

Isolation

The diseases described in the Torah this week as Leprosy are not actually the disease we know of by that name. Rather it is a general way of describing any serious or potentially infectious disease or fungus.

The Torah involves the priests in assessing the problem, prescribing isolation if necessary and then participating in the healing process. This interconnection between religion and healing is a very ancient one that actually goes back long before the Bible. There were no health systems, doctors, surgeons or health professionals. It was left up to medicine men and women, healers and witch doctors. By handing the whole process over to the priesthood, Judaism removed the hocus pocus and the superstition and instead appointed the priests to offer practical support and spiritual advice.

It was a brilliant concept. It not only removed magic from the equation and emphasized the need for humans to take responsibility for their own ills, but it showed that our mental states can have a profound impact on our bodies and our illnesses. Very often a positive attitude works better than drugs or helps the drugs be more effective.

The priest brought the religious dimension into play, that we are part of a wider Divine Universe in which disease and suffering exist but can be overcome in different ways that should include the spiritual. This was why so many rabbis in pre-Modern times were doctors too.

In addition, diagnosis is crucial. And if you look carefully at the Torah you will see how in each situation, the priest first examined and diagnosed. Then he had to make a judgment as to decide whether he was dealing with the risk of contamination and a potential plague. Sometimes he will require isolation until the nature of disease becomes clearer or alternatively just goes away naturally. Above all it is his responsibility to provide support, emotional and spiritual, as well as medical. The term plague recurs throughout these chapters. So that it is clear they had plague prevention very much in their minds.

The idea of Isolation medically is relatively recent. That is why in Medieval times plagues often had catastrophic impacts. The Torah seems to have known how important isolation, quarantine was. But one needed to avoid panic. Which is also why the priest took his time and went through rituals that bought time and yet helped in the process of overcoming plagues. Smells, perfumes were important too and they find a place in the rituals the Torah prescribes.

And finally, the ceremonies of recovery were a combination of celebrating one's cure and enabling one to get back into normal community life and take up again where one left off. The priest guaranteed a seamless transition. Both out of society to prevent infection, and back again to ensure rehabilitation. He was indeed a combination of doctor, psychiatrist and rabbi. Supported by the community to take care of its physical and spiritual needs.