

Parshat Tazria Metzora
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Unlikely Heroes

I don't often give my sermons titles – I sometimes envy those Christian ministers who put their pithy sermon titles out on the signs in front of their churches – they serve as an intriguing invitation that piques your interest and makes you want to hear what they have to say. My main problem is that when you don't really know what you are going to say until Friday – it is hard to publish a title on Monday. I remember once when I was an Assistant Rabbi and my Senior Rabbi published his Rosh Hashanah sermon title a month in advance in the bulletin – he said he would speak on, "The 'Unanswered Question.'" I was amazed that my senior colleague had his sermon finished so far in advance and intrigued by the title so I walked into his office and asked him what it was he was speaking about in his sermon – to which he replied, *that's* the unanswered question!

But today, I have a sermon title for you – I want to spend a few minutes speaking to you about "Unlikely Heroes". What is a hero, what makes a hero, where do they come from? Are heroes born? Are they the product of circumstance or are they some rare breed of person, a remarkable combination of strength, courage and bravery?

Hero is a word that has become very popular since 9/11 – we began speaking of the first responders as heroes – those men and women whose job it was to rush into a burning building with little thought to their own health and welfare – these men and women seemed to epitomize our sense of modern day heroes. That is why, I have always been intrigued that our tradition seemed to present a very different notion of what it meant to be a hero, a very different model for being a hero. Abraham – the first Jew – has few feats of strength to his credit, fewer acts of bravery or physical prowess – he is known for his humility and kindness – his lasting legacy was his hospitality – could you see a comic book modeled after "Hospitality Man"? *Moshe Rabeynu* – was a reluctant hero – he begged God to send someone else – he was a stutterer, he had no talent for public speaking and pleaded with God that there was no way he could stand before Pharaoh and argue his people's case. The prophets too, one after another – are reluctant to embrace their roles – they are anti-heroes more than they are heroes. And so we have in the Bible and throughout Jewish history a very different notion of what it means to be a hero. We are a people, a nation of unlikely heroes.

Which brings us to today's *parasha* – *Tazria Metzora*. The subject of the torah reading is the ancient treatment of the leper – who we now know were people who had certain types of skin diseases. What is relevant to our understanding of the Torah is the question of *how* the torah treated them and *who* treated them. People's natural reactions were to shun the leper, to exile them and cast them out. They were contagious so the reflex of the community was to assert its needs of self survival over any consideration for the individual needs of the leper – the rights of the leper were trampled, the needs of the leper were ignored in the rush to protect the rights and needs of the larger community. It is in this context that the torah enters and sets down rules regarding the treatment of the leper; laws that balance the legitimate needs of the community with the rights and dignity of the leper. Isolate them if you must – but the *koheyn* – the man of God, the purest, holiest representative of the community must maintain contact with them – check them regularly –so that when cured they could be immersed, purified and allowed to re-enter the community.

And if the torah portion deals with the laws regarding how we as an *am kadosh and mamlechet kohanim* – as a holy people, as a nation of priests – would deal with these most marginal of our people in general – the *haftarah* focuses on four particular lepers who lived in the time of the prophet Elisha and may well be the unlikeliest heroes you will ever meet.

Let's first take a look at the *haftarah* – it can be found in our *humashim* on page 676. Now it actually helps to know the larger context of the Book of Kings from which this *haftarah* is excerpted. It is part of the Elijah/Elisha narratives and their purpose is to demonstrate the power of these prophets. The general form of these stories is that the prophet makes a prediction in the name of God – the prediction seems unlikely if not downright outrageous – the people, or the king – mock the prophet, but then the prediction comes true and the power of the prophet as a true spokesperson for God is enhanced.

In this particular story – the northern kingdom is under siege from the King of Aram – “King Ben-hadad of Aram mustered his entire army and marched upon Samaria and besieged it.” (2 Kings 6:24) As the notes in our *humash* point out on page 675, “the siege is described as brutal. Famine and cannibalism were rampant, and the price of food was out of control...the King of Israel, utterly helpless, sent his messenger to threaten the prophet Elisha who replies that “by this time tomorrow” all would change...the royal messenger scoffs at the prophet's message.” Now this is the background to the remarkable chapter seven of the second book of Kings that is our *haftarah*.

In our *haftarah*, there are two groups of people – the poor Israelites who are inside the city walls – under siege – suffering from hunger. They are desperate and hopeless. And outside the city sit camped the foreign troops of the king of Aram, well fed, empowered, on the verge of victory.

And then in the opening lines of the story we are introduced to a third group -- who occupy a place in between the first two – who literally sat outside the gates of the city but in front of the encamped troops: “There were four men, lepers, outside the gate. They said to one another, ‘Why should we sit here waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, still we die. Come let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they let us live we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die.’” These four anonymous lepers are, in my humble opinion, amongst the most fascinating characters in the entire Bible. We are never told their names – to some extent their anonymity merely exaggerates the lowliness and desperation of their situation. They are nobodies; they are the least of the least, the most marginal of the marginal.

Definition of tough times – you know things are tough when the lepers who have been sent out of the city have better options than you. The calculations of the four lepers to defect to the enemy camp – is less a comment on the nature of the lepers than it is a description of the desperation that was Israel besieged. When the lepers are defecting – things could not be much worse.

But wait, after showing the lepers defecting, I would have expected the camera to pan back to the Israelites under siege – the point has been made, the rats are jumping ship – but the camera stays with the lepers – something very interesting is going on here.

“They set out at twilight for the Aramean camp; but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp, there was no one there. Now the story adds an editorial note that what had apparently happened is that God had caused the Arameans camped there to hear a sound of chariots and horses – the din of a huge army – they panicked and as they would say in the old Westerns, “they high tailed it out of town..” they just picked up and left – leaving everything behind, abandoning their camp and all their possessions and as the Bible puts it, “they fled headlong in the twilight, abandoning their tents and horses and asses just as it was – they fled for their lives!”

Well you can imagine the reaction of the lepers – the Arameans are gone – the Israelites know nothing of their retreat – and only these four lepers have the opportunity to eat and drink and enjoy the booty they left behind. And then comes the pivotal moment in this narrative. These four lepers – who had been cast off by their fellow Israelites and could easily rationalize that they owe them nothing – these four lepers who stand inside the enemy camp – which had they been there might just as easily have killed them as fed them – these four lepers make one of the most incredible comments in the entire Bible: “*lo cheyn anachnu oseim*- We are not doing right.” Can you picture this scene? Can you imagine this moment? The enemy is gone, the Israelites are back inside their walled city – starving to death – here these four lepers sit with all the food, gold and silver for themselves – and rather than enjoy it, rather than rationalize that a world that has kicked them and rejected them and thrown them out can go fly a kite – no these four lepers have a conscience - “*lo cheyn anachnu oseim*- We are not doing right.”

“This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent...come let us go and inform the king’s palace.” Now from here out the story is fairly predictable – the people are saved, the prophet is vindicated and everyone lives happily ever after – at least for a little while. But, before we close the book on this episode – I want you to remember these four lepers – the unlikeliest heroes in world history.

Why do I insist on calling them heroes? Look at the note in our *humashim* – it is on page 676 – it says it better than I ever could: “It is intriguing that the fulfillment of the divine oracle begins with the defection of the four lepers, who dramatize the polarities and precariousness of the situation as a whole. What is more, it is precisely their social and ritual marginality that puts them beyond the walls and in a position to flee to the Aramean camp. As aliens among the aliens, they bring “good news” back to the city once they overcome their private desires and think of their starving compatriots in Samaria. Their moral turning is at the core of the narrative.” Once they overcome their private desires and think of their starving compatriots - that is the moral turning point in the narrative.

Who are our heroes? The strongest amongst us? The bravest amongst us? Those capable of feats of enormous daring? We Jews have a very different definition of what it means to be a hero. For us a hero is the one who does the right thing – no more, no less. For us a hero is the one who “overcomes their private desires and think of their starving compatriots...” This is in keeping with that wonderful *mishna* from the fourth chapter of *Pirke Avot* where Ben Zoma asks: “Who is strong? The one who can conquer his own passions.” Such are the nature of Jewish Superheroes.

We live in a world where the definition of what it means to be a hero has set the bar so high – that we can only conclude that heroes are indeed supermen. We have even created a term for

normal people who do exceptional things – we call them anti-heroes. Think of Clint Eastwood as disgruntled Korean War Vet in *Gran Torino* – and we have the classic portrayal of the anti-hero. But for us Jews, these aren't anti-heroes – they are the true heroes.

It is very dramatic when Superman flies to the rescue and saves the world from destruction by battling the forces of evil – but imagine if you will how much evil could be driven from the world if people like you and me – would just choose to do the right thing?

Imagine how much suffering would have been avoided if Bernie Madoff had just done the right thing? Read the newspapers, take a survey of your own lives and just think about how many of the worlds problems could be solved without any need for Superman or Batman or Spiderman or any superhero – if only people would do the right thing.

This past week, many of us gathered in this sanctuary to bid farewell to a beloved friend and a past president of this congregation, Arthur Goldberg, *zichrono l'vracha*. And, he would be most uncomfortable and most unhappy with me for just mentioning his name in a sermon on heroes. I could hear him protest – “I'm no hero, I am just a simple guy who tried to do my best.” And yet, if you think about why we loved him so much, and why we turned to him for guidance time and time again - it was because he was someone who always tried to do the right thing. That's why he was, in the spirit of my tradition, as I understand it, my hero.

And you can be my hero too. As your rabbi, I do not expect you to fly faster than a speeding bullet, or leap tall buildings in a single bound – if you want to impress me, if you want to be my hero – all you have to do is the right thing. Now, it is not nearly as simple as it sounds – in some ways – it is easier to leap a tall building. It takes enormous strength, incredible commitment, and amazing fortitude – just to do the right thing. That's why we live in a world of so few heroes.

“There were four men, lepers, outside the gate...” how often we Jews felt marginalized by the world, how easy it would be to rationalize that we owe the world nothing – and yet our strength, like the strength of those four lepers – is that we have, time and time again remained true to our values – and done the right thing – and in the doing have transformed the world.

Just do the right thing, and you too can be a hero.