

PARSHAT METZORA
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The portion of Metzora focuses on the purification process for the healed Metzora. Most of us think of the disease as leprosy. However, modern scholars seem to think that it was some sort of skin disease, though not necessarily leprosy itself. Its symptoms were described last week in the portion of Tazria, the purification process is our story of this morning. Scholars point out that the person must be fully healed before the purification process. Healing comes from G-d, the Priest takes care of the Temple and ritual purification.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, basing himself on a D'var Torah delivered by Rabbi Eitan Mayer, suggests that there is a three-fold process that is attached to the purification of the Metzora. The first action, as detailed by the Torah, informs us that the healed Metzora takes two birds. One is brought as a sacrifice to G-d, the other is set free. He suggests that this ceremony resembles the taking of the two goats on Yom Kippur.

The next aspect of the purification of the Metzora involves sprinkling blood mixed with cedar, hyssop, and scarlet wool. This potion resembles that mixed with the ashes of the Red Heifer, which purifies an individual who comes into contact with a human corpse.

Following the purification, blood is sprinkled on the extremities of the healed Metzora: his ears, fingers, and toes. This process resembles the installation of the Priests for Temple service.

Thus, suggests Rabbi Angel, the ultimate goal of the purification process is not simply to eliminate impurity, but rather to elevate the individual to a higher level of holiness, as symbolized by the sanctity of the Temple service. He suggests that this symbolic amputation of sin; purification from having come into contact with a corpse, in this case himself; and elevation to a level of holiness, is a rather important process. According to Rabbi Mayer, the process of healing is one in which the Metzora rids himself of the signs of death by recreating himself spiritually. He was, if you will, among the dead when he had the disease, he was shunned and sent outside the community. There was even a concept of mourning for him. However, after removing himself from this impurity he is, if you will, brought back to life.

Rabbi Angel suggests that the Torah teaches us that one living through a crisis should seize the opportunity and end in a better place than before it. Going through a traumatic experience leads to self-mourning, introspection, and isolation. It is necessary to move forward by letting the negativity go away. If we can do so, we may be able to find ourselves in a better place than before we began. Thus, he informs us, the Torah sets out a process of healing whose relevance endures beyond the existence of this disease and the Temple.

During the course of our lives, many of us go through traumatic experiences. They could entail financial woes, the loss of people close to us, illness, moments of fear which traumatize us, psychological deficiencies, or accidents which can injure us and sometimes maim us for life. The issue is whether we can bring ourselves up from the depths of despair, mourning for our own

problems and predicament, and move beyond that present to create a brighter future for ourselves and for all those around us.

In my teaching this year, both in Lunch in the Loop and Lunch in the Suburbs, I have chosen the topic “Crisis and Uncertainty.” While many of the sources we have studied attempted to find a reason for suffering and traumatic situations, some of the sources reminded us that a positive attitude is critical to surmount the difficulties, travails, and troubles in our lives which most assuredly will come. One of those individuals who could do so was Rabbi Akiva, the great scholar, who lived at a time of persecution of the Jewish people and underwent martyrdom himself at the hands of the Romans. Rabbi Akiva had learned from one of his teachers, Nachum Ish Gam Zo, that “whatever the All Merciful does is for good.” While things may look horrible at a certain moment, it is important to put it into perspective, to maintain a positive attitude, to work towards surmounting the difficulty, and to execute a plan for a brighter future. This must be the case, both on a personal and national level.

In the 1980’s, when I was in Hyde Park, I met a young Israeli mathematician, Alex Lubotzky, a brilliant scholar who came to the University of Chicago to work on some research projects. We befriended Alex and eventually his entire family, as we got to know them both in Chicago and in Israel. Alex, at the age of less than 30, became head of the Mathematics Department at Hebrew University. He was a brilliant scholar, a dedicated Jew, and a good friend.

For a while, Alex dabbled in politics and became a member of the Knesset for a centrist party known as “The Third Way.” I visited him in the Knesset, he spoke here at our Congregation, and he was involved in issues of religious pluralism. Unfortunately, for us but perhaps not for him, his tenure was rather short, as, again, a centrist party in Israel could not survive.

Alex and Yardena are the parents of six children. Their oldest boys are twins, Asael and Boaz. Like all Israeli young men, they went off to war. Asael enlisted in the Golani Brigade and during the second Lebanon War served as a platoon commander. During the battle of Bint Jbeil in Lebanon, Hezbollah terrorists fired an anti-tank missile that hit the armored personal carrier he was in. Luckily, he was standing at that time, otherwise, he would have been killed. However, he was seriously wounded as his legs received a direct hit. In a book, just translated into English by Yardena’s father, a professor of English, entitled *From the Wilderness and Lebanon: An Israeli Soldier’s Story of War and Recovery*, Asael writes of his battles in Lebanon, of his deep devotion to the State of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces, of the feelings of sadness he had when his friends and colleagues were killed, of the story of how he himself was injured, and of his struggle to return to a normal lifestyle.

He was moved from the field and transferred to Rambam Hospital in Haifa. The doctors were concerned whether they had to amputate the leg. They finally decided they could restore the severed leg in place. It was strengthened and extended through muscles that were transplanted from his back. He underwent ten orthopedic and plastic surgeries.

He describes in his book the difficulties of the rehabilitation, the love and support of his family, the pain and yet the promise of the future. He tells the story of the wedding of his sister, Shakked, to his fellow officer, an Ethiopian Jew, Maru, and describes the wedding as two types of dancing, the normal simcha dancing and Ethiopian dancing, took place. I remember it too, because I was there. And, then he describes how, in his wheelchair, he did some wheelies to bring joy to the bride and groom. It was quite a scene.

Towards the end of his book he writes: “War and injury involve much pain and suffering, but they are also unique experiences in which lessons can be learned and by which one can mature. First, they provide a sense of proportion concerning many things in life. Worries and concerns to which people attribute great importance grow pale and less significant in the face of death and physical injury, the moments when a person must struggle with powerful life forces. Priorities change, fundamental issues find their place at the top of the ladder, and small, materialistic issues slide to the bottom.” He now knows, he writes, how important is a sense of gratitude. He learned to take nothing for granted, he is grateful for the deep love and support that he received from so many sources, his family, his friends, his community, and the doctors and occupational therapists who were always with him. He concludes by writing: “The challenges I was compelled to face strengthened my spirit and endowed me with a broader and deeper understanding.” Today, Dr. Asael Lubotzky is married and a father of three. Although he still uses crutches, the last I heard, he was beginning an internship in pediatrics at the Shaare Zedek Medical Center in Jerusalem.

We pray that we don't have to learn the lesson that Asael Lubotzky learned the hard way. Yet, when we look at the picture of the Metzora and Asael's difficult ordeal, sometimes we recognize that we take too much for granted without showing gratitude to those around us and to G-d who created us. Sometimes we need to learn from the difficult moments in life.

If this is the case on a personal level, then it is also the case on a national level. In our studies we learned in the Tractate of Berachot of the Babylonian Talmud that: “The Holy One, blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, and all of them were given only through sufferings. These are: the Torah, the Land of Israel, and the World to Come.” In order to become a scholar of Torah, there is much suffering that must be undertaken in terms of time and assiduous study of the text. We have learned the hard way that there are many sufferings that must be undertaken if we are to possess the Land of Israel. As to the World to Come, we can only hope that our path will be rather smooth.

In his book Asael repeatedly shows his love of the land of Israel and his great devotion to the Israel Defense Forces. We have learned that gaining sovereignty in our land and maintaining it is not an easy project. This past Sunday, David Roet, the Deputy permanent representative for Israel to the United Nations, came to our Congregation to speak at our annual JUF event. David and his delegation knows that even before they walk in the door to the General Assembly there are 21 resolutions that are going to be passed against the State of Israel. Almost none are passed against North Korea, Syria, and the like. While it is difficult to represent Israel in international arenas such as the U.N. and in Geneva at the International Court of Justice, he told us that bilateral relationships behind the scenes between Israel and many countries are taking place.

This past week I was in New York at a meeting of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Frank Luntz, a well-known marketing professional in this country, told us of the difficult times that our college students are having on college campuses. All over the country, BDS is gaining ground. Even at the University of Chicago this week a student vote passed a divestment resolution against the State of Israel. Luntz, who was on his way to meet the Prime Minister of the State of Israel over the weekend, told us we must use proper language in order to fight the battle. And it is a battle both here, at places like U of C where Jewish students are not allowed to speak up at public meetings, and throughout the country where these issues are being raised.

There have been many who have given their lives in defense of the state and many others, like Asael, who have been injured for life. However, even at this critical moment in the history of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, we dare not be despondent or give up hope. Even during the most difficult times of our history we have maintained our love for the land and our devotion to our people. We have learned the hard way, once more. A stateless people without a land to call its own, is a people which can be destroyed. A people with a state which can defend itself, is a people that will survive. It is that second choice that we today accept and to which we dedicate ourselves.

The purification process of the Metzora is a complex one. However, using this method of interpretation and seeing it as a model for living can strengthen our resolve to get past the difficult moments, in the personal and communal spheres, and to move forward with hope, faith, and resolve. May our difficult moments be few, and our faith and dedication to our families and our people be ever strong.