

Much of this double parashah sounds like an ancient textbook for medical diagnosis in which the operating words are *wash* and *quarantine*. Sound familiar? Over the past several weeks we have come to know these words well. The procedure for dealing with COVID-19 is strikingly similar to what we read in our Torah portion, but the illnesses discussed there are not respiratory in nature. They affect skin, hair, bodily fluids, and organs, as well as garments, houses, and furnishings. They too, require separation and purification, but recovery from them is marked by rituals involving sin-offerings, because our ancestors viewed illness as the result of sin – an internal misalignment that results in physical malady. Fortunately, we have learned that sin is not the sole cause of illness, but today's array of so-called "civilization diseases" caused by poor lifestyle choices does open a window into their logic.

Because *Tzara'at* is seen as HaShem's punishment for sin, the priest is in charge of diagnosis, isolation, and reintegration. It is interesting that our sages chose to embellish the grammatical construction of the word *metzora* (someone who has *tzara'at*) by reading it as an acronym for *motzi shem ra* – one who brings forth an evil name – in other words, one who engages in *lashon hara* – gossip or slander, a misdeed Judaism takes very seriously. We know the story of Miriam in Parashah B'ha'a lot'cha, who speaks ill of Moses's wife, the "Cushite woman." On the spot, she is stricken with a severe form of leprosy (one of the diseases associated with *tzara'at*), and Moses pleads with HaShem to heal her. An operatic illustration of the power of *lashon hara* is Basilio's aria *La calunnia* in "The Barber of Seville," about how he plans to discredit Almaviva through vicious gossip. Along with murder and treason, *lashon hara* is one of the three sins that cannot be rectified by repentance. The Talmud equates slander with bloodshed, which is why *tzara'at* is actually only half of the punishment. The other half is separation from the group – an ancient form of "time out" – something every parent has used with a misbehaving child. Sitting alone with one's thoughts is a powerful therapeutic tool.

If we took this literally, we would likely all have some form of skin affliction. But let's look deeper: As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads, so does the flow of misinformation and conspiracy theories traveling through the media sowing fear, panic, and outrage, sometimes with devastating results. At first it affected people who looked Asian, who were sometimes violently attacked for spreading the virus. But it has gone on to spawn some truly outrageous behavior that touches huge numbers of innocent people. If only these ideas could be quarantined, but unfortunately physical separation cannot contain them. It is up to us to use all the discernment we have to determine what we can believe and how we should act during this unprecedented time. We're in uncharted waters, and we need levelheaded guidance to navigate them.

Those who count the Omer using the Kabbalistic sephirot know that we have just finished the week of *Gevurah*, an attribute which not only stands for strength and judgement, but also for discernment. Right now, it takes all the discernment we have to help us determine how best to follow the guidelines and rules we are given. Self-isolation when we have COVID-19 or have been exposed to it, practicing social distancing (I would rather call it physical distancing, since we have a wide variety of ways to communicate with each other.), wearing a mask in public – all the safety measures our governments establish to slow the outbreak: Theories abound as to their effectiveness and it's up to us to sort them out and try to do the right thing. No easy task right now. We are moving into the week of *Tiferet*, the attribute of beauty and balance. May we use our gleanings from this week's Torah portion – separating truth from falsehood, fact from fiction, so we may be able to keep our balance during this week and into the future.

Shabbat shalom!