

A RIGHT TO HEALTHCARE?

A commentary on *Parashat Tazria*

By Rabbi Danny Rich

Parashat Tazria (Leviticus 12:1-13:59) has two main parts: a description of the required ritual for a woman following childbirth and a procedure for the diagnosis and treatment of a variety of skin diseases.

In the ancient Israelite world bodily functions and illness were a cultic matter, overseen by the priesthood, a hereditary male caste associated with the tribe of Levi. Bodily emissions -including blood and semen- appear to have been the source of some fear and resulted in ritual (but not hygienic) uncleanness which frequently led to temporary separation or exclusion from cultic arenas, if not the community as a whole.

The opening verses of *Parashat Tazria* indicate that a mother who bears a son is ritually impure for an initial seven days and is excluded for a further period; if she has a daughter the time period is doubled, presumably on the logical basis that it is assumed that the daughter herself will bear a child in the future.

It is possible out of this bizarre ritual to begin to appreciate the sense of reverence for, and appreciation of, the wondrous nature of birth. Nevertheless, in a world where childbirth continues to be a moment of great physical danger in many societies and leads to discrimination in, for example, employment, in the case of so called developed nations with modern and safe healthcare systems, the verses describing the ancient rituals surrounding childbirth may serve as a timely reminder. Access to maternity services should be a given in our modern world and the birth of a child should be a moment of celebration for individual families and communities and should reinforce our commitment that these children will be raised in a society of which all can be proud and in which all can thrive.

What is true of the newborn child should be equally applied to men and women who suffer mental and

physical illness. The remainder of *Parashat Tazria* prescribes the role of the priest in the diagnosing and ritual purifying of sufferers of skin complaints, known in Biblical Hebrew as *tzarat*. Although often translated as 'leprosy,' *tzarat* appears to designate a variety of skin ailments. The procedure involved identification, treatment and, in some cases, isolation and most dramatically a requirement for the sufferer to declare 'Impure, impure!'

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This declaration requirement which may remind us of the leper's bell might initially cause us to recoil but the Babylonian Talmud Moed Katan 5a remarks that the purpose of such a declaration serves not only as a warning to others but should elicit compassion and prayer on behalf of the sufferer. Perhaps ahead of its time the Talmud was alluding to the rights and responsibilities aspects of health. The modern citizen is entitled to expect the community to offer sympathy and the very best of health care treatment but as a responsible member of the same society one should endeavour to recognise when one is ill, to reduce (where possible) the illness's damage to oneself and others, and to acknowledge that even the most advanced healthcare system provision demands a sense of responsibility from its users.

Interestingly despite the role of the priesthood *Parashat Tazria* makes no suggestion that illness arises from moral failure, reaffirming the modern concept that both mental and physical illness strikes its sufferers at random and a decent society places great importance on accurate diagnosis, appropriate treatment and rehabilitation where possible.

Read *Parashat Tazria*, enjoy good health and play your part in ensuring the maintenance of a caring society in which healthcare remains the right of all regardless of individual circumstance.