



Parashat Tazria and Parashat Metzora
It's the Purity, Stupid: Reading Leviticus in Context

by Jay Michaelson on Friday April 28, 2006

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Leviticus 12:1-13:59, Rosh Chodesh Iyar

For gay and lesbian Jews, parshat *Acharei Mot* contains some of the most infamous passages of the Torah, but the preceding two, *Tazria* and *Metzora* (usually read together as a “double portion”) contain some of the most obscure. In these portions, we learn about the laws of leprosy (actually *tzaraat*, a skin disease similar to it but different in various ways), seminal emissions, and menstruation; here we are told the detailed method of sin-offerings and wave-offerings, and the methods of purity and contamination. Few people spend much time poring over the vivid anatomical and biological details of *Tazria-Metzora*. And yet, how can we understand the meaning of the Levitical sexual prohibitions without a sense of their immediate context?

In fact, while today one hears all sorts of expedient pseudo-rationales for why “homosexuality” is prohibited in Leviticus 18, a review of the preceding eight chapters reveals an agenda entirely different from those usually proffered in our times.

The extended *sugya* (topical section) to which *Tazria* and *Metzora* belong begins in the previous parsha, *Shemini*, which describes how the sons of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, brought “strange fire” (*eish zarah*, which can also be translated as “foreign fire”) into the tabernacle, and were destroyed. The Hebrew text, in the first verses of Leviticus 10, is actually a bit ambiguous as to what happens; it’s not clear whether God sends out a fire to destroy the young priests, or whether they are consumed by their own creation. But the response is clear: a “team meeting” between Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s remaining sons, in which new rules are set forth for regulating priestly behavior and maintaining the purity of the Israelite nation. In the context of what archeologists tell us regarding the cultic practices of ancient Canaan, which were varied, syncretic, and often ecstatic in nature, Leviticus 10:9-11 is perhaps most important. There, God says directly to Aaron:

Do not drink wine or strong drink, you and your sons, when you come into the tabernacle, so you don't die. This will be an eternal law for your generations, so you can discern between holy and



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secular, and between impure and pure, and so you can teach the children of Israel the laws that God speaks to them through Moses.

This is both a clear retort to Nadav and Avihu, who invented their own ritual and mixed authorized and unauthorized sacrificial practice, and a prelude of what is to come for the next three parshiot. Israelite priestly worship is not to be an ecstatic bacchanal, in which distinctions are erased and the god(s) known in wild abandon. It is to be precise, mindful of distinctions, and separated from anything “unclean” or foreign. After those admonitions follow eight chapters of laws regarding exactly those topics: clean and unclean, pure and impure, permitted and forbidden. Chapter 11 spends 47 verses on which animals may be eaten and which are “abominations” (here the Hebrew word is *sheketz*, whose exact meaning, like that of Leviticus 18’s *toevah*, is unknown), before repeating the injunction “to discern between impure and pure.” Chapter 12, the first of *Parshat Tazria*, describes the laws of separation of the “impure” mother following childbirth; chapter 13, the specific diagnosis for *tzaraat* (59 verses) and chapter 14 (the beginning of parshat *Metzora*), its spiritual-physical remedy, which involves quarantine (i.e., separation to contain the contaminating agent) and special offerings and whose 57 verses are closed again by the injunction “to teach when something is impure, and when it is pure.” Finally, and ending parshat Metzora, 57 more verses, this time of chapter 15, describing how seminal and menstrual emissions render a person *tameh* (“impure”), and how *tahara* (“purity”) is to be regained after them. The parsha concludes, “thus shall you separate the children of Israel from their impurity, and they shall not die from it by defiling my tabernacle which is among them.”

Hopefully the general theme here is clear. This part of the Torah is not about what is “natural,” nor what is moral, nor what is ethical or unethical – but what is pure and what contaminates, what is proper for Israelites, and what is to be left to other nations. Indeed, Leviticus 18 itself is quite clear on this point. After reciting the prohibitions on incest, male homosexual behavior, bestiality, and sex with a menstruating woman – all of which seem to be equivalent in gravity – an explicit rationale is provided: “Do not impurify yourself with all these things, because with all these things the *goyim*, who I am sending away before you, impurified themselves, and impurified the land.” (“Impurified” is a bit clumsy, but it is meant to translate *titamu*, the same word as *tameh*; words like “defiled” fail to make the connection.)

It’s rare that the Torah provides such clear reasons for the commandments—and yet, how often are these reasons attended to today? This text is about ancient cultic purity, and the prohibition of foreign actions and mixtures which contaminated it. Not “homosexuality,” not the family, not nature, not morality. After all, what do menstruation, vultures, leprosy, and male anal sex have in common? Ethics? Hardly.

Let’s also notice how much more weight is given today to one verse in Leviticus 18 than the 47 verses of chapter 11, 59 of chapter 12, and 57 of chapter 15. Both religious bigots and anti-



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religious activists sometimes act as if the Bible is all about homosexuality, but a lot more of it is about leprosy. Presumably such subjects don't suit anyone's political or religious agenda – skin diseases don't play a significant role in most contemporary spirituality, and menstruation is rarely a hot-button political issue – but it's what's in the text.

Sexual practices are forbidden not because of the convenient rationales one often hears today, but because they are *maasei mitzrayim*, acts of Egypt, and thus taboo for Israelites, who are exhorted to live a life circumscribed by distinctions. The prohibitions are part of Leviticus's "Holiness Code," which is chiefly about maintaining cultic and ritual purity – not ethics, not family, and not "nature." Of course, we know from the archeological record that Israelite life was never so neat – the whole reason these practices were forbidden is that people were doing them, expressing their religiosity in unorthodox, hybrid, and "foreign" ways that were abhorrent to the priestly elite in Jerusalem. But as far as the text is concerned, the bumper stickers are right: God hates fags only as much as God hates shrimp.

If this world of purity and danger seems distant from our own, well, perhaps it is. Perhaps the Biblical obsessions with cleanliness and separation from other nations do not speak to us as they did to their original audience; that is a subject for a different conversation. But as far as the text is concerned, the meaning is clear. As *Tazria*, *Metzora*, and *Acharei Mot* all explicitly state, Levitical rules are about cultic purity. I wonder, though, why doesn't the Religious Right also preach about separation from the unclean nations, or vultures, or menstruation?

A version of this essay was also recently featured on [Radical Torah](#), a weblog which features multiple takes on parshat hashavua (the weekly Torah portion), as well as commentaries on holidays, rituals and various concepts in Judaism, as seen through the lens of progressive religious and political viewpoints.



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