how did you respond to your daughter's first menses? How does your attitude toward menstruation compare with your mother's? Through words and deeds, what have you conveyed to your daughter(s)?

## OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. In *Parashat M'tzora*, the person with *nega tzaraat* must remain outside the camp and undergo a series of rituals before being able to return to the community. If you have experienced an illness, trauma, or tragedy in your life, to what extent did you feel outside the community? What steps did you—perhaps with the help of others—take to help reintegrate yourself into the community? How have you helped friends and relatives who have experienced such difficulties remain part of the community?
2. How, in your opinion, does Goldstein's view that society "sends negative messages to women from earliest childhood about the expected perfection of their physiques and the disappointments of any flaws in the female form" (p. 674) apply to women who are no longer menstruating? What can we learn from *Parashat M'tzora* about how women can view the changes to their bodies that occur over time?

## CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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