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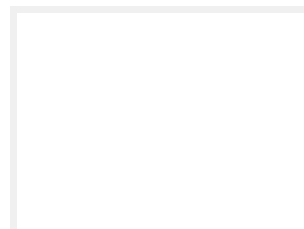
April 19, 2018 | 4 Iyar 5778

Blog Edition



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Return and Reintegration: A Rite and a Right



Parshat Metzora (Leviticus, 14:1-15:33)

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We start from the assumption that every leper will eventually return to the community.

The "day of cleansing" is a given. This is a radical idea. That the Torah instructs us to exile the leper during his ailment can seem harsh and maybe even cruel, but it reflects reality. There are always people on the margins of a society, who for one reason or another have been pushed out of the community. Students of Parshat Metzora have analogized the leper to people with illnesses and those who carry with them shame for any number of reasons. We hear about the plight of the Metzora, and we recognize it in our modern world. But exile is not the end of the story. Parshat Metzora is a detailed manual for the person's return. And the key to this process is: everyone gets to return.

How many of the social stigmas of today have a formula for bringing people back into society? How do we make that reintegration a given? Whose job is this reintegration and how would it work?

The Torah offers a multi-step process. When the leper's period of isolation and distance from the community has ended, a stigma remains that must be acknowledged and cleared away. The first stage (Vayikra 14:3-7) addresses this phenomenon through a ritual involving two birds. The first bird is sacrificed, and it's blood becomes an agent of ritual cleansing. The second bird is set free. As metaphors, these birds might emphasize a process of letting go needed to reenter community. Some things will need to die, others may need to be set free.

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