

D'Var Torah on Parshat Metzora
April 15, 2016
In Honor of the Marriage of Daniel Johnson and Edwin Greenlee
Rabbi Julie Greenberg

The Torah portion this week, Metzora, is about an affliction called tzara'at that is sometimes translated as leprosy. The strange thing about this disease in the Torah is that it can affect a person, a garment or a house. Imagine that, a house with leprosy.

In the Torah portion, the Cohen, the priest is called in to diagnose the condition and to treat it with elaborate rituals.

What can it possibly mean for a house to be sick? It's clearly not the kind of problem that a carpenter or plasterer or in these days a plumber or electrician could fix. If so, why would you need a priest to address the situation? Clearly, the affliction of tzara'at has to do with a spiritual disorder that requires healing of a spiritual nature.

So let's look at the meaning of a sick house on a metaphorical level. What is a house supposed to do? It is supposed to offer shelter, to protect its inhabitants, to ease family life and to be a centering sanctuary.

Let's think of a society as our house. We might say that when a society fails to provide these caretaking resources for all of its members, it is a sick house, a house afflicted by tzara'at.

For many years our society was a sick house when it came to sheltering, protecting, affirming and celebrating the love of two members of the same sex, men loving men, women loving women.

To start curing our house, it took Cohens, priests, in the form of wise and brave citizens; it took ritual in the form of court cases, demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience and creative new cultural messaging to start curing our sick house, our sick society.

Today, those of us who were active in making these changes to repair our common home, can proudly say, our house is healthier, more whole and actually holier

than it was when we excluded and stigmatized varieties of love. There is still a lot of work to be done but our house is sturdier as laws and community values change to shelter and support diverse identities, diverse orientations.

We still have a very sick house when it comes to other areas of human dignity. Marching this week with low-wage workers, I heard stories of people who work full time for \$7.25 an hour. There is no way they can feed their families and pay their bills at the end of a month. So they often end up with unstable housing, moving children from school to school, turning to illegal activity to make a living. The under-funded public education system prepares many citizens for nothing but these low wage jobs. Our house is sick. Tzara'at is a current crisis in the house of this society.

On a positive note of healing and hope, I will mention that POWER, our multifaith social justice organization and our allies have succeeded in doubling the wages of more than 200 workers at the airport and of thousands throughout the city who are sub-contracted workers now entering contracts that require a living wage. POWER also had a recent victory in negotiating with Comcast for its once in a generation contract renewal with the city. Comcast uses public land and air to sell its cable and other products. As a result of our work, Comcast will now be offering cyber connectivity to swaths of disadvantaged Philadelphians, creating internships and training programs for youth from impoverished zip codes and committing to hire here in our city.

As we heal injustices inflicted on marginalized groups, we release energy for the work of bringing respect and opportunity to all people. We are all the Cohens, the priests, joining to heal tzara'at whenever we see human dignity threatened.

This is the work we do to heal our house. And as we do so, we all live better lives.