

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps
Torah Portion – Tazria/Metzora

Wealth and Access to God

ובמלאת | ימי טהרה לבן או לבת תביא כבש בן־שנתו לעלה וב־יונה אֶחָד לְחַטָּאת אֶל־פֶּתַח אֹהֶל־מוֹעֵד אֶל־הַכֹּהֵן: וְהִקְרִיבֹהּ לְפָנַי יְהוָה וְכִפֶּר עָלֶיהָ וְטָהַרָה מִמִּקְרַח דַּמְיָהּ זֹאת תוֹרַת הַיִּלְדוּת לְזָכָר אוֹ לְנִקְבָּה: ח וְאִם־לֹא תִמְצָא יָדָהּ דֵּי שֶׁהָ וְלִקְחָהּ שְׁתֵּי־תוֹרִים אוֹ שְׁנֵי בְנֵי יוֹנָה אֶחָד לְעֹלָה וְאֶחָד לְחַטָּאת וְכִפֶּר עָלֶיהָ הַכֹּהֵן וְטָהַרָה:

On the completion of her period of purification, for having given birth to either a son or daughter, she shall bring to the priest, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the Lord and make expiation on her behalf...If, however, her means do not suffice for a sheep, she shall take two turtle doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering and the priest shall make expiation on her behalf. [Leviticus 12:6-7]

This shall be the ritual for the leper at the time that he is to be cleansed...On the eighth day, he shall take two male lambs without blemish, one year-old ewe lamb without blemish, three tenths of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in and a log of oil...If however, he is poor and his means are insufficient, he shall take one lamb for a guilt offering, to be elevated in expiation for him, one-tenth of a measure of choice flour with oil mixed in for a meal offering; and two turtledoves or two pigeons, depending on his means, the one to be a sin offering and the other the burnt offering. [Leviticus 14:2, 14:10, 14:21-22]

AVODAH COMMENTARY: These two passages describe the means by which a new mother and a leper, respectively, effect their re-entry into the community of Israel after their period of impurity has passed. In both cases, the priest plays a central role, as both a religious leader and as a healer, by offering sacrifices on behalf of the new mother or leper. While the sacrifices differ for the new mother and the leper, both are given the opportunity to offer sacrifices within their economic means. Instead of offering the prescribed sacrifice, one lamb for the new mother, and three lambs for the leper, the Torah states explicitly that pigeons or turtledoves – less expensive animals – might serve as substitutes for the costly lambs.

What the Torah seems to be suggesting is that access to both religious services as well as physical healing should be within the means of any Israelite. Indeed, the text teaches in both the case of the new mother and the leper that their sacrifices – whether the lambs or the pigeons or turtledoves – serve as expiation. As biblical scholar Baruch Levine notes in his commentary on Leviticus, “The provision for a reduction in the cost of the sacrifice is standard for a number of required purifications and religious obligations. Insistence on the full sacrifice would have deprived poor Israelites of expiation when impurity was incurred through no fault of their own.”

QUESTION: While contemporary Jews may be troubled by some aspects of the sacrificial system, we can nonetheless glean a profound social commentary within the above selections from *Parshat Tazria*: that the opportunity to engage our spiritual selves – to make our own offerings to God – should be accessible to all Jews. *Parshat Tazria* does not place the responsibility on the new mother or leper to ask about less costly options for their respective sacrifices – these options are embedded in the system. How do our contemporary Jewish institutions stand up to this test?