

## The Torah of In and Out: Lessons from Leviticus

You don't need me to read you the *New York Times*. But this week, the *Times* opinion columnist Ezra Klein prompted a controversial debate in the Jewish community that also happens to be relevant to the *parashah*. So how can a rabbi resist?

On Sunday, Klein published an article<sup>1</sup> suggesting liberal Americans should pay more attention to the popular far-left online influencer and self-styled provocateur Hasan Piker. Piker champions the working class and promotes socialism; and he also admires Hezbollah, said America "deserved" 9/11, and feels that a "liberal Zionist" is akin to a "liberal Nazi." Klein candidly admits all this; and he also asserts that while Piker is an anti-Zionist, he is not, as he has been accused, a "Jew hater." Importantly to Klein, Piker has millions of followers, many of whom agree with him on many of the issues. Ultimately, Ezra Klein thinks that American liberals need to engage with Hasan Piker and people like him even though they have extreme views. This is because of the fundamental principal that "Conversation is not a reward to be bestowed on those with whom we agree; it's a necessary habit in a democracy."<sup>2</sup>

Yehudah Kurtzer is the president of the Shalom Hartman Institute, which is "a leading research and educational center serving Israel and world Jewry."<sup>3</sup> A prolific writer himself, Kurtzer penned this week an essay of dissent<sup>4</sup> that sought to uphold many of Ezra Klein's values without following them to the same conclusion.

First, Kurtzer identifies Ezra Klein's move as classically liberal. Good liberals want to keep conversations open and broad, which requires engaging even with people who are not themselves liberal. As a liberal himself, Kurtzer shares that conviction and has dedicated much of his scholarship and leadership to promoting pluralism within and beyond the Jewish community. At the same time, Kurtzer also points out that *another* hallmark of liberalism is *defending liberalism*. Speaking as a liberal, Kurtzer writes, "We [also] have to *advocate* for our liberal commitments themselves, making the case for them, arguing against their opponents."<sup>5</sup> He calls this a "delicate balance,"<sup>6</sup> in which liberals preserve the right for illiberal people to share their views while also at times forcefully disputing those views.

I don't know enough about Hasan Piker to know whether him and his views should be included by liberals. But whether it's Piker or some other person with

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<sup>1</sup> "This is Why There's No Liberal Joe Rogan" (April 12, 2026)  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/12/opinion/hasan-piker-democrats.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hartman.org.il/about-the-hartman-institute/>

<sup>4</sup> "Ezra Klein and the Perils of Misplaced Pluralism: Why are liberals fawning over illiberalism?" (April 14, 2026),  
<https://yehudakurtzer.substack.com/p/ezra-klein-and-the-perils-of-misplaced>.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

extreme opinions, I think Yehuda Kurtzer has a point: not everyone deserves a seat at every table. How do we respond to people who venerate violence or advocate authoritarianism while staying true to a free and open society?

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This week's Torah portion offers a helpful framework. We read about the *metzora*, the person who suffers from the skin disease called *tzaraat*. The King James Bible translates *tzaraat* as "leprosy," though that diagnosis isn't quite right. The signs of *tzaraat* include white hairs on scaly patches, a rash that spreads for more than a week, or pervasive white discoloration of the skin. The source of the disease isn't revealed; but later in our story, *tzaraat* will be God's punishment against Miriam when she slanders her brother, Moses. Drawing from this and some other textual clues,<sup>7</sup> the Rabbis taught that the term *metzora* – which means "afflicted with *tzaraat*" – is also an acronym for *motzi shem ra*, "one who brings about a bad name."<sup>8</sup> This refers specifically to slander, but Jewish ethics expand the category to gossip and other sins of speech referred to as *lashon hara*, or "an evil tongue." Accordingly, we can interpret the Torah's teachings about *tzaraat* as relevant for how we should treat those who speak inappropriately in our community today.

So, in the Torah what happens to the *metzora*? First, "Their clothes shall be rent, their head shall be left bare, and they shall cover over the upper lip, calling out 'Unclean! Unclean!'" (Lev. 13:45). This is a public announcement that the person is a danger to society, perhaps because their disease is contagious or they bear the mark of unacceptable behavior. And then, "They shall dwell apart; their dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Lev. 13:46). In other words, society simply cannot contain them.

Often, modern readers experience this isolation as brutal and unfair. We are inclined to see the *metzora* as fundamentally innocent and their excommunication as a sign of superstitious intolerance. But the Rabbis remind us that sometimes, we do have good reason to remove someone from society. The clearest analogue in today's world is prison, a place set aside specially for those whom society can no longer tolerate. We might also think about today's residences for people with intense physical or psychological concerns; these homes seek to provide shelter for those whose needs are too difficult for families and communities to meet. One way or another, we can imagine that there are, indeed, times when it is appropriate or even necessary for someone to dwell "outside the camp."

But the Torah also contains a crucial caveat to this practice of isolation. While the priest is examining a person who *might* have *tzaraat*, he checks in on them every seven days (see Lev. 13:2ff). And once the priest determines a patient has *tzaraat*, they still remain close. The priest continues to examine them – the Torah uses the intimate

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<sup>7</sup> *Tzaraat* is classified as a *nega* (נִגַּע), "affection," from the root נָגַע, "to touch." In Lev. 14:34, God says וְנִתְחַי נִגַּע צָרַעַת, "[when] I give an affection of *tzaraat*." These clues suggest that *tzaraat* is imposed upon people or objects by God.

<sup>8</sup> See Vayikra Rabbah 16:1 and BT Arachin 15b.

language וַיִּרְאֵהוּ הַכֹּהֵן, “And the priest shall see them” (Lev. 13:17) – until they need to be removed from the camp. And then, the text assumes that contact remains, for it tells us that when the person shows signs of recovery, the priest is informed and immediately comes outside the camp to visit the isolated person (Lev. 14:2-3). He brings with him a kind of portable sacrifice, the only one of its kind; and he conducts a purification ritual very similar to the Yom Kippur offerings we’ll read about next week. The priest accompanies the patient through every step of their reintegration into the camp, conducting rituals on the first day, the seventh day, and the eighth. The proximity of patient and priest is emphasized throughout this teaching, and the goal is clear: Everyone wants the *metzora* back into the camp. And it is the priest, society’s highest religious leader, who takes on this important communal work.

So despite what you’ve heard about lepers being shunned by the community, this part of the Torah is all about the yearning for connection. Looking through the Rabbis eyes, we see a person who has brought isolation onto themselves through extreme speech or otherwise intolerable behavior; and even though it’s urgent to remove them from the community, we do this reluctantly, and we hope it is only temporary. Personal connection and the goal of reunification are essential this Jewish ethic of communal safety.

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This Torah of the *metzora* can help us think through our approach to those whose speech seems intolerable. First, they don’t have to remain in the camp. Indeed, it can be safer for everyone if they are kept firmly outside. But second, they also can’t remain at a total remove. Communication and connection are essential because we *want* to be in relationship, and we *want* the person to be restored to community. This means periodic engagement and an eager willingness to welcome back.

So in a case like Hasan Piker or others like him, we might rightly stand by our liberal commitments by excluding such a person from our community. And at the same time, we should be open to the exchange of ideas and the possibility of return. Ideally, these connections happen personally and intimately; and while that may not be very helpful in thinking about social media influencers and politicians, it might be helpful for thinking about members of our families and communities who seem beyond the pale. It’s okay to say, “You’ve gone too far.” And it’s also important to say, “I’m going to check in on you every week, and I’m really looking forward to welcoming you home.”

The dynamics of “in and out” are challenging and emotional, especially in today’s super-charged world of bombast and extremes. But our fundamental principles remain ever at the ready, reminding us of the integrity of communal boundaries and the urgency of communication and community. As the *parashah* says over and over again, זֹאת תּוֹרַת הַצָּרַעַת, “This is the Torah of *Tzaraat*” (Lev. 14:57. See also 13:57, 14:2, 14:32, and 14:54). May we find ways to live by it, including in our camp as many as we can.