

## Feeling Guilty during a Pandemic

### *Shabbat Tazria-Metzora 5780*

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The other day, I received an email about a congregant who is facing serious surgery. A relative requested that I visit this Temple member in the hospital. Normally, my response would be, “Of course, I’ll be there.” This time, though, I had to explain, “The hospital isn’t permitting any visitors, even family members or clergy, at this time of pandemic.” Yes, I had already been in frequent contact with the congregant who is facing surgery, but I make a priority of being physically present. Intellectually, I knew that the right decision would be not to go to the hospital. And still, I felt guilty.

I am hardly alone. Guilt feelings are magnified for family members who cannot visit their loved ones in hospitals or long-term care facilities. Others can’t attend funerals of their nearest relatives. Adult children who live at a distance from their aging parents feel guilty because they cannot honor their parents as they normally would in a crisis.

I’ve also heard expressions of guilt from healthy older people who are wisely letting others do tasks that they would normally do for themselves. Yes, they’re grateful that their children, friends, and neighbors are going to the grocery store and other errands for them. Yes, they know that these younger folks are happy to help. Yes, they know that they’re behaving wisely. Still, they experience guilt. For many people, accepting help from others evokes unwelcome feelings of being a burden, even when the helpers would prefer to assist than not.

I noticed the phenomenon when we publicized the opportunity to volunteer with the City of Little Rock and Clinton Foundation, which are providing over 7,000 meals a day to needy individuals and families. The City is seeking volunteers between ages 18 and 65. Several members in the over-65 category contacted me. Why couldn’t they volunteer? The Temple did not set the guidelines, of course. Still, I felt comfortable supporting them: Older people are more vulnerable to Covid-19. That made sense to our congregants, who didn’t argue. Still, I understood: People who are used to being volunteers, to making themselves available whenever the need is greatest in our community, felt guilty when they could not help in a crisis.

This week’s Torah portion acknowledges that we may feel guilty when we cannot perform a *mitzvah*, a religious obligation, whether fasting on Yom Kippur or reaching out to care for those most in need.

This portion is not where one would first normally turn for help. It's about skin afflictions. The disease is called *tzara'at*, often translated "leprosy." However, since the illness described isn't actually leprosy, and we don't know what it is, I'm just going to call it by its Hebrew name, *tzara'at*. A person thought to be suffering with *tzara'at* would be examined by the priest. If the priest did in fact diagnose that illness, the afflicted person would have to remain outside the camp and would be unable serve God as part of the Israelite community.<sup>i</sup>

When the person was healed, a detailed process would enable the previously-ill person to reenter the camp and serve God once again.<sup>ii</sup> As part of that procedure, the now-healthy individual would bring a guilt offering, an animal sacrifice.<sup>iii</sup>

Why, we may ask, would a person need to bring a guilt offering after having been ill? I have a theory, which I doubt I came up with on my own, though I can't find a source for it. The person with *tzara'at* has been outside the camp, and has therefore been forbidden to visit the sick in the community, to celebrate with couples getting married, or to comfort mourners. In short, they have been prohibited from carrying out *mitzvot* that they are ordinarily commanded to perform! They may well feel guilty, contemplating all the meals they did not deliver, all the hugs they did not offer, all the visits they did not make, while quarantined. The guilt offering, then, gives the newly-healed person a way to deal with all that guilt. The offering absolves them of their guilt for having failed to accomplish all the good deeds they were prohibited from doing while they were ill.

So what might be our guilt offering? What can we bring, we who feel guilty for not visiting the sick or comforting mourners in person? For letting others get our groceries or for venturing out to the grocery store when we know we shouldn't?

Rabbi Lisa Grushcow, writing in *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, suggests that compassion is in order. We may begin, she argues, by recognizing the kinship we all share, young and old, ill and healthy, vigorous and infirm. She cites the words of Susan Sontag: "Illness is the night side of the line, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place."<sup>iv</sup>

In our present moment, many of us who typically reside on one side of that line have been thrust onto the other, even though we may still feel well. We should all strive to empathize with people on the other side of that invisible line that has

become so visible now. Each person who feels guilty because of inability to visit or shop or tend to friends and relatives right now is a person who has performed all those good and noble deeds in the past. If one had never been such a compassionate person, one would not feel badly about being unable to help others now. And yet, none of us is powerless: Even now, those who cannot visit the sick can call people who are isolated at home, combatting loneliness. Even now, many who cannot buy their own groceries can donate to help families who are suddenly thrust into poverty, with bread-winners having lost their jobs to the crisis. The compassionate deeds we are able to perform may be our guilt offerings.

Another thought comes from my teacher Elana Stein Hain. An Orthodox Jew, Dr. Hain found herself pregnant on Yom Kippur. Her doctor advised her to drink throughout the day, prescribing exactly how much she had to drink and when. And the doctor was clear: Test results indicated that the fetus's life was at stake. At first, Dr. Hain felt guilty. Never as an adult had she ever taken anything by mouth on that fast day. Eventually, though, she came to see that drinking water on Yom Kippur was more of a religious obligation, a greater *mitzvah*, than fasting. By drinking, she was giving life to future generations, countless descendants, who would fast on innumerable Yom Kippur days to follow, as would she.<sup>v</sup>

We will—God willing, sooner than later—get back to visiting the sick, comforting the mourners, and taking care of ourselves, no matter our age, as long as we are healthy. Until then, let us find comfort in the compassion we are able to bestow. Let us assuage our guilt by reaching out to those whose needs are different from our own. And let us take comfort: By staying safe, we are keeping ourselves and others alive to perform countless *mitzvot* in the years to come.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Leviticus 13:1-46.

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 14.

<sup>iii</sup> Leviticus 14:10, 21-22.

<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Lisa J. Grushcow, DPhil, "*Rachamim—Mercy: Seeing the Whole Person*," *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Barry H. Block, Editor, New York: CCAR Press, p. 169.

<sup>v</sup> Elana Stein Hain, Ph.D., "*Pikuach Nefesh: The Primacy of Saving a Life*," Hartman@Home: Talmud from the Balcony, Shalom Hartman Institute webinar, April 22, 2020.