



***Parashat Tazria Metzora***

***Community and Solitude: Rethinking Clean and Unclean***

by Vanessa "Vinny" Prell on Friday April 16, 2010

2 Iyar

Leviticus 12:1 - 13:59 and Leviticus 14:1 - 15:33

*Tazria – Metzora* is deeply concerned with appropriate categorization. It is the epitome of the Leviticus I remember from my childhood, verse after verse of rules and directions for incomprehensible diseases and bodily functions. It is very easy to read this text today and have the same feelings. What lessons can we, as queer people, learn from priestly rituals about gendered child-birth, menstruation, and diseases which affect people and cloth and houses? How can we increase our understanding of the world and ourselves through a section of text that is so deeply wound up in categories and their enforcement?

I want to use this section of Torah to think about the way we organize and act in the queer Jewish community. The *parasha* categorizes people into two categories: clean or unclean. Pure or impure. Today these categories are used to wound us. Homophobic organizations use the Torah to argue that LGBT people of all faiths are impure and unclean. Too often our experiences as LGBT folk are not so different than that of the person with skin disease in this *parasha*.

his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart..." (Lev 12:45-46, JPS translation).

Our sexual orientation and gender identities are used to separate us from our families, deprive us of our jobs, erase our personhood and end our lives. But, there is another way to see this text, to understand the two states of being the text calls for. Our typical state is in community. In community we connect with others, build, and act. Community is a place of our daily lives, where we must find ways to straddle differences (within our movement and outside of it), face exclusion, and keep working despite exhaustion and despair. This is the place of our work as a movement.

The second way of being is that of solitude and healing. Sometimes the ways of the world hurt us. Whether it is because of our sexual and gender identities, because of our race or our class, our ability level or our immigrant status, or something else entirely, sometimes we all need to



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retreat. As a tidbit, the Rabbis say that the mysterious disease in this parasha was caused by *l'shon hara* – gossip – and only this generation of Israelites was spiritual enough to be hurt by evil words. I am suggesting the opposite of this: sometimes we are hurt by the evil words (and acts) of others and need a place of safety to recuperate. For us, those places are ones where we can find people like us. We may attend trans writing groups, bisexual support groups, gay knitting clubs and lesbian community service projects. In these groups we can find people who understand what we are going through or what we need to feel 'at home' in the world. I believe these places are vitally important to the health of our souls and our communities.

But in the ancient times we had the Priests, Aaron, and his sons to tell us when it was time to move from solitude to community or community to solitude. Now there is no clear messenger, no one whose duty it is to help us reflect upon ourselves and our communities. I think this is a deep loss, because we forget to leave our places of isolation and connect with others. Our long history as Jews facing exile and exclusion from nations around the world did not keep Jewish denominations from excluding LGBT Jews as we began to come out en masse fifty years ago. The LGBT history of exclusion from mainstream society did not keep us from downplaying and distancing ourselves from transgender people for a whole generation. Even within Jewish LGBT communities we forget those who are different from ourselves, lauding the Conservative movement for their decision to ordain gay and lesbian clergy while forgetting that there are still many barriers to the inclusion of transgender and bisexual people.

When we lose our ability to come back to our communities, in all their diversity, we lose allies and we lose touch with our vision of a sacred and just world. As we move forward as a movement we need to think carefully about our categories. When does identifying as bisexual connect us with others and when does it isolate us from others? How do we thoughtfully advocate for people around their sexual orientation and their gender identity? When is it time to build bridges and when is it time to heal? At this time of the Omer we are metaphorically in the desert, counting the years until arrival in the promised land. In this time of transition let us reflect on where we are and how we can move toward creating a beloved community.



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