



Mapping the sacred and profane

The Torah offers what comfort it can in a world of chaotic diseases

“LET’S PLAY tag, Abba. You’ll be It.”
“OK, get ready to run. Where’s Home?”
“Silly Abba. I don’t have to run. It’s all home.”

We look for strategies to keep ourselves safe: medical strategies, financial strategies, legal and military and diplomatic strategies, all to keep away “The terror by night, or the arrow that flies by day... the pestilence that stalks in darkness [and] the plague that destroys at midday” (Psalms 91).

We use religion and superstition and magic as well. For thousands of years amulets and prayers and rituals of various kinds have been used by believers and sometimes hopeful non-believers. We will do what we can to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe.

But if we can’t ward off the danger – and we often cannot – we will do the next best thing, which is to explain it. For many this can be an even more urgent task, because what is often worse than the idea that the world is dangerous is that it is chaotic. If things fall apart because of chance, the everyday randomness of life – this can be almost intolerable.

Much better to believe that there is a plan of some kind, hence the popularity of conspiracy theories. Alternatively, there is the idea that there is a moral order to the world, and if bad things happen it is because at some level you or your family or community deserves it.

We can see that dynamic at work in the rabbinic response to *tzara’at*, the disease (generally mistranslated as leprosy, but more likely a generic term for a number of skin ailments including perhaps vitiligo, psoriasis and fungal infections) discussed in the Torah portions Tazria-Metzora.

It is the only disease dealt with at any length in the Torah, and it is almost unequivocally understood as a punishment for sin, and especially the sin of *lashon hara*, evil speech.

That idea is based on the story in Numbers 12, where Miriam is afflicted after she and Aaron speak against Moses. Yet the Bible never explicitly ascribes a cause to *tzara’at*, and it seems to me that the ancient rabbis’ understanding is less a response to the demands of the text than to a vision of a world made intelligible, at least in part, by that “moral map.”

Yet our own experience tells us that bad things do, indeed, happen to good people, and the Bible seems to know that as well. And so it offers a different kind of order to the material world, one based not on good and bad, but on an idea of holiness – holiness as a physical

property. And while there is an occasional overlap between the realm of the physically holy and that of the morally good, the two are not the same.

For example the tradition holds that one of the greatest acts of kindness that one can do is to help bury a corpse, especially an abandoned one, yet participating in that noble deed renders one ritually “impure” and unfit to enter into the areas mapped as holy.

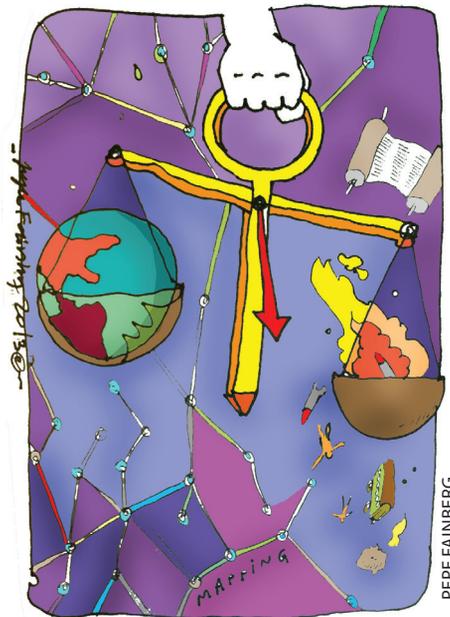
Some things and places partake of this holiness to various extents, some do not, and each place and thing has its role to play. That is as it has to be, because a map only makes sense when there are distinctions, just as you can’t play tag when everywhere is Home. The “not-Home” isn’t bad; in fact you need it to make the whole system work.

In the Torah, that mapping extends to people as well. Priests are holy, and again, unlike with prophets or sages or saints, their status is a purely material property, a product of birth and physical well-being, independent of learning or piety or any of the moral virtues. The Bible has no real interest in the inner life of the priest, for his whole existence as priest is public. There is a logic to that – to navigate the world of the physically holy you would need someone who was physically holy as well.

It is in this context that we can begin to understand the status of the *metzora*, the afflicted one, as a sort of counter-priest. Like the priesthood, *tzara’at* is an entirely public category. Is it painful? Does it itch? Does it cause weariness, confusion, poor digestion, insomnia? We never know. All we are told about it is how it looks. In fact, it looks like death, in stark contrast to the physical perfection of the priest. And what does the afflicted do? While the priest’s role is to take center stage, the *metzora* moves away from the center, tracing a journey to the outside of the camp, and in doing so he acts out the map of the sacred and profane.

Of course, he does not act it out alone; he does it in concert with the priest. Each in his distinctive garb, using voice or bell to call attention to their movements, they work together in the mapping of the territory, the defining of the world in terms of the sacred. And in this partnership the Torah offers what comfort it can in a world of chaotic diseases – not a promise of safety, nor a promise of cure. But a place in the world, and a role to play in making it a home. ■

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