



Parashat Metzora

Birds, Blood, and Living Waters

by Marisa James on Friday April 11, 2008

7 Nisan 5768

Leviticus 14:1 - 15:33

We're in the middle of the book of Leviticus, in the middle of the Torah, which means that we're reading the instruction manual for the Levites in Temple times, detailing the knowledge necessary to carry out the job of the descendants of the house of Levi. On the surface, Leviticus teaches us how to keep the Temple running, how to properly dress and act for rituals, how and when to correctly offer sacrifices. For those of us who are modern, post-Temple, non-priestly, diaspora Jews, it can seem about as useful and exciting as a 19th-century British plumber's manual.

Parashat Metzora has three sections, two of which give us instructions for the purification of people and houses. On one hand, the *parasha* is entirely practical, presenting a wandering-in-the-desert edition of Readers' Digest, complete with articles on improving your health and keeping your home mold-free. Certainly, at this time of year, Jews preparing for *Pesach* (Passover) can identify with the list of activities recommended to thoroughly cleanse one's house – I spend most of March eating as much *chametz* (leavened bread, or any food that contains leavening) as I can find in my house, hoping that by *Pesach* I'll have minimal cleaning left – but our instructions are not for maintenance, but for eliminating *tzara'at* in one's self or one's dwelling.

Tzara'at generally refers to some sort of disfiguring infection: when discussing people, English translations prefer the word "leprosy," and when discussing dwellings, most translations use the word "plague."

The Torah makes it clear that the purity of our selves and our homes are linked; that keeping each clean and free of disease or decay is of equal importance. On a very practical level, this makes sense, but these days, few of us have to worry about plagues and leprosy. So how can we use this knowledge today?

Interestingly, the process for "purifying" houses and people is nearly identical. In both cases, if the plague or leprosy is cured, people and homes can be declared clean again by following a similar procedure: the *Kohen*, the priest, looks to see if the person/house is free from visual



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

uncleanness caused by *tzara'at*. The Kohen then gathers “two birds, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop” (Lev. 14:4 and 14:49), and “living waters in an earthen vessel” (Lev. 14:5 and 14:50). He kills the first bird, dips it with the other ingredients in the blood of the first bird and the water, flings the resulting liquid over the person or house, and sets the live bird free (hopefully to find a good therapist). Aside from a few differences in language, the ritual is the same.

What are these two birds? The first is killed; the second is dipped in the blood of the first and *malyim hayyim*, living waters, and set free.

Pesach arrives at the point of the year when we are farthest from Yom Kippur. These two holidays can be taken as representative of our two cases in Metzora; prior to Yom Kippur, we work to cleanse our souls, while at this time of year, we work to cleanse our homes. In both cases, we take stock of what we carry with us, making the difficult decisions about what we will give up and what we will keep; what will be sacrificed and what will live. The baggage each of us accumulates during a year is enormous, and twice a year we have chances to clear out and start fresh.

So we kill off our accumulated anger and feelings of inadequacy. We get rid of our bread, our *chametz*, our breakfast cereals and cookies and bagels. We sacrifice our experiences of discrimination, the names we are called, the fears we have learned, the jobs and families we lost.

And we take what remains, our hopes and dreams and ambitions, and we dip them in the blood of our experiences, drawing wisdom from them while jettisoning the heavier baggage in which they arrived. When *Pesach* begins, our homes are clean. When Yom Kippur begins, our souls are clean. One bird has been sacrificed, and the other bird sent off into the world, covered in the blood of the sacrifice and the waters that cleanse.

Parashat Metzora may be out-of-date as a literal instruction manual, but it still comes just as we are preparing for one of our great times of decision. As we hurriedly finish eating our pasta and pita chips in the next week, we learn from the Torah that our journey through the desert will be a purifying experience only if we learn what to leave behind. And we are reminded that in another six months, we will once again be given the chance to decide what to do with the fluttering in our hearts.



BOSTON | DENVER | SAN FRANCISCO

Working for the full inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Jews in Jewish life

www.keshetonline.org