

The Meaning of L'Chaim

Parashat Tazria, Leviticus, Chapters 12-13 | March 31, 2022

Some twenty years ago, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah, said something that was simultaneously egregiously evil and enormously insightful. These are his words:

We have discovered how to hit the Jews where they are the most vulnerable. The Jews love life, so that is what we shall take away from them. We are going to win, because we love death, and they love life.

This statement is obviously evil. It is also insightful, because Jews do indeed love life. This love of life is captured in the most famous of Jewish toasts. As Leon Kass once put it:

You don't have to be Jewish to drink *L'Chaim*, to lift a glass "To Life." Everyone in his right mind believes that life is good and that death is bad. But Jews have always had an unusually keen appreciation of life, and not only because it has been stolen from them so often and so cruelly. The celebration of life—of this life, not the next one—has from the beginning been central to Jewish ethical and religious sensibilities. In the Torah, "Be fruitful and multiply" is God's first blessing and first command. Judaism from its inception rejected child-sacrifice and regarded long life as a fitting divine reward for righteous living. At the same time, Judaism embraces medicine and the human activity of healing the sick; from the Torah the rabbis deduced not only permission for doctors to heal, but also the positive obligation to do so. Indeed, so strong is this reverence for life that the duty of *pikuah nefesh* requires

that Jews violate the holy Shabbat in order to save a life. Not by accident do we Jews raise our glasses "*L'Chaim*."

L'Chaim, the Jewish love of life, defines Jewish history and lies at the heart of some of the most seemingly mysterious laws in Leviticus.

We are introduced in Leviticus to the possibility of a person becoming impure, in Hebrew, "*tameh*." In this state, one is forbidden from entering sacred spheres within the Temple or Tabernacle.

At the heart of these rules is the biblical belief that though the union of body and soul, earthly existence can be sanctified. Thus, any symbolic reminder of loss of life is kept far away from the sanctuary.

It is important to stress that becoming impure is not forbidden and indeed is often obligatory. A man who has engaged in marital relations, or a woman who has given birth, have both participated in activities central to the family and at the heart of Judaism. But, because each has expended the life-giving power within them, they must undergo certain purification rituals before they enter certain sacred parts of the Temple Mount. One who has buried his or her beloved, and come in contact with a dead body, has performed an act of love and loyalty that is celebrated and obligated. But the mourner must then be purified from the association with death before going to the Temple.

The same rationale can be given for the form of impurity that occupies Leviticus 13 and 14. Called "*tzara'at*," it is usually translated as "leprosy," but Jacob Milgrom has shown that this rendering is inaccurate, and that it is something, for Leviticus, that can afflict and render impure not only people, but also garments and houses. What precisely *tzara'at* is, and whether this is a regular biological affliction, as Milgrom

suggests, or something supernatural, is likely beyond the realm of certainty. What is clear is that it too is a reminder of death; its appearance somehow portrays the pallor of death and the disintegration involved in death. It is therefore treated as a severe source of impurity requiring separation from others and, when it afflicts homes or clothing, the destruction of these houses and objects. As Milgrom further points out, when in the Book of Numbers Miriam is punished with *tzara'at* for criticizing her brother Moses, Moses prays then for his sister, and describes her as having a corpse-like appearance:

Let her not be as one dead, of whom the flesh is half consumed... (Numbers 12:12)

Thus here too, the impurity of *tzara'at* is linked to the heart of the Jewish approach to holiness, its linking of the love of life to sanctity. Judaism thereby distinguishes itself from certain other philosophical and religious worldviews. The Jewish perspective is captured simply and sublimely in a short story by the great Yiddish writer I.L. Peretz. Peretz tells of a Hasidic leader, or rebbe, who during the penitential season did not show up for prayers. The rebbe's followers speculated that their leader had ascended to Heaven to plead for mercy on behalf of his flock. There lived in that town, writes Peretz, a lone Litvak, a Jew of Lithuanian origin—known to be of a less mystical bent than their Hasidic brothers—devoted first and foremost to the minutiae of Jewish law. The Litvak scoffed at the community's suggestion that the rebbe had ascended up high, and cites the Talmud, which states that even Moses himself, when he ascended Sinai to receive the Torah, was barred from actually entering Heaven. And so the Litvak stalked the rebbe to figure out where he was going and followed him to the outskirts of town, where he came upon a shack, in which lived an old and poor woman, blind and feeble. The rebbe fed the woman, and took care of her. From that point on, writes Peretz, the once cynical Litvak became a follower of the rebbe and whenever the Hasidic *shtetl*-dwellers would suggest that their rebbe could be found in Heaven, the Litvak would invariably respond, "if not higher."

Now note well Peretz's literary maneuver: Peretz does not make the Litvak into a standard Hasidic follower. The Hasidim in the story still think that their rebbe was

a truly righteous man who would seek to help his flock by transcending the world. That the rebbe, if he were truly holy, would prefer Heaven to Earth. But the Litvak, having followed the rebbe, having seen what the rebbe had done with his body helping to feed a poor woman, realized that that hovel of a hut had become higher than Heaven itself. He realized that no act exists in a vacuum, but rather has the power to sanctify, to endow physical Earth with the glory of God through the performance of His will.

This is why Judaism has divinely dictated laws that relate to every aspect of human existence—how we treat the elderly, but also what foods we eat, how and whom we marry, how we conduct business righteously, how we farm, how we build a home—because we thereby elevate and sanctify every part of the world. Some philosophies and versions of religion dismiss this world, seeing it, as Socrates describes in his famous cave analogy, as one of mere shadows. But for Jews the opposite is true. We believe in Heaven; but what we do here on Earth turns this world into a sphere of holiness. What we do here may even be in a certain sense higher than what we do in Heaven itself. Physical reality is not transcended or avoided, but sanctified.

And in an interesting way, rightly understood, the ritual of purification for a person afflicted with *tzara'at*, known in Leviticus as a "*metzora*," highlights the fact that for Judaism, this world is not to be disdained, but rather claimed as a sphere in which holiness can be made manifest. Let us focus for a moment on this ceremony. Two birds are taken; one is slaughtered, and its blood is applied to the *metzora* utilizing the other bird:

Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two living clean birds, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.

And the priest shall command to kill one of the birds in an earthen veil over running water.

As for the living bird, he shall take it, and the cedar wood, and the scarlet, and the hyssop, and shall dip them and the living bird in the

blood of the bird that was killed over the running water.

And he shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the tzara'at seven times, and shall pronounce him pure, and shall let go the living bird into the open field. (Leviticus 14:4-7)

What is going on here? The clue, as scholars note, is the hyssop. Recall that it was hyssop utilized in adorning domiciles in Egypt with the blood of the paschal lamb. This was an act of purification from paganism—the hyssop and the blood absorbed the impurities in the home so that the Divine could dwell amongst the Israelites and shield them, protecting them from the plague. Thus, what is occurring here is that the blood, symbol of life, is utilized to draw the impurity from the person afflicted with *tzara'at*. That impurity is then transferred to the live bird, who is let go and who flies away with it forever.

Let us ponder the poetic symbolism of this text. Whereas holiness is often thought of as achieved by escaping this world for heaven, here the bird flies off seemingly into higher realms bearing the impurity, while the newly purified man, recovered from *tzara'at*, returns to the Temple, to the life of Torah, to the life of sanctity here on Earth. As Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik wrote in his masterpiece *Halakbic Man*, for Judaism, we seek not to escape the world, but to sanctify the world. The ideal of Jewish law, “is the redemption of the world not via a higher world, but via the world itself,” or as he added, “a lowly world is elevated through the Halakhah to the level of a divine world.”

In a fascinating article, the Catholic theologian R.R. Reno reflected on how the experience of reading Rabbi Soloveitchik’s writings can teach Christians to avoid the temptation of Gnosticism—of rejecting this world as evil—and how the Jewish approach Rabbi Soloveitchik outlines can allow readers to understand how physical existence can be sanctified. Reno writes that:

Soloveitchik has helped me see the larger significance of the Jewish pronomian

metaphysical dream, one that sees the Torah as a gift and not a burden. The *halakha*—the all-encompassing array of divine imperatives—are as countless arrows of love shot downward and into human life. The more expansive and detailed the law, the more deeply and completely halakhic man’s life is penetrated by the divine...

This is a beautiful description of Jewish law as arrows shot *downward*. Jewish law seeks not to escape this world, but to bring the holiness of Heaven down here into earthly existence.

The laws of ritual purity capture the union of sanctity and the Jewish love of life, and it is this latter love that has sustained us through the centuries against the forces of death that sought to destroy us. In 2017, a man by the name of Yisrael Kristal passed away in Israel. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, he was the oldest man on earth. His life, more than many others, embodied the Jewish love of life, not because of his longevity, but because of how he reacted to all the death that he had experienced.

I cite the summary of Kristal’s remarkable story given to us by Liel Leibovitz in *Tablet*:

Moving to Lodz when he was 17, Kristal found work in a candy factory, and soon proved himself as an expert candy-maker. He married Chaja Feige Frucht in 1928, and had two daughters. He continued to manufacture candy, sometimes, secretly, even after the Nazis took over and forced all of Lodz’s Jews into the ghetto. Both of his children perished there. In 1944, when the ghetto was liquidated, Kristal and his wife were both deported to Auschwitz. Chaja Feige died shortly thereafter, but Yisrael survived, working as a forced laborer. When the Red Army liberated him, he thanked the Soviet soldiers by making them candy. He returned to Lodz, rebuilt his old candy shop, and met another woman, Batsheva,

whom he married in 1947. The couple had a son, Chaim, and a daughter, Shula.

In 1950, Kristal and his family emigrated to Israel. They settled in Haifa, and Kristal found work at the Palata candy factory. A proud artisan, he soon went into business for himself, making his own sweets at his home kitchen and selling them at a local kiosk. Some of his innovations were firsts for the Jewish state: jam made from carob, chocolate-covered orange peels, and, most famous of all, tiny bottles of liquor, made of chocolate and wrapped in tinfoil. He continued to work as a candy-maker until his retirement, and was a religiously observant grandfather of nine.

Last year, he made headlines when he realized an old dream and celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, 100 years later. Huddling under his *tallis* with his family, Kristal quipped about being the world's oldest tefillin-laying person. Then, he got serious. "Here's one person," he said, "and look how many people he brought to life. As we're all standing here crowded under my *tallis*, I'm thinking, 'six million people. Imagine the world they could've built'"

Here we have a man who loses his entire family, and then he founds a family, a man who experiences the most profound bitterness of life, and he lends sweetness to life. No one would have been shocked had Kristal lost his faith, but instead the oldest bar mitzvah boy in the world perpetuated the faith.

The leader of Hezbollah was partially right: Jews do love life, and that is what so many of our enemies have attempted to take from us. But he was also wrong, because Nasrallah and his fellow forces of death will *not* win, for they can never take our love of life away from us. The Jewish love of life is founded on a desire to sanctify this world, to turn it into a realm that has the holiness of Heaven and more. Thus the triumph of eternity can

be contained in the seemingly simple word "*L'chaim*," a toast to life that is not self-serving, but sanctifying. Leon Kass concludes his own understanding of "*L'chaim*" by noting that what we celebrate in that word is not our desire for physical immortality, but rather our dedication to the holy, and his description of the toast captures the life of Yisrael Kristal as well. He writes:

Let us cleave to our ancient wisdom and lift our voices and properly toast *L'Chaim*, to life beyond our own, to the life of our grandchildren and their grandchildren. May they, God willing, know health and long life, but especially so that they may also know the pursuit of truth and righteousness and holiness. And may they hand down and perpetuate this pursuit of what is humanly finest to succeeding generations for all time to come.

Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. How might Rabbi Soloveichik's interpretation of *tzara'at* allow us to interpret other stories about *tzara'at* in the Hebrew Bible?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik cites R.R. Reno as drawing a connection between the details of Jewish law and Divine love. What can this association teach us about the relationship between love and obligation in interpersonal relationships?