

Shabbat shalom!

A couple of months ago, I visited the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan, a collaboration of several different archives and museums that pooled their resources together into one facility, open to the public. Upon walking in, visitors are greeted by a somewhat unusual sight. Blown up to large proportions and very dramatically lit, is an anatomical drawing of a human man and an intricate architectural drawing of a house to his side. Hebrew letters affix each of his detailed organs and these corresponding letters are also on the house. The stomach is the house's furnace for example. His eyes are windows. His kidneys are two pointy chimneys, pumping the bad stuff out. Even his bladder makes an appearance, as a basin way down in the house's cellar. This illustration is from a kabbalist from the early 1700s, who wanted to express the perfection of the body and how similar it is to a sturdy, beautiful house. It seemed like a perfect image for the center, an organization that is brilliant because of how its disparate pieces cooperate.

This is so similar to the Asher Yatzar, the Shacharit prayer that exalts and gives thanks to the body. Part of this prayer reads "Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melekh ha-olam, Who formed man with wisdom and created many openings and cavities within him. It is obvious and known before Your throne of glory that if any one of them were closed or if one of any one of them were opened, it would be impossible to exist for even an hour, *afilu sha'a echat*." The Asher Yatzar emphasizes the precariousness of the body, the complex equilibrium required to function, very fitting for a prayer said upon waking, when many of us feel like we are about to fall apart. The Hebrew text refers to the "openings and cavities" as "*nekavim, nekavim, chalulim, chalulim*." Why this repetition? Perhaps it's to emphasize the balance of the body, the two repetitions echoing each other in harmony. Or maybe it speaks to the continuity of the body, the rhythmic thrum of "*nekavim, nekavim, chalulim, chalulim*" carrying the murmur of the blood in

our veins. The text mirrors our body, like that sturdy house reflected in the neatly labeled sketches of organs.

What does this have to do with the parsha this week, Metzora? Well, Metzora is about the purification rituals after an affliction of leprosy, as well as bodily emissions, two very body-bound subjects. If the archetype of the healthy body is that beautiful house, peaceful and sturdy, then what can the body with leprosy be compared to? Metzora gives us an answer when Hashem says “When you enter the land of Canaan that I give you as a possession, and I inflict an eruptive plague upon a house in the land you possess...the plague in the walls of the house is found to consist of greenish or reddish streaks that appear to go deep into the wall.” The Talmud is very clear, however, that Hashem does not randomly go around inflicting leprosy mold on houses left and right.

In fact the Talmud, in its usual diligence, states seven reasons why the *tzaraat* plague is incurred: “Slander, bloodshed, a false oath, incest, arrogance, robbery and envy.” So we have a bit of a Dorian Gray situation here. Bad deeds can incur leprosy in either our body or our home, another conflation, one to the other.

Midrash Rabbah has an excellent story about this. One day, a man who is going through a rough patch financially goes to his friend and asks for a small loan, a *kav* of wheat, a *kav* being a unit of measurement only a little more than a pint. His friend, in a huff, says “I don’t have anything. Leave me alone!” What does Hashem do about this? He inflicts leprosy upon the man’s house. Those green and red streaks of mold deface the greedy man’s house, and he and his wife must rush all of their belongings, one by one, out into the street. This, of course, causes a great commotion. The whole town comes running. But one guy, the one who desperately needed just a *kav* of wheat, notices something. “Hey! Wait a minute! You just told me that you don’t have any wheat, but here’s a whole bundle.” A woman in the crowd pipes up. “Just last week, you told me you had no barley at all.

But here's a whole bag full of it." The leprosy drove the truth out into the open. And so it continues with dates, figs, and more. As the Midrash writes, "Cursed be the house with such cursed inhabitants!"

Justice and truth compel the body to righteousness, and they are both older and more powerful than the body itself, because the body derives power from them. As a passage from *Tehilim* says, "My frame was not concealed from You when I was shaped in a hidden place, knit together in the recesses of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed limbs; they were all recorded in Your book; in due time they were formed, to the very last one of them." Significant here is the word "frame" which recalls construction, as well as the precision that is present in the creation of the human, to the very last limb. The body, equal in assembly to a house, must live justly to honor the builder, and not destroy or corrupt the body, which is a cleverly constructed and designed interdependence of many parts. It's like when people say "Your body is a temple," except MUCH less annoying than that.

This parsha is generally read together with Tazria, but I'm glad this year we get to give Metzora some extra attention. Its lengthy descriptions of bodily emissions certainly don't make it popular for Hebrew school skits and it probably isn't on many lists of favorite parashot. But I think Metzora captures something really profound about Jewishness. Rather than being stubbornly bound to useless tradition and custom, as anti semites believe, Jews exalt this minutiae and the small, codependent pieces that form a body of Torah, a body of law, and an actual human body. Rather than leaving it all behind for the lofty world of the mind, we derive power and peace from the natural majesty of our bodies. We know that a house reflects the personality of its occupants. So we must treat our bodies the same, because they are also miraculously complicated and endowed from a master craftsman.

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