

Parshat Tazria-Metzora
"How to Treat Leprosy in 2009"
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As a rabbi, the news of this past week has been weighing on me very heavily. A Garden City father killed his wife and two daughters before killing himself in a Maryland hotel room. While the Police officially have no motive for this horrific murder/suicide, speculation has begun to revolve around an FBI investigation that was connecting the father to a Madoff style Ponzi scheme that was on the verge of being exposed. Is it possible that a father murdered his wife and two daughters and himself because he was embarrassed and felt he had nowhere to turn?

Also this past week the CFO of Freddie Mac the embattled Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation was found dead in the basement of his Washington suburban home apparently from a suicide – he left a wife, and 5-year-old daughter. The SEC and the Justice Department have been questioning officials of Freddie Mac about possible accounting violations and other matters in recent months. Could this be another case of someone who feared he was about to be exposed and again felt he had nowhere to turn?

Of course there is no way to know what was going on in the heads of these men as they were about to do these incomprehensible deeds – but as a rabbi, I can't help but wonder – if they had felt they could talk to someone, share their burden with anyone –if they just would have, could have turned to one someone who could put their arms around their shoulders and say – "ok, this is tough, things are bad –but they are not hopeless—we can work through this- yes, things are rough but we can get you through this..." Might it have been possible to have avoided these terrible tragedies?

This week's Torah reading contains the regulations concerning the *Metzora* generally known as the "leper". The leper is also one who perceives himself to be – beyond hope and is often seen this way by others. The leper can see himself as unredeemable, incurable, hopeless and helpless – so how the our tradition deals with this most extreme of situations can, I believe provide important insights into our challenge – as we strive to be a society, a community where no one should ever feel – no matter what they have done, no matter what has happened to them – that they are hopeless – irredeemable – beyond help.

Chapter 14 of Leviticus in today's reading which can be found on page 660 in our *Chumashim*, begins with the ritual for the leper when his leprous period is over: "This shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he is to be purified. He shall be brought to the priest. ("ve-huvah el ha-cohen", JPS "When it has been reported to the priest"), the priest shall go outside the camp. If the priest sees that the leper has been healed of his scaly affection,"(Lev. 14:2-3), he will perform the ritual that will return the leper to society.

There are two types of rabbinic comments on our torah text. One kind takes a textual problem and solves it. The other type creates a problem in the text where there is none. These tend to be even more interesting and I think the following may be a good example.

My colleague Rabbi Michael Graetz, highlights a striking question that our tradition focuses on regarding the exact sequence of events. When a leper is to be made clean, is he brought to the priest, "*ve-huvah el ha-cohen*", as in verse 2; or does the priest "go outside", "*ve-yatza ha-cohen el mi-hutz la-mahaneh*", to the leper, as in verse 3? The JPS translation smoothes over this difficulty by translating, "*ve-huvah el ha-cohen*", as "when it has been reported to the priest". This is probably the *pshat*, the simple intended meaning and if it is – there is no problem in the text at all. But, the rabbis in the Midrash and commentaries struggle with the above question and persist with their questioning. And in their struggles emerges a wisdom that we can use today.

The fundamental way we as a society, we as a community should relate to the sick, should relate to the troubled – are made clear in the varying interpretations to the textual contradiction they create.

One Midrash turns the Hebrew word "*huvah*", literally "brought", into two Hebrew words, "*hu vah*", that is "he comes". This midrash makes it absolutely clear that at the critical moment when the leper seeks cleansing and purification, the leper is to come to the priest. And this Midrash asks: "Why? Why is the leper to come to the priest, and not stay in his quarantine so that the priest comes to him?" And it answers: "Because, all are far from him" (Tanhuma, Metzora 8). If I understand this midrash correctly – it puts the entire burden for the purification of the leper on the priest. For the ill person, the leper, to begin to free themselves from the stigma of being dismissed or removed from society, they must have someone they can go to, someone who accepts them with no strings attached. Here they are completely separated and isolated from society – we want nothing to do with lepers – they are dirty and disgusting -- but there still must be someone whom they can approach, someone they feel will not turn them away even in their leprous state – and that someone is the priest. *Ve-huvah el-hakoheyn*.

We see from this that the "cleansing" ritual is not only physical cleansing of scabs or sores, but it is a spiritual cleansing of removing the social barriers of exclusion or even rejection which illness brings in its wake. One has to be able to "go to" the priest without feeling alienated. Rabbi Akiba in the *halacha* makes a special point of noting that it is the leper who initiates this purification process. What triggers the sequence of events for his purification is when "he thinks he is clean..." The priest is not allowed to wait, if the person thinks they are ready.

I believe that the ethical value being stressed here is incredible. The priest is someone who needs to be readily available to the leper – at his beck and call – so that when "*he thinks*" he might be ready – the priest will be there to cleanse him, to purify him – to ease his transition back to the community. The Ramban spells out the meaning of this *Midrash Halakha* by interpreting the phrase "he shall be brought to the priest" thus: "on the day he wishes to be cleansed, he shall be brought to the priest, for he never can be cleansed except by his own request" (on Lev. 14, 2) When a person who has suffered social ostracism, for whatever the reason, has reached a point where their mind is made up to break out and return to society, the authorities who signify acceptance, that is the priest, must immediately respond to that person's request. It is their request that triggers the cleansing, not necessarily the time frame or the rules of society. We must honor their feelings and wishes.

However, the Ramban also raises the possibility that for some people they may never reach this point. There are some people who have so internalized their leprosy, their impurity, and their uncleanness, that they do not see themselves as ready for re-entry, purification and re-

socialization. If we wait for them, suggests the Ramban, these people will never be ready – they will never seek out the priest and they will forever remain lepers. That is why verse three was included in our torah portion: *va-yatza ha-coheyn el michutz l'machane* – that the priest shall go outside the camp. For the Ramban – these two verses do not represent a textual contradiction but a reaction to two very different kinds of people. And with respect to this second type – those who may never of their own accord see themselves as healed, healable or redeemable -- in this case, the leper is to be brought, even against his will, to the priest for cleansing. For those for whom a return may be emotionally difficult, our obligation is NOT to wait for them to decide to return to society, but to help them do so.

What a wonderful lesson – how desperately do we need its message today.

The year is 2009 – but leprosy is alive and well. It is still possible to do things or to have things happen to us that result in our feeling totally isolated and cut off from those around us. Maybe it is a hole of our own making that we have dug for ourselves – through poor decisions, clouded judgments, greed, desire. We might be a CFO of a major financial corporation or the governor of the State of New York – and overnight we are lepers, untouchable, reprehensible, unclean, unworthy, unlovable and exiled outside the camp. We must go through a period of separation and purification – we must search our souls, confront the errors of our ways, relent and repent – and then, “this shall be the ritual for a leper at the time that he or she is to be purified...”

There is no Temple any more, and there are no priests who function as they did in the days of the Temple some 2000 years ago – but each of us can take on the duties of the ancient priest – each of us has the possibility to conduct the ritual for a leper at the time that he or she is to be purified. And as your rabbi, I am certainly prepared to do so.

No one should ever feel so alone, so isolated, so dirty or disgusting – that they are beyond our reach. If you know someone who is hurting – you must be the priest who can guide him or her back at the time they need to be purified. If they are “verse two” kind of people – if they turn to you, reach out to you – you must, says the Ramban – accept them when they feel they are ready to be purified – you must make them feel loved and worthy and redeemable when they seek your love and your acceptance. There are judges and newspapers aplenty who will pass judgment and render their verdict – as a friend – you need not approve of what they might have done but you must be there to forgive and help them find a way back to the camp. As a rabbi I must be there to help them and as parents we must be there for our children. We parents have such high hopes for our children, such lofty expectations – and we are very good at communicating these hopes and these expectations to them. But we must also make sure that they understand that if they do not fulfill our hopes or rise to our expectations that we still love them. We must make sure that our children understand that no matter what they do, we will love them. What was it that Robert Frost said about home? “Home is the place where no matter what, they have to take you.” We must make sure that our children understand that no matter what they do they can always come home.

And if they are “verse 3” kind of people, the kind who might never feel themselves to be redeemable and lovable again—you must not wait for them – you must go out of the camp and reach out to them. If you know someone who is hurting, a friend, a child – even if you do not know why, or if they can't bring themselves to tell you why – you must let them know there is

nothing they can do or say that is not redeemable, not fixable, nothing that after a period of separation and purification will prevent them from returning to the camp.

Teach them the wonderful saying of Rabbi Nahman of Bratislav – *im atah maamin she yecholim l'kalkeyl...tamin she yecholim l'takeyn* -- If you believe that it is possible to break – believe that it is possible to fix – if you understand that you are the one who created the mess you are in – you have the same ability to find your way out – if you dug the hole – you can dig your way out of it. There is nothing that can't be fixed, repaired and healed in the world of the soul. You may not be able to prevent a divorce, a jail sentence, a loss of income or a loss of employment – but you can prevent a loss of hope – and that may be the most important thing you will ever do for another human being.

The torah makes it clear that the leper cannot purify himself. Another leper cannot purify him. Only the priest can do it. Even though there might be much support in the leper's own camp, even though he may have read every self-help book every published – it is not sufficient. He needs us – she needs you. Our role, as the group to which the leper wishes to return, is to accept him, and to help her totally.

Yes, it pains me to read in the newspaper of those who felt so far beyond the pale of the community that there could be no help, no hope -- that is why God spoke to Moses in our torah portion for today, to instruct him to teach the children of Israel – that there is always a way back, there is always a way home, *zot tihyeh torat hametzora*.