

Parshat Tazria – Metzorah: Sowing Seeds of Peace

(Draft for speaking purposes)

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

Strange as it may seem, a particular story from my childhood occurs to me every year when we arrive at these Torah portions, which contain the laws pertaining to the isolation of the individual afflicted with the scaly skin disease known as *tzara'at*. For my 9th birthday my parents rented the local community theater for a showing of the play, *Rumpelstilskin*. Two or three days before the party, *I* came down with the Chicken Pox. When my father tried to cancel the party, the theatre informed him that they would not be able to refund any of the money; according to the contract it was too late. So we had a quick family meeting and we made the decision not to call off the party. Rather, the birthday party would go on -- without me, the birthday boy. On my own birthday, of all days, I was separated from my community because of my affliction.

Just so you don't think this was cruel, I was part of the family decision to do this and, in truth, my mother and several friends who had already had the chicken pox stayed back with me. I figured, if it was

already paid for and everyone had already RSVP'd, why prevent everyone from having a good time?! Plus, my father made a tape of all of my friends at the party sending me personal happy birthday wishes, which I still have and treasure today. Sometimes things have a way of working out.

Yet, I still remember the strange feeling I had of being segregated – of being forced to be on the outside of a community in which I was formerly such an insider. I still recall what it felt like to have an illness separate me from the places and people whom I loved. For me, it was temporary and voluntary, but I caught a glimpse of what it feels like to be excluded for something you could not control.

From that perspective, the Torah's laws regarding the *metzorah*, the individual afflicted with the scaly skin disease I mentioned, are troubling. Here is someone who is afflicted with a difficult disease. The Torah then tells us that the afflicted, when they notice their symptoms, is first told to submit to the priest for inspection. Then, if warranted that person is to be isolated for seven days. After that time period, they are to be inspected again. If the priest determines that it has gotten worse, the afflicted must

walk through the community shouting, “Impure, Impure!” about himself and then remain in isolation until the affliction clears up.

One of the techniques I like to use when trying to truly understand and derive meaning from the Torah text is to imagine myself in the shoes of the characters that appear. Imagine the humiliation and rejection you might have felt walking through the camp, your home, declaring yourself to be impure. And further, just to understand the gravity of what it means to be isolated “*until the affliction clears up*”, while this disease is clearly not a form of modern leprosy, if it even shares some characteristics with such diseases, it is possible then that the affliction will *never* clear up: meaning that this person has been sentenced to isolation, **indefinitely**. For me, once the chicken pox inevitably went away, my life returned to normal. For the *metzora*, there was no such guarantee. Which leads us to the question, why is such seemingly harsh treatment ordained for someone who is already afflicted and in need of compassion?

Rashi, one of our greatest Medieval commentators states the case simply: the *metzora*, he wrote, “informs others that he is impure so that they keep away from him.” The purpose, then, of calling out is to alert

others to stay away. And the purpose of isolation is to protect others from contact with those afflicted. Following this, many commentators take a position that might be said to best fit with a modern medical view of quarantine: “We don’t like that this is how we have to treat the victim of this disease, but if we don’t, others will contract it too and that would be worse.” This is certainly a plausible explanation, and reasonable if it was true, but there **are** problems with it. First, the Torah makes *no* explicit mention of the worry that others might contract the disease from the afflicted. If that actually was the *primary* concern, why was that not articulated at all? Second, the priest is required to inspect the progress of the disease at various points, yet there seems to be no worry that the priest himself will be infected - no precautions proposed to help him prevent that from happening. If catching this affliction through contact was the main motivation for their treatment of the *metzarah*, why would the Torah not be concerned with the *priest* contracting the disease? Finally, even if the aforementioned problems can be overcome, there is the larger issue of why the Torah devotes so much time to addressing this *particular* disease. Are

there not other diseases that might be contagious, which would require isolation? Why *only* talk about this one?

Thus, the rabbis feel that since this disease gets so much attention in our holiest book, given to us by God, there must be some deeper religious and/or spiritual meaning to it. It cannot be that the primary lesson here is simply one of public health. Therefore, we must also then view the *response* to the affliction, as ordained in the Torah, as carrying religious significance as well. In this spirit, the Midrash in Leviticus Rabbah, one of our most ancient sources of Biblical commentary, surmises that the word *metzora*, the name for the one afflicted by this disease, is an acronym of sorts - representing the Hebrew words, “*Motzi Shem Ra*” (*metzora* – **Motzi shem rah**), which means: speaking negatively about others. In other words, this affliction is not a normal disease contracted at random through the laws of nature. Rather, this affliction is the consequence for participating in destructive unethical behavior, namely gossip and slander. In that view, as Rashi and others point out, the *metzora* is forced into isolation to separate him from others. Why? As the midrash relates it, “since *the metzora* caused a separation through malicious talk—between

husband and wife, between friends, colleagues or other community members -- he, too, shall now be set apart.” As the midrash sees it, in a poetic justice type of retribution, since the person *caused* rifts and separation through speaking in an evil way about his fellows, he must now suffer the very same isolation he inflicted on others through his words. The segregation, therefore, is not to prevent others from catching his symptoms, it is to prevent them from being hurt by his actions.

Thus, according to the rabbis, this section of the Torah represents a harsh condemnation of speech uttered against our fellow human beings. In fact, there is a long standing tradition in Judaism that regards evil speech as one of the worst transgressions one could commit. The Talmud compares such evil speech to poison and the Mishnah warns us that to embarrass another is akin to murder. Perhaps Leviticus Rabbah puts it most starkly when it writes, “Proverbs states that there are seven things abhorrent to God. And which is the worst of them all? **He that sows discord amongst his brethren**”. And what sows discord? Evil speech. Like the skin disease, gossip is contagious, deadly and almost impossible to uproot. To prevent the evil from spreading it must be stopped

immediately and fully, otherwise the source needs to be removed. Thus, according to the most classical understanding of the *spiritual* meaning of this section of the Torah, the laws of the *metzarah* teach us how important it is that we appreciate the power of our speech. We are to learn today, by reading about the consequences of those afflicted, the terrible costs evil speech has on the one who speaks it, the ones who hear it and the one against whom it was directed. We are to be reminded, with this Torah reading, of the crucial importance of using our God given gift of speech to bring *holiness* into the world and to *honor* God's fellow creations. We are adjured to remember that above all, we are to try to do everything in our power to promote *unity* and *peace* and to avoid, literally like the plague, discord, hatred and antipathy.

And in the spirit of this powerful lesson, some commentators further point out that there is more to this text than meets the eye. Looking back at the instruction forcing the *metzarah* to walk through the camp declaring his affliction, the Talmud actually offers a radically different interpretation from that of Rashi, which says: “the proclamation ‘Impure, impure’ that he is required to make, is in order to make known his affliction so that the

community may pray for him. Likewise, *anyone* upon whom a calamity has fallen should make it known, so that others may pray for *him*.” This interpretation in *Masekhet Hulin*, rather than viewing the announcement of his affliction as a warning to stay away, proclaims that the purpose of this practice is to summon people to his or her **aid**. As Rabbi Brad Artson wrote about this, “What a wonderful reading! . . . Without having to ask for help explicitly, simply by mentioning the suffering, the *metzora* can count on fellow Jews to reach out to do something to lift the burden, to show solidarity, to express caring. The *metzora* calls out ‘impure’ so as to no longer remain alone”.

And the Talmud even goes one step further, drawing a more general lesson from this specific example, “Likewise, *anyone* upon whom a calamity has fallen should make it known so that others may pray for him.” The Talmud tells us that when calamity, in general, happens to us, there is no value placed on silently suffering. One should let others know, so that the community can respond. The opposite of causing *strife* amongst one’s brethren, which perhaps brought the onset of the disease and which is condemned as the worst possible transgression by the

Midrash, this *remedy* forces the afflicted to let others know that he is in need and gives the community the *privilege* of coming to his aid – the opportunity to express love and care.

Think about a time in your life when you felt excluded or were left out of a community or group. Perhaps you excluded yourself by your actions, or perhaps others excluded you unfairly. Remember your thoughts and your feelings. Did you ask for help? Did you want someone to reach out to you, to stretch out a hand, to bring you back in? Think about how it feels to be the one to reach out, to be able to do the mitzvah of helping someone in need. If the Torah is teaching us here the importance of *condemning* actions that bring about discord, evidenced by the harsh treatment proposed for those who speak evilly about others, it is *also* telling us how crucial it is to promote unity and peace by reaching out to others in need, by turning the source of discord into an agent of unity. As Artson further writes, “Wouldn’t it be transforming if we responded to the ‘impure’ voices of our age with compassion, love, and help, rather than with condemnation and distance? Isn’t that response truer to the voice of God in the Torah, truer to the soft, still voice within our hearts?”

When I look at our Jewish community, as well as the world at large, I *feel* the need for unity and compassion. The dialogue our community is having, for example, around Israel, around the differences between our religious movements, about partisan politics and about so many other issues, is filled with speech that breeds discord and spreads enmity. Just this past week, Alden Solovy (whom some of you know) and another man, were physically attacked at the Western Wall, simply for handing a Torah over to the women's side of the *mehitzah*. While we, as Jews, are taught to question and debate, and not to ignore real differences in opinion (all values I fully embrace), we are also taught to respect and honor these differences. Opposing opinions have always appeared side by side in our texts; even the voices of the minority that were rejected are given their rightful place. In the famous debates of the ancient Jewish rabbis, love and respect for the *person* holding the opposite view was maintained, even while their *ideas* conflicted. Dynamic debate could occur without the abandonment, dismissal and rejection of those who held the opposite view.

And thus I call out this morning to **us**, "Impure, Impure!" Our community has taken action in the way we speak to each other, as the

midrash stated, to sow seeds of discord amongst our brethren, when what we really need is unity to stand against the real hatred and truly negative forces in the world. I call out “Impure, Impure”, as the Talmud states, to invoke compassion for one another, for the wounded amongst us, for the ones suffering from isolation and for those of us who may have transgressed in *how* we have rebuked our fellows but would now like to make amends. And I proclaim, “Impure, Impure”, to call us to focus, not on what divides us but on what brings us together, differences and all. *Let* us debate with each other, *let* us bring our true hearts and disagree if we must. But *let* us still love and respect one another. *Let* us save our enmity for those who explicitly and actively work for the destruction of our people, or who openly seek as their purpose to harm others. Let us not speak in hatred to our brothers and sisters. We are stronger together and our chances for prosperity and security are increased when we are unified. And our Torah demands that we treat each other with dignity and respect and do our utmost to bring peace to our communities.

The truth is that the Torah understands that we human beings are fragile and sensitive. Peace and unity are thus difficult to maintain. On a

personal level and on a communal level, let us therefore take the lessons of this Torah portion to heart. As Rabbi Harold Schulweiss once wrote, “He who says ‘sticks and stones can break my bones but names will never hurt me’ is usually a person who has been hurt and who speaks this comfort through tears”. Names do hurt and words can damage. Let us remember this lesson and instead use our words to promote love and connection, to debate with respect and civility and to inspire compassion and care, even with those members of our community with whom we disagree. Let us resolve, for the sake of our people and our values, not to sow seeds of discord but instead to sow seeds of peace. Shabbat Shalom.