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Shabbat Parashat Tazria-Metzora

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Covenant and Conversation **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l**

The Plague of Evil Speech

The Rabbis moralised the condition of tzara'at – often translated as leprosy – the subject that dominates both Tazria and Metzora. It was, they said, a punishment rather than a medical condition. Their interpretation was based on the internal evidence of the Mosaic books themselves. Moses' hand became leprous when he expressed doubt about the willingness of the people to believe in his mission (Ex. 4:6-7). Miriam was struck by leprosy when she spoke against Moses (Num. 12:1-15). The metzora (leper) was a motzi shem ra: a person who spoke slightlying about others.

Evil speech, lashon hara, was considered by the Sages to be one of the worst sins of all. Here is how Maimonides summarises it: The Sages said: there are three transgressions for which a person is punished in this world and has no share in the world come – idolatry, illicit sex, and bloodshed – and evil speech is as bad as all three combined. They also said: whoever speaks with an evil tongue is as if he denied God . . . Evil speech kills three people – the one who says

it, the one who accepts it, and the one about whom it is said. Hilchot Deot 7:3

Is it so? Consider just two of many examples. In the early 13th century, a bitter dispute broke out between devotees and critics of Maimonides. For the former, he was one of the greatest Jewish minds of all time. For the latter, he was a dangerous thinker whose works contained heresy and whose influence led people to abandon the commandments.

There were ferocious exchanges. Each side issued condemnations and excommunications against the other. There were pamphlets and counter-pamphlets, sermons and counter-sermons, and for while French and Spanish Jewry were convulsed by the controversy. Then, in 1232, Maimonides' books were burned by the Dominicans. The shock brought a brief respite; then extremists desecrated Maimonides' tomb in Tiberius. In the early 1240s, following the Disputation of Paris, Christians burned all the copies of the Talmud they could find. It was one of the great tragedies of the Middle Ages.

What was the connection

between the internal Jewish struggle and the Christian burning of Jewish books? Did the Dominicans take advantage of Jewish accusations of heresy against Maimonides, to level their own charges? Was it simply that they were able to take advantage of the internal split within Jewry, to proceed with their own persecutions without fear of concerted Jewish reprisals? One way or another, throughout the Middle Ages, many of the worst Christian persecutions of Jews were either incited by converted Jews, or exploited internal weaknesses of the Jewish community.

Moving to the modern age, one of the most brilliant exponents of Orthodoxy was R. Meir Loeb ben Yechiel Michal Malbim (1809-1879), Chief Rabbi of Rumania. An outstanding scholar, whose commentary to Tanach is one of the glories of the nineteenth century, he was at first welcomed by all groups in the Jewish community as a man of learning and religious integrity. Soon, however, the more 'enlightened' Jews discovered to their dismay that

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he was a vigorous traditionalist, and they began to incite the civil authorities against him. In posters and pamphlets they portrayed him as a benighted relic of the Middle Ages, a man opposed to progress and the spirit of the age.

One Purim, they sent him a gift of a parcel of food which included pork and crabs, with an accompanying message: 'We, the local progressives, are honoured to present these delicacies and tasty dishes from our table as a gift to our luminary.' Eventually, in response to the campaign, the government withdrew its official recognition of the Jewish community, and of Malbim as its Chief Rabbi, and banned him from delivering sermons in the Great Synagogue. On Friday, 18 March 1864, policemen surrounded his house early in the morning, arrested and imprisoned him. After the Sabbath, he was placed on a ship and taken to the Bulgarian border, where he was released on condition that he never return to Rumania. This is how the Encyclopaedia Judaica describes the campaign:

M. Rosen has published various documents which disclose the false accusations and calumnies Malbim's Jewish-assimilationist enemies wrote against him to the Rumanian government. They

accused him of disloyalty and of impeding social assimilation between Jews and non-Jews by insisting on adherence to the dietary laws, and said, 'This Rabbi by his conduct and prohibitions wishes to impede our progress.' As a result of this, the Prime Minister of Rumania issued a proclamation against the 'ignorant and insolent' Rabbi... In consequence the minister refused to grant rights to the Jews of Bucharest, on the grounds that the Rabbi of the community was 'the sworn enemy of progress'.

Similar stories could be told about several other outstanding scholars – among them, R. Zvi Hirsch Chajes, R. Azriel Hildesheimer, R. Yitzhak Reines, and even the late Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik of blessed memory, who was brought to court in Boston in 1941 to face trumped-up charges by the local Jewish community. Even these shameful episodes were only a continuation of the vicious war waged against the Hassidic movement by their opponents, the mitnagdim, which saw many Hassidic leaders (among them the first Rebbe of Habad, R. Shneur Zalman of Ladi) imprisoned on false testimony given to the local authorities by other Jews.

For a people of history, we can be bewilderingly obtuse to the lessons of history. Time and

again, unable to resolve their own conflicts civilly and graciously, Jews slandered their opponents to the civil authorities, with results that were disastrous to the Jewish community as a whole. Despite the fact that the whole of rabbinic Judaism is a culture of argument; despite the fact that the Talmud explicitly says that the school of Hillel had its views accepted because they were 'gentle, modest, taught the views of their opponents as well as their own, and taught their opponents' views before their own' (Eruvin 13b) – despite this, Jews have continued to excoriate, denounce, even excommunicate those whose views they did not understand, even when the objects of their scorn (Maimonides, Malbim, and the rest) were among the greatest-ever defenders of Orthodoxy against the intellectual challenges of their age.

Of what were the accusers guilty? Only evil speech. And what, after all, is evil speech? Mere words. Yet words have consequences. Diminishing their opponents, the self-proclaimed defenders of the faith diminished themselves and their faith. They managed to convey the impression that Judaism is simple-minded, narrow, incapable of handling complexity, helpless in the face of challenge, a religion of

anathemas instead of arguments, excommunication instead of reasoned debate. Maimonides and Malbim took their fate philosophically. Yet one weeps to see a great tradition brought so low.

What an astonishing insight it was to see leprosy – that disfiguring disease – as a symbol and symptom of evil speech. For we truly are disfigured when we use words to condemn, not communicate; to close rather than open minds; when we use language as a weapon and wield it brutally. The message of Metzora remains. Linguistic violence is no less savage than physical violence, and those who afflict others are themselves afflicted. Words wound. Insults injure. Evil speech destroys communities. Language is God's greatest gift to humankind and it must be guarded if it is to heal, not harm.

Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

“Then he shall sprinkle [the mixture] seven times upon the person being purified from the tzara’at; he shall purify him and set the live bird free upon the open field” (Leviticus 14:7).

One of the strangest and most primitive-sounding rituals of the Bible surrounds the purification of the individual afflicted with “tzara’at,” a skin disease that

apparently, at least in biblical times, struck those guilty of slanderous gossip (metzora – one who is afflicted with tzara’at derives from motzi-ra, an individual who spreads evil talk). Because the root cause of the malady was spiritual rather than physiological, it was the priest – the kohen – rather than a doctor who had the responsibility of examining the white spots that appeared on the skin of the individual to determine whether quarantine was necessary, and then – if he was able to declare the person free of the disease – initiating a process of purification.

It is with this particular ritual that our portion of Metzora opens. The kohen commands two birds to be taken; the first to be slaughtered in an earthenware vessel, its blood mingled with the living waters of a spring, and the second – kept alive – to be immersed within the mingled blood waters in the earthenware vessel. The waters are sprinkled upon the person cured of the malady, whereupon the live bird is allowed to fly away, leaving the city limits.

This ritual act of purification is fraught with symbolism. There are few biblical infractions as serious as speaking slander; three different prohibitions recorded in Scripture proscribe such speech. The first is gossip

regarding another, which may in itself be harmless, but which is no one else's business and can easily lead to evil talk (the prohibition of rechilut – when, for example, one tells another the cost of a neighbor's new house). The second is lashon hara – downright slander – reporting the negative action of another which may actually be true but ought not be spread.

The third and worst of all is motzi shem ra – disseminating a lie about an innocent person. From such unnecessary chatter, reputations can be broken, families can be destroyed and lives can be lost (“with the negative turn of their noses, they can become responsible for the death of another”).

Hence, three people incur penalty for such talk: the one who tells it, the one who listens to it and the one who spreads it further. And when the Kohen Gadol (high priest) appears once a year before God in the Holy of Holies with the incense sacrifice, it is for this infraction against slander that he seeks atonement on behalf of the Jewish nation.

With this in mind, let us analyze the symbolism of the purification process. In idolatry, the point of offering a sacrifice was to propitiate the gods – idolaters believed that the world was run by the warring gods and

humans could only seek to bribe them. In Judaism, by contrast, humans are full partners with God in perfecting this world. Our sacrifices represent the one who brings them, with the sin-offering animal standing in the place of the owner, “telling” him that it is he who deserved to die but for Divine loving-kindness, and the whole burnt offering “telling” him that he ought devote “all of himself” to the service of the Almighty in the perfection of the world.

In the case of the metzora, the slanderous, scandalous chattering twitters are symbolized by the two birds; one is slaughtered as gossip is considered akin to taking a life, and the other is sent off to fly away.

The best way to explain this symbolism is by means of a remarkable Hassidic story told of someone who asked his Rebbe how he might gain Divine forgiveness for his sin of slander. The Rebbe instructed him to confess his sin and beg forgiveness of those whom he had slandered; then he instructed him to take a feather pillow, bring it to the marketplace late in the afternoon when the wind was strongest, to open the covering, allow the feathers to fly, and then set about collecting all the scattered feathers.

The distraught Hasid returned to the Rebbe that evening, reporting that gathering the feathers was a “mission impossible.” “So is it with slander,” replied the Rebbe; “You never know how far your evil words have spread, since each person you told may well have told his friends...”

Rav Yisrael Salanter explained why the portions Tazria and Metzora follow Shemini, with its laws of kashrut: because what comes out of your mouth is even more significant than what goes into your mouth.

Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying this: “Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people.”

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Walls Which Speak in Red and Green

“The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying, ‘When you come into the Land of Canaan which I give to you as an inheritance and I shall give you the plague of leprosy in the houses of the land of your inheritance.’” (Leviticus 14:34)

The disease known as leprosy has engendered dread in the hearts of people, especially in times gone by when it was apparently more widespread and exceedingly contagious. In biblical times, the priests

(kohanim) would determine whether a skin discoloration or scab was indeed leprosy – and, if so, the hapless leper would be rendered ritually impure and exiled from society. From the biblical religious perspective, this tzara’at emanated from a serious moral deficiency, generally identified as slander.

An especially problematic aspect of these laws of tzara’at is the fact that not only individuals but even walls of houses could become infected by this ritually impure discoloration. Do walls have minds, souls, consciences or moral choices which allow for punishment? And stranger still, the Bible describes the phenomenon of “leprosy of houses” in almost positive, gift-of-God terms:

“The Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron saying, “when you come into the Land of Canaan which I give to you as an inheritance and I shall give you the plague of leprosy in the houses of the land of your inheritance.” (Leviticus 14:34)

How are we to understand this biblical reference to the “divine gift” of the leprous walls? And third, for individuals, the tzara’at malady is expressed as a white discoloration, whereas for walls, white spots are not at all problematic, the only thing they attest to is mold! Green and red

are the dangerous colors for walls (Lev. 14:36 ,37). Why the difference?

Nahmanides, the twelfth-century commentary who is an especial champion of the unique importance of the Land of Israel for the people of Israel, sees the phenomenon of the leprous walls as an expression of the intensely concentrated moral sensitivity of our holy land: the sanctity of Israel, home of the Divine Presence (Shekhina), cannot abide within its boundaries a home in which slander is spoken. Hence the walls of such a house in Israel will naturally show the effects of words of gossip which can destroy lives.

Maimonides sees another benefit to the “leprosy of the homes”—an explicit warning to cease and desist from speaking slander: “This is a sign and a wonder to warn people against indulging in malicious speech (lashon hara). If they do recount slanderous tales, the walls of their homes will change; and if the inhabitants maintain their wickedness, the garments upon them will change” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Impurity of Tzara’at 16:10).

Rashi suggests a practical application for the “gift of the leprous walls”: “It was a happy tidings for them when the plague (of leprosy) came upon (their

homes). This is because the Amorite Canaanites had hidden treasures of gold in the walls of their homes during the forty years when Israel was in the desert, and because of the leprous plagues the walls were taken apart and [the treasures] were found” (Rashi, Lev. 14:34).

I would suggest that Rashi’s commentary may be given a figurative rather than a literal spin. The walls of a house represent a family, the family which inhabits that house; and every family has its own individual culture and climate, scents and sensitivities, tales and traditions. A house may also represent many generations of families who lived there; the values, faith commitments and lifestyles which animated those families and constituted their continuity. The sounds, smells and songs, the character, culture and commitments which are absorbed – and expressed – by the walls of a house, are indeed a treasure which is worthy of discovery and exploration. The walls of a home impart powerful lessons; hidden in those walls is a significant treasure-trove of memories and messages for the present and future generations. Perhaps it is for this reason that the nation of Israel is called the house of Israel throughout the Bible.

From this perspective we can now understand the biblical introduction to “house-leprosy.” This hidden power of the walls is a present as well as a plague, a gift as well as a curse. Do the walls emit the fragrance of Shabbat challah baking in the oven or the smells of cheap liquor? Are the sounds which seep through the crevices sounds of Torah study, prayer and words of affection or are they experiences of tale-bearing, porn and anger? The good news inherent in the leprosy of the walls is the potency of family: the very same home environment which can be so injurious can also be exceedingly beneficial. It all depends upon the “culture of the table” which the family creates and which the walls absorb – and sometimes emit.

With this understanding, it is instructive to note the specific colorations – or discolorations – which render the walls ritually unclean: “And he (the kohen – priest) shall examine the leprous plague penetratingly embedded in the walls of the house, whether they are bright green or bright red...” (Lev. 14:37). Can it be that green is identified with money and materialism (yerukim in modern Hebrew, an apt description of American dollars), and red identified with blood and violence? A home which imparts materialistic goals as the ideal and/or

insensitivity to the shedding of blood – remember that our sages compared slander or character assassination to the shedding of blood – is certainly deserving of the badge of impurity! And is not the Palestinian flag waved so ardently by suicide bombers, red and green and white (white being the initial sign of leprosy).

And finally, Rashi suggested that there was an Amorite-Canaanite treasure which the inhabitants placed in the walls of their homes in Israel while the Israelites dallied in the desert rejecting the divine challenge of the conquest of Israel. Might not this interpretation be suggesting that the indigenous seven nations, as well as present-day Palestinians, do indeed have a treasure which they impart to the children through the walls of the houses? This treasure is the belief that the land is important, that the connection to the land is cardinal for every nation which claims a homeland and respects its past. The land must be important enough to fight and even die for, since it contains the seed of our eternity; only those committed to their past deserve to enjoy a blessed future.

I am certainly not suggesting terrorism against innocent citizens and nihilistic, Moloch-like suicide bombing, which perverts love of land into a

rejection of life and destruction of fundamental humanistic values. The Torah declares the ritual impurity of Red, Green and White! But many Israeli post-Zionist leaders are forgetting the indelible linkage between a nation and its land as an expression of its commitment to eternal ideals and the continuity between its past and future. Tragically we all too often only begin to appreciate the importance of our homeland when the Palestinian suicide attackers threaten to take it away from us by their vicious attacks. But perhaps sacred lessons can even be learned from purveyors of impurity.

Torah.Org: Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Does Mussar Help?

Towards the end of Parshas Metzora, the pasuk says: “You shall separate the Children of Israel from their contamination; and they shall not die as a result of their contamination if they contaminate My Mishkan that is among them.” (Vayikra 15:31). The simple reading of this pasuk is that when Bnei Yisrael are tameh (impure), they should not, in a state of impurity, go into the holy places where they are forbidden to enter, lest they die from that impurity. However, homiletically, the sefer Yismach Yehudah cites the following interesting vort from a drasha of Rav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer (a great grandson of the Chasam

Sofer, who was the Chief Rabbi of Cracow, Poland, in the early part of the 20th century):

Sometimes we talk to our children or to our students or to our congregants until we are blue in the face. We wonder, does it make an impression? Are our words taken seriously? Do people change? Perhaps this is most relevant for professionals who do this for a living. Do all the things that we say, year after year, really help? Do speeches help? Do drashos help? Does mussar (chastisement) help? Does lecturing to our children really help?

Rav Kornitzer suggests that we need to bear in mind that it may not help now, and it may not help six months from now or a year from now. But, at some point, at some time in the future, maybe the lesson will hit home.

I don't know how Rav Yosef Nechemia Kornitzer explained the mashal that he gave, but today it is easy for us to imagine what this is like. Namely, the “mussar” is in the “cloud.” Where is all this data? It is in the “cloud.” Where is the “cloud?”? There is not a cloud in the sky! But we know this concept that something can be not in front of us, yet when we need to access it, it is somehow there for us to access. It is the same with mussar and with lecturing our children. It is

there. It hasn't penetrated yet, but it can penetrate.

He references the pasuk "And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart (al levavecha)." (Devorim 5:6). It does not say b'soch levavecha (within your heart) because sometimes it has not yet penetrated the heart. However, at least it remains al levavecha – upon your heart. One day, maybe, just perhaps, it will penetrate the heart and will be b'soch levavecha.

This is why the pasuk says "... v'lo yamusu m'tumosam" (Vayikra 15:31), which means you talk to people and you tell them what is right. Even though it might not help now or even ten years from now, they will not die from their impurity. How many people do we know that return at the end of their days? They don't die in their state of impurity because at the end of their days, they in fact realize that what they were told so many years earlier was correct, and they in fact do come back.

Ironically, I was recently speaking with someone in Eretz Yisrael who told me the following interesting incident that happened only a few days ago. (This was April 2016.) I believe this story brings home the point that I am trying to make:

A fellow in Eretz Yisrael has a distant relative who was born and raised in a small town in Pennsylvania in the first half of the twentieth century. The relative's father was a rav and a shochet, who tried his best to educate his son in the proper Torah path, including sending him to a yeshiva. The boy only lasted in the yeshiva for two weeks. He hated it. He left the yeshiva and eventually left Yiddishkeit. He never got married. He does not have a wife or children. He is a man alone in the world. From what I gather, he must be in his late sixties or early seventies.

For whatever reason, this relative got an inspiration: I want to go to Israel. I want to daven at the Kosel HaMaaravi. He takes his Bar Mitzvah tefillin, which he has not put on in a half century, and has plans to visit the kosel, put on his tefillin, and daven there. He hooks up with some Federation tour and goes with this tour and their tour guide on the Federation tour to Eretz Yisrael.

The person who is relating the story finds out that his long-lost cousin is coming to Israel and he decides that he will get in touch with him, take him around, and give him a real tour of Eretz Yisrael. They meet in a certain place. The Israeli says to his American relative, "Have you been to the Kosel yet?" His

cousin responds, "No, I have not been to the Kosel yet." The Israeli said, "Great. So let's go now!" The American says "No, not now. Maybe later."

"What's the problem?" his Israeli cousin presses him. "This is why you came. You want to put your tefillin on and daven at the kosel." The cousin is hesitant. Finally he says "I can't go!"

"Why can't you go?" The long-lost cousin finally explains "I can't go to the Kosel with a cross."

The Israeli cousin is incredulous: "What are you doing with a cross?" The American explains that while he was on the Federation tour they went through the Armenian Quarter of the Old City. "I have a very good Christian friend back home in America. I wanted to buy him a cross from Israel as a present. I asked the rabbi who is leading the Federation tour if it was okay to buy a cross for my Christian friend in America. He told me it was."

He bought the tselem (cross) and put it in his bag, and is now walking around Jerusalem with a tselem in his bag. He tells his relative "I cannot go to the Kosel with a cross in my bag."

This Israeli cousin told my friend this story and his friend

told it to me. He then commented: This fellow has not had any connection to Yiddishkeit in maybe sixty years. He is putting on tefillin now for probably the first time in more than fifty years, or even more! But he still has a sensitivity, a feeling, that a person does not go to the Kosel HaMaaravi with a tselem in his bag.

This is an example of "... You shall not die in your state of impurity." The person left Yiddishkeit, he had a bad experience in yeshiva, he did not want to have anything to do with Judaism, and he has not kept who knows what for all these years, but there is something in the Jewish heart that remains "al levavecha" – upon your heart. It was ON the heart. It was "in the cloud." After all these years, it finally penetrated that you do not go to the Kosel with a tselem in your bag.

This is a lesson to all of us, whether you are a rav, a rabbi, a rebbi, a teacher, or even a parent. If you preach and preach and preach and it does not seem to make a difference, yes, it does! "You shall warn... and they shall not die in their state of impurity."

Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis

We have just commenced what

is probably the happiest month on the Jewish calendar. It's the month of Nisan and as many of us know, throughout this month we do not say the Tachanun prayer and that is because nearly the entire month is festive.

Now of course we know that from the middle of the month until the end, that's the festival of Passover and then the days thereafter and soon after that is Rosh Chodesh, but what about the first half of the month?

Well, we know from the Torah that during the first 12 days of Nisan, that's when the Nesi'im, the Princes, the heads of the tribes, brought a sacrifice to inaugurate the new altar in the sanctuary in the wilderness. On each day, a different Nasi brought his sacrifice.

So therefore, the first 12 days are festive. However, I have a question; surely that day was only festive for one single person? Perhaps, at most, it was festive for his whole tribe – but that is only one twelfth of the nation, the entire people didn't celebrate and yet today none of us say Tachanun during that period?

I believe that a very powerful message emerges from this.

When it comes to sadness, we so often readily identify with the worries, the troubles, and the

sorrow of others.

This is happening right now at a time in Israel when there is so much sadness and as a nation, we are reaching out with so much altruism and sympathy for all those who are there.

But from the month of Nisan, we are taught that it is not just during times of sorrow that we should empathise with others, it is also when they are happy.

When a person is having a Simcha, we should rejoice with them. Even if there is one single person rejoicing, that is a reason for the entire nation to be happy and that's why for the first half of Nisan as well, we as a people celebrate.

May Hashem bless us, that in the same way as we are expressing sorrow with all those who are grieving right now, so may we soon all celebrate together, the great redemption of our people.

Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah

"Tum'ah & Tahara" –

Definitions in Flux...

Rabbi Daniel and Rebbetzin Ilana Epstein

The Torah portions of Tazria and Metzora, appearing as they do in the middle of the Book of Leviticus (Vayikra), deal with the epicentre of the Law of the Priests ("Torat Kohanim").

Engaging with various physical discharges from or maladies of the human body, male and female, the Torah states that when these flows or lesions appear, the status of the individual concerned moves from Tahor (“pure”) to Tamei (“impure”).

These definitions are in quotation marks because they might not do justice to the change of status in every situation.

To be “tamei” implies experiencing a discharge that is somehow connected to death, or the inability to support life. In contrast, to be “tahor” means to be in a state of life-giving capacity.

For example, when a woman concludes her monthly cycle, the discharge of blood and material from her body demonstrates that the life-giving capacity of the womb is temporarily concluded, until the next month’s cycle replaces all the material necessary to potentially harness and initiate life once again. As a result, her body moves objectively from “tahor” – life-giving – to “tamei” – unable to sustain new life.

The period of being tamei – by not being able to procreate life – indicates a distancing from God in a comparative sense. God is,

by definition, the pure articulation of Life and, as we emulate God as creatures “created in His image”, we are “like Him” when giving life and “unlike Him” when we cannot do so.

As a result, we become naturally and spiritually distanced from Him, and so coming into contact with a dead body, for example, similarly causes us to experience “non-life”. As a result, we find ourselves assuming a status of tamei, until we can return to a period of “tahara” through the passage of time and processes of purification.

However, in recent days, we have all witnessed the tragic loss of life in terrorist attacks in Israel. The intense outpouring of both grief and emunah (“deep faith and conviction”) have been overwhelming with the families themselves leading seemingly superhuman expressions of reaffirming their faith in God and in the passage of history and destiny of the Jewish People.

At this time, I am struggling with these definitions of tum’ah and tahara because as we are brought into contact with death, I find myself being drawn closer to God, not further away, and my faith deepens in a desperate attempt to find the strength to move forward.

I am finding that the traditional status of tahara (purity/closeness) is lacking in articulating my expression of closeness to God, as I find a much more visceral experience of vulnerability and d’veikut (“cleaving/closeness”) in the encounter with tum’ah (impurity/distance).

Maybe in the day-to-day fluctuations of life, these definitions are correct, but at the emotional and spiritual extremes, there may be room for a philosophical redrawing of the lines; to help us navigate the unknowable and the unspeakable.

May we draw strength from our faith at all times and in all circumstances. Amen.

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Lepers and Kohanim in Current Times: Contemplations on Parshat Metzora

Vered Lifschitz

The Evil Neighbor / Zelda

As the eve of Passover descended,
and the flames consumed the leaven
in every courtyard,
and the chimney’s broom swept,
her garment charred,
she bounded towards me,
her words racing like lightning,
tears cascading:
“You, standing there opposite,”
she cried,

“care not for me,
my charred attire, and you utter
no solace!
Behold, I am ailing, profoundly
so, consumed by despair.”
A perplexing assertion,
uttered from the depths of a
miserable soul,
who had only recently rented a
room among us.
A foreign and bold and
impudent claim it was.
Deep within me, my soul
enfolded
her frenzied longing, kissing her
yearning for
softness.

...

Whenever she opened her door,
children hid themselves,
as did the neighbors, both
women and men.
Her chilly laughter pursued
our sheltered existence,
penetrating the decorum of our
days:

- Do not deceive yourselves
with the guise of goodness,
her wild laughter proclaimed.
- Do not deceive yourselves
with the facade of your prayer.
- Do not deceive yourselves
with the semblance of your
kindness,
- Do not deceive yourselves
with the illusion of your joy.
- And do not deceive yourselves
that your happiness is complete.

When it became known

that she had departed to distant
parts,
and that the tempest had waned
and she had vanished,
we breathed with greater ease,
unlatched our windows.
Sound the drums,
blow the shofars,
play the flutes and lyres.
Now we may repose.
Prepare the beds,
for tonight we shall sleep.

...

I knew
that we had conversed of her
living soul,
consumed day by day,
as of a plague.
For nought her imprecations
were cast upon us;
her smoldering hands
attempting to embrace our
desolate souls,
bereft of imagination.
In vain she had fluttered vainly,
a flickering flame,
before me with her scarlet,
tattered banners,
so that I might liberate myself
from my own enchanted circle
to uncover the essence of her
existence...

Vered Lifschitz

The poem below is a segment
from a longer poem, by Zelda,
entitled “The Evil Neighbor.”
Who is this evil neighbor? The
evil neighbor is the one who
disrupts our decent serenity;
who interferes with the
bourgeois flow of life, and,

perhaps, even invades the
comfortable space of our
traditions and customs. The evil
neighbor is the one who does
not fit into the human fabric of
our community. She is the
woman whom the neighborhood
children nickname ‘witch’. She
is most probably not beautiful;
nor is she pleasant, intelligent or
wealthy.

She spoils our landscape,
thereby disturbing our peace.
We will feel relieved, and sleep
better when we know that she
has left the neighborhood for
another place, and it doesn’t
matter where – as long as we
don’t have to look at her and
acknowledge her existence.
When we look upon her, the
protective walls of our life seem
to collapse; our self-perception
of being benevolent and
compassionate individuals
seems to dissipate.

The evil neighbor cries out with
a “yearning for softness”; a cry
that conceals a painful life story
– one of constant struggle
against rejection.

The portion of Metzora
commences with the verses:
“This shall be the ordinance for
the leper upon the day of his
cleansing: He shall be brought
unto the kohen. And the kohen
shall go forth outside the camp,
and the kohen shall look, and
behold, the plague of leprosy

has been healed from the leper...”

In the portion of Tazria, the kohen proclaims the condition of the individual afflicted with tzara’at and takes him outside the camp. Yet, this action alone is insufficient; the kohen’s responsibility extends to reintegrating the metzora, the leper, into the fabric of society, constituting a sacred duty to both the afflicted and the community.

The social task with which the kohen is charged – purifying and absolving the one afflicted with tzara’at – is also a religious and spiritual one. In fact, it conveys the following religious assertion: under certain circumstances that are potentially harmful to society, individuals should be temporarily removed from its fold, as part of a process of spiritual renewal and rehabilitation. Nonetheless, it remains our responsibility to facilitate these individuals’ return to the societal embrace when conditions allow, be it upon their healing, or when society itself is ready and resilient, and is no longer threatened by the affliction.

Our pursuit of an orderly existence falters when individuals depart without the prospect of reintegration into the social tapestry of our lives.

Today, there are no worshipping kohanim, and there is no leprosy, for that matter (some even claim a cure has been discovered). Nonetheless, throughout the ages, those afflicted with leprosy were banished from society’s embrace, and cast out from the rhythms of communal life. These outcasts received few visits, and only few had the courage to inquire after them and infuse their isolated existence with the breath of life. However, there were exceptional individuals, like Rabi Yehoshua ben Levi, who would sit and engage in Torah study with them, or Rabbi Aryeh Levin, who would make the journey to the leper hospital in Jerusalem to offer solace. In our times, leprosy has been replaced with other afflictions which lead to social isolation.

While physical leprosy may no longer afflict us, the metaphorical leprosy has expanded its reach. It has transitioned from a mere physical ailment to a stigmatizing label attached to those whom society regards with disdain, casting them out into the shadows even in our time. When we encounter them, we instinctively cross to the opposite sidewalk. We confine them beyond the boundaries of our community, placing them

outside the realm of societal norms.

To many of these individuals, fortune has not been kind, yet their mere presence “irritates” us, not out of malice on their part, nor because they have wronged us, but simply because fate has dealt them an unfavorable hand. They stand apart from us, failing to fit neatly into the mold of societal expectations we have crafted. They may bear physical disabilities, cognitive challenges, mental anguish, or any number of significant hardships. They exist as “others” in every conceivable sense.

And then there is another kind of “others” – those who think differently from us. And, as such, we label them; we demonize them; we engage in battle against them, often without deigning to lend an ear to the truths beating within their hearts.

Today, there are no worshipping kohanim.

Therefore, the responsibility to reintegrate the afflicted back into the fold of society rests upon our own shoulders. It falls upon each and every one of us. This is a religious obligation.

Our task is not to change these “others”, but to acknowledge

their otherness and include them in the circle of life, as well as in our personal circle of life.

We must look upon our “evil neighbors,” those who stir unrest within us, who attempt to arouse our souls – not with disdain for their idiosyncrasies, but with an outstretched hand, inviting them inward. Rather than showing off our imagined garments of righteousness, we must remember that our society needs these “others” to be a part of us.

Levinas sees in the face of the other, a plea directed at the one who gazes upon him, a demand for response, not in words, but in actions, in attitude. The other demands of me to acknowledge his otherness and thereby reach out to him. This is my ethical duty. I cannot simply observe from the sidelines. The other demands engagement; he demands responsibility from me. The other demands action and hospitality; he requires his nakedness to be clothed; he insists that I inconvenience myself and deviate from my comfortable path of life in order to come closer to him.

We live in a time when there are no worshipping kohanim, and it seems that leprosy has also vanished from the world. But the principle still stands. There are “lepers,” and we are required to be the kohanim who

purify them and bring them back into the camp.

This year, we will read Parshat Metzora on Shabbat Hagadol, and two days later we will burn our chametz after cleaning the house, scrubbing the kitchen, and polishing the windows to perfection. Perhaps our untainted windows might afford us a better view of those “others”, our modern-day lepers, such that we will reach out to them and invite them to enter our haven.

“Let all who are hungry come and eat, let all who are in need come and celebrate Passover. This year we are here, next year in the land of Israel. This year we are slaves, next year we will be free.”

**Rabbi Dr. Norman J. Lamm’s
Derashot Ledorot**

A Day of Good Tidings

Our Haftorah for this morning records one of the more fascinating chapters in the early history of our people. Four lepers who, in keeping with Biblical law, were outside the camp of Israel, were hungry and found themselves near starvation. They decided that it was no use to try to reenter the community, because famine reigned in the Land of Israel at the time. Instead, they decided to take their chances and proceed to Aram, what is today Syria, and what was even in

those days the sworn enemy of Israel. If they kill us, they argued, we are no worse off than we are now; and if they let us live, why then we shall we survive. As they approached the fortified city of Aram, the Bible tells us that G-d performed a miracle, and the sound of their approach was in the ears of the Syrians like that of a great army on the march. The Syrians were dumbfounded by the thought that the Israelite king might have hired the Hittites and Egyptian mercenaries to do them battle. Thereupon the Syrians panicked, and leaving Aram in the middle of the day upon a moment’s notice, they all fled and deserted the city. When the four lepers entered the ghost city, they filled themselves with what they found and then they said to each other, we do not do right to care only for ourselves for yom besorah hu, v’anu mach’shim--today is a day of good tidings, and shall we be silent? As patriotic Israelites, they returned to the Land of Israel and notified the guard at the gate that he should tell the king that they alighted upon Aram and v’hinei ein sham ish ve’kol adam--behold there is no man there, neither the voice of a human being, ki im ha-sus assur, ve’ha-chamor assur, v’ohalim ka-asher hemah - but the horse is tied to the stake, and the donkeys are tied, and the tents are as they were. Aram has suddenly been deserted and it is

the perfect time for an Israelite attack against its mortal enemy. In this manner the four lepers were instrumental in achieving a victory of Israel over Syria. This story is an interesting recollection from the Jewish past. But if it is included as a Haftorah which is read and re-read every year, then it must be more than that: it must have ramifications for all times and it must have a special relevance for us of this day. Indeed, I believe that its message is most appropriate to us of 1961.

There comes a time in the life of man--or the life of a people--when he or it realizes that the day is a yom besorah, a day of tidings, a day when an important message makes him restless, urging him to speak out. At a time of this sort, when he feels impelled to say something significant and urgent to the world, he has no right to be silent and to suppress the message which restlessly stirs within him. And one of the major things that we of our age must talk about, expose, and bring to the attention of the world is this: that our life has become such that *ki im ha-sus assur, ve'ha-chamor assur, v'ohalim ka-asher hema--* everything seems to be functioning smoothly, there is every evidence of "business as usual"--but unfortunately, *v'hinei ein sham ish ve'kol adam--* the man is missing; the voice of humanity is absent. The

whole machinery of life and society seems to be so well lubricated, but at the center we do not find the humanness; there is no feeling of compassion. There is no voice of protest raised against injustice.

Our society is essentially based upon the pattern of Aram--a deserted ghost city. Everything seems to be functioning smoothly: communications and transportation, business and finance, universities and laboratories-- but at the core: *v'hinei ein sham ish ve'kol adam--* instead of the warm heartbeat of individual human beings, there is only the grinding of gears and the hum of electronic machines. One of the basic ills of contemporary society is that it is so thoroughly mechanized that it has become dehumanized. The individual human being has been depreciated. Man as such has become depersonalized and has been reduced to a cog in a tremendous machine. We no longer think in terms of individuals; we think of individuals only as little units of society. We do not conceive any longer of patients, but of hospital beds. We do not concern ourselves with hungry children, we count the number of mouths we must feed. We fail to consider the unfortunate victim of an accident, and his widow and orphans; he is only one of the casualty rates on a

holiday. Man has been reduced to a statistic, a thing.

Even in the ideological sense, the *ish* and the *kol adam* have been banished from life. For the last three hundred years, since the onset of the modern era, a mechanistic philosophy has been dominant. According to this philosophy all the world is a machine, of which all parts function until they run down. Even man is a machine--and he does what he does because he must do it, because he has no choice, because man is a creature of habit and circumstance and necessity. He may think that he does what he wants to do; in truth, however, he does it because he must do it and not otherwise. Man is not really a free agent; he is only another screw in the great machine of the universe. He must function in his capacity, mechanically, just like the *sus*, and *chamor* and *ohalim*. He has lost his humanity, his freedom. And as a result of this mechanistic philosophy which has banished human freedom, people have become confirmed in their irresponsibility and have learned to coat it with a respectable veneer of sophistry and sophistication.

In a world of this sort, all Jews must recognize a yom besorah, a time when their message is of the utmost importance if the humanity of man is to be salvaged. Israel dare not be silent. It must proclaim for all

the world that man was created in the Image of G-d, that he is a thinking and feeling human being, not a thing; that it is not true that he is just a little more advanced than the animals--rather, he is but "little lower than the angels." Man, Israel must teach the world, is unique. Every individual human being is absolutely irreplaceable. These are good tidings that we must this day pronounce for all this world to hear. We must restore the value of man up to its former dignity.

The historic trial that is now taking place in Jerusalem has fortunately gone beyond the question of merely what to do with one man who is the greatest murderer of all times. The proceedings are beginning to turn on the crime, rather than the criminal. All the material is now present for a great lesson for our generation, the generation that has grown up and matured after the war: a new insight into man and his capacity for depravity and decadence. One would think that this impact would hit the world like a ton of bricks.

Instead, *ki im ha-sus assur, ve'ha-chamor assur, v'ohalim ka-asher hemah*. Everything functions normally, the busses run and the elevators go, the radio blares, and the television records, the newspapers are read and stock is exchanged - *v'hinei ein sham ish ve'kol adam*, but the humanity of man which

should make him rise to new heights of indignation, has remained essentially muted. A mass circulation magazine has even begun to complain that the news from the trial has become boring. And listen to this most amazing example of "business as usual": a report from the *Osservatore Romano*. One would have expected that with the revelation anew of the terrible depth to which our culture has descended, a culture raised in Christianity and in Christian concepts and categories, that the officials of the Church would bow their heads in shame and acknowledge their participation even if indirect, in the guilt for these crimes. If not an open confession, one might at the very least have expected a sense of humility. Instead, the Vatican's official newspaper had nothing better but in the same month of the trial to reveal that Titus, the Roman general who destroyed the Holy Temple and ravaged Jerusalem in the year 70, felt that the Jews deserved their punishment, and that he was the instrument for their destruction. "The Jewish people were so obviously struck by Divine punishment that it would indeed have been an impious action to spare them from destruction." To which "Osservatore Romano" adds wisely and sagely that they know what the sin of all Jews was: the rejection of the Christian witness and faith. At

the very time that official Christianity should recognize their share in the responsibility for the horror and the shame of the twentieth century, they re-warm and re-hash the old theological nonsense which has caused so much anguish in the world, which has stained so many pages of history with innocent Jewish blood! The same horses, the same donkeys, the same tents-but there is no human man, the voice of humanity is lacking in the Vatican.

At a time of this sort, when sensationalist magazines are bored and when pious journals are snickering, the State of Israel has a sacred historic duty to recognize that *yom besorah hu, v'anu mach'shim*, that it has an urgent message to tell the world and that it dare not draw a curtain of silence over itself; that no matter how unwilling the world is to listen, it must drill it in again and again like the proverbial drop of water which ultimately forms a hole in the rock. It must remind the world of *ish*, of humaneness.

Throughout Jewish history, we have been the ones to wake up the world to the message of humanity. From the time of Moses of whom it is said *va-yiffen koh va-koh va-yar ki ein ish*--that he looked hither and yon--and saw that there was no man--and therefore he became the man to execute justice and righteousness--until the time of

the rabbis of the Mishnah who proclaimed that be'makom she-ein ish, hishtadel li-heyot ish, in a place where there is no man, you must become that man, Jews have recognized that where others are remiss in their humaneness we shall assert ours. How appropriate a task for the State of Israel which this week celebrated its thirteenth birthday. Thirteen years is the time when traditionally a young lad becomes an ish--a man. On this bar mitzvah year of the State of Israel, it too must proclaim for the world the message of ish.

The second lesson to emerge from this historic trial is that without G-d, without Torah, without an ideal higher than man himself, man can be reduced to a very clever robot who will kill and murder efficiently as part of "obedience." He will be able to sit behind the desk, and with complete politeness to secretaries and underlings and callers, as part of his "orders" and "discipline," calmly press a button which will seal the doom of thousands and millions of his fellow men. In other words, it has revealed to us, to our new generation, that modern man has something rotten and mean in his soul, that he is the kind of being who can allow "business as usual" in utter disregard of the sanctity of ish, and without ever listening to kol adam.

We Orthodox Jews in a world of this sort, have a historic responsibility. We must break out of the bonds of our usual discord and wake up our fellow Jews and through them the world. We must educate--first our own Jews, and afterwards all others--that unless the Divine Image fills the human form, then man is better off dead than alive. We must teach all humanity that if you take the word ish, man, and remove the middle letter, yud--which stands for G-d--what you have left is: esh--a consuming fire, whether it be the powerful fire of the crematorium or the cataclysmic fire of the nuclear bomb. Through every available means, through school and through paper, through journal and through speech, through friendship and through example, we must teach the Torah way of life, which in practice for Jews and in its ideals for all people, can alone bring back to man a sense of dignity which comes from the Tzellel Elohim, the Divine Image in which he was created. Yom besorah hu, v'anumach'shim. We must teach our fellow Jews both the grandeur of our own heritage and also the danger of a secularized, G-dless culture. We must tell them that if they want to assimilate, let them first know the kind of world into which they are assimilating: a sick, sick culture, the very cradle in which Nazism was nursed and weaned. For

men who truly believed in G-d could never let "orders" by mere creatures transcend such very basic and fundamental religious principles as "Thou shalt not murder." A misguided religious bigot will kill individuals in a rage of passion. But cold, white collar, wholesale murder with scientific efficiency is possible only in secular society in which G-dlessness has allowed science to develop into deadly channels.

There is a nega, a plague, in the soul of modern man, man whose sus and chamor and ohalim are cared for, but whose heart is in disarray, whose spirit is in chaos, whose soul suffers from sickening cynicism, whose core of ish has been obliterated, who is like the ghost of city: only a ghost of a man. And our Sidra tells us the one effective procedure for him who suffers a nega, and that is: ve'hava el ha-kohen--he shall be brought to the priest. We must bring suffering man back to Torah, back to G-d, back to a sense of the sacred. For the nega of our times is a disease of the soul and a plague of the spirit.

If the State of Israel is to serve its historic destiny, then it must assume the role of ish. On the years of its bar mitzvah, it must attempt to achieve religious maturity. Diplomacy, military marches on Independence Day, all this is good and well; but this is not the essence of the destiny of Israel. Israel must now rise to its full historic stature and

benign to fulfill the religious role which destiny gave it.

There is no doubt that religiously speaking, Israel has made mistakes in the past; only one who is blind will deny that. But, like the proud father of his bar mitzvah son we recite over Israel the Barukh she-petarani--blessed is G-d who has let us survive those years of immaturity and weakness and mistakes. We now turn to the future, a future which Israel must return to its sacred origins.

The good wishes go out from the hearts of all Jews to the State of Israel. Like the young lad who, as his first mitzvah, learns to lay his tefillin, so do we wish Israel the blessings of tefillin. Just as the tefillin consists of two parts, the shel yad (the part that is wound on the hands) and the shel rosh (the part that is wound on the head), so do we hope that Israel will be strong in hand and dedication of mind and soul to Almighty G-d will be its religious greatness. In its dual capacity as a strong and peaceful nation and as a holy and noble people, may the State of Israel relay its message to all the world, that the G-d who dwells in its midst has given every man the Divine Image, and that every human being must assert the ish within him and articulate the kol adam, the voice of humanity which G-d granted him. For today is a yom besorah, a day of proclamation

of this great message, on this day we shall not be silent.

And in return, in the words of the Grace, ha-rachaman yevasser lanu besurot tovot, yeshuot ve'nachmot- the all merciful G-d will proclaim to us good tidings, tidings of salvation and consolation. Amen.