



VAYIKRA

Tazria-Metzora / 3 Iyar

Do You Feel All Alone? The Social Leper

April 29, 2017

DO YOU FEEL ALL ALONE?

THE SOCIAL LEPER: A CHANCE FOR REBIRTH

ABSTRACT

Have you ever felt like an outcast? Have you ever had a sense of “not belonging” ... isolated ... rejected ... shunned like a social leper?

As social creatures, whose sense of well being is dependent on interactions with others, feeling separate and apart can be most distressing to our psyches. None of us are immune to the occasional experience of existential loneliness, and rejection and abandonment can be especially devastating to children.

The Torah addresses the problem of the social outcast in this week’s reading, which at first glance may seem obscure and irrelevant to our modern times. Here, the Torah discusses *metzora*, a person afflicted with a spiritual, leper-like disease who was sequestered from the community and banished to live alone outside of the camp until he was healed. But upon a deeper look, the “law of the leper” contains some very relevant lessons to our lives today concerning those who feel shunned by society for whatever reason.

The Torah considers this so important that it devotes two full chapters (comprising nearly 100 verses) – in Parshat Tazria and Parshat Metzora – to the subject. And odd as it may seem, the introduction to the discussion of the leper does not mention anything repellent at all. Indeed, it speaks of a pure miracle ... conception and childbirth.

Another puzzle concerning the leper is introduced by the Talmud, which describes the Messiah – of all people – as a leper! So what are we to make of these paradoxes?

In tackling these questions, this sermon arrives at some surprising answers about rebirth – a timely topic just a couple of weeks after Passover, when we celebrated climbing out of the pits of *Mitzrayim* (a word which shares its root with *metzora*).

Along the way, this sermon explores the teenage phenomenon known as “cyber-bullying” with which young people isolate some of their numbers as social lepers, and it relates the poignant story of one man who believed himself a born pariah.

1. Nobody and Unknown (Joke)

A very wealthy American Jew arrived in Israel and during his tour he asked to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. There is no such tomb in Israel, but in order not to disappoint him the tour guide decided to improvise, taking him to the Har Herzl Military Cemetery and pointing to the back side of a gravestone there.

But the American took a long look and walked around to the other side of the grave, where he clearly saw engraved the name “Abraham Goldman 1920-1948.” Very angry, he said to his tour guide, “I thought this was supposed to be the grave of the Unknown Soldier!”

“It is,” the guide replied. “As a tailor he was a nobody, but as a soldier he was totally unknown.”

2. Do You Feel Alone?

Have you ever felt like a nobody? Forgotten by others, isolated from society? Have you ever had a sense of “not belonging” ... rejected ... shunned like a social leper?

As social creatures, whose sense of well being is dependent on interactions with others, feeling separate and apart can be most distressing to our psyches. None of us are immune to the occasional experience of existential loneliness, and rejection and abandonment can be especially devastating to children.

3. Cyber-bullying

We know that kids can be cruel. But their cruelty, like their moods, tempers and emotions tend to flare and die away. A few minutes after a bitter feud, they are laughing together like nothing has happened.

Unfortunately, modern technology has introduced another level to the common spat among kids, especially teenagers, though there have been stories of kids as young as nine who have been bruised (and even damaged) by this new way of communicating taunts, insults and even explicit pictures.¹

Facebook, Twitter and texting allow kids to ridicule their friends, peers or neighbors, impersonate them, lie about them and then disseminate – within seconds – that hurtful talk to the entire class or social circle. When the recipients forward such messages, the effect on the victim and his or her family can be devastating.

Why? Because online bullying can be more psychologically savage than schoolyard bullying. The Internet erases inhibitions, with adolescents often going further online than they could ever go in person.

¹ “As Bullies Go Digital, Parents Play Catch-Up,” New York Times, Dec. 4, 2010, and “A Girl’s Photo, and Altered Lives,” New York Times, Mar. 26, 2011.

This phenomenon has become so common that it has a name of its own – “cyber-bullying” – and it has already been the subject of numerous studies and books. In fact, cyber-bullying – as well the old fashioned kind of bullying – have become such a huge social problem that it has spawned its own genre in book publishing. There are now nearly 2,000 works in print on this subject and they are selling briskly as parents grow more and more desperate to resolve the problem.²

It is no longer a matter of teaching kids “sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt you.” Platitudes won’t do when kids are so cruelly ostracized that they are driven to commit suicide – as happened two years ago with Phoebe Prince, a high school student in Massachusetts. There are countless tragic stories with kids so viciously taunted by others that their families must move out of town to save their child from being permanently scarred as a social pariah.

And that brings us to today’s topic. How does someone who becomes a pariah – for whatever reason – recover his sense of self-worth and belonging?

For answers, we turn to this week’s Torah reading, which discusses – of all things – the leper.

4. The Leper

What is a leper?

A leper is someone suffering from a horribly disfiguring disease caused by bacteria. Left untreated, leprosy can be progressive, causing open skin lesions and resulting in tissue loss that causes permanent deformation. Because of this terrible, highly contagious disease, lepers have always been social outcasts. So much so that, in today’s English, the word leper is most often used to denote somebody shunned by society – synonymous with “reject” or “pariah.”

The Torah calls him *metzora*. But Torah’s leper is not an ordinary leper, for the Torah is speaking about a person with another problem altogether, a spiritual problem with physical manifestations, not a leprous bacterial infection.³ And Maimonides writes that this disease – which occurred primarily in spiritually advanced individuals whose body functions reflected their spiritual state – does not exist today.⁴

So what relevance can this possibly have for our modern lives?

Since the very word “Torah” means “instruction” (from the Hebrew *hora’ab*), we must assume that the chapters pertaining to the *metzora* do contain timeless lessons. Furthermore, these lessons must be of crucial

² See “Publishers Revel in Youthful Cruelty,” New York Times, March 26, 2013.

³ Talmud, Arachin 15b and 16a.

⁴ Yad, Tumath Tzaraath 16:10.

importance as the Torah devotes two full chapters – in Parshat Tazria and Parshat Metzora – to the subject of this pariah, and how he or she can be healed and re-introduced into society.

But odd as it may seem, the introduction to the discussion of the leper – which is obviously linked with it in the same Torah reading – does not mention anything repellent at all. Indeed, it speaks of a pure miracle: conception and childbirth.

5. Another Puzzle

Another puzzle is introduced by the Talmud,⁵ which describes the Messiah – of all people – as a leper!

The Talmud relates a most amazing conversation between the Prophet Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who wanted to know when the Messiah would finally arrive.

Elijah replied, “Go ask him yourself.”

“Where can I find him?” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi wanted to know.

“He sits among the lepers at the gates of the city [of Rome].”

“And how I will know him?”

“The other lepers,” revealed Elijah, “untie all the bandages over their sores and then retie them. But he unties and reties each bandage individually, so that he will not delay if he is summoned.”

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi went to the gates of the city and found the Messiah among the lepers just as the Prophet Elijah had described, and asked him, “When will you come?”

The Messiah answered, “Today.”

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi returned to the Prophet Elijah, but though he had seen the Messiah, he was not happy. “[The Messiah] spoke falsely to me,” he complained, “for he told me that he would come today, yet he has not come.”

“You misunderstood,” said Elijah. “When he said ‘today’ he was quoting a verse from the Book of Psalms: ‘Today, if only we would hear [G-d’s] voice.’”⁶

So is the leper a pariah or a savior? And what are we to make of these paradoxes?

⁵ Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a.

⁶ Psalms 95:7.

6. A Leper's Conception

Before we tackle these questions – and I promise you some surprising answers – I'd like to tell you a very poignant story related by a colleague of mine.

Some years ago a fellow came to this rabbi for spiritual counseling and began to describe his miserable life. “As far back as I can remember,” the fellow confessed, “I was shunned. People would ridicule and pick on me. I was always the bully's favorite target ... I don't know why ... I don't know what it is about me, but I seem to project a negative energy that elicits scorn and contempt...”

Before the rabbi could phrase some words of consolation, the fellow continued: “And then one day, looking for some solace in the Torah, I found a description of my life: This is the law of the leper ... he remains alone, outside the camp.⁷ Yes, I thought to myself, that's me. Isolated, alone, a pariah, with no home, no family and no community.”

What do you say when someone shares such feelings of self-loathing? The rabbi was overcome with pity and unable to respond for the lump in his throat. But then, the man said something even more heart-breaking:

“So, as I was reading the Torah chapter, having finally discovered my tragic story, I noticed that the two sections concerning lepers are called Tazria and Metzora. Tazria literally means ‘conceiving’ and Metzora literally means ‘leper.’ How uncanny, I thought to myself. I was actually conceived and born a leper. I am inherently a repulsive person. My doomed destiny is set in stone...”

The rabbi was about to explain to him that these words – Tazria and Metzora – are just the names of the respective portions derived from their opening words, and they are not meant to be combined into one statement. But then he stopped himself because he realized that this man was speaking from deep pain, and no matter how macabre, this was his personal interpretation which resonated in his heart. Any Talmudic reading or interpretation of biblical commentators was irrelevant to this moment.

Secondly, the rabbi remembered that the sages do actually comment on the fact that these two Torah portions (Tazria and Metzora) are often read together as this year. And that their juxtaposition does bring about a bizarre convergence of these two paradoxical elements: the power and beauty of conception and birth, and the degradation and lowliness of the leper.

7. High and Low

Indeed, Sefer Yetzirah (the Kabbalistic “Book of Formation”) states:⁸ “Nothing is higher than pleasure (*oneg*). Nothing is lower than leprosy (*negab*).” *Oneg* and *negab* consist of the same three Hebrew letters: *ayin, nun,*

⁷ Leviticus 13:46 and 14:2-3.

⁸ Chapter 2, Mishne 4.

gimmel. When the *ayin* comes first it creates *oneg* (“pleasure”), but when the letters are re-organized and the *nun* comes first, it creates *negab* (a “leprous curse”).

There is no greater pleasure (*oneg*) than birth. But pleasure is only possible and appreciated when contrasted with something unpleasant. In reply to Job’s timeless question “Why do people suffer?” G-d replied (in short): “If there was no life there would be no pain, if there was no birth there would be no death, if there were no pleasure there would be no suffering.”⁹

Negab is a form of death (for the leper is considered as “dead”). Yet the same letters slightly re-organized describe the deepest pleasure of birth.

The sages go on to explain that the deepest pleasure is derived from transforming the abyss, revealing the deepest sparks of divine light that lie embedded within the murky depths. And thus we can link the two terms Tazria and Metzora to intuit new revelations conceived in the womb of darkness.

But this is the opposite interpretation to this fellow’s – he read the same terms and came up with: “a leper from conception ... a monster from birth.”

How could the rabbi not react to such a statement? Never does Judaism believe that monsters are born. “No evil comes from above,” our sages tell us.¹⁰ Ugliness is man-made ... and often self-inflicted.

8. The Most Fundamental Truth

It is perhaps the most fundamental truth of all truths – and the basis of the entire Torah – that every individual was created in the Divine Image, each with a pure soul, and no matter what happens in one’s lifetime, the sacred innocence remains intact.

It may be cloaked, obscured, even to the point of total concealment, but it is still flickering in some way, waiting to be fanned into a flame.

This applies even to the child who grew up in the most abusive home, where instead of being nurtured he or she was hurt and rejected. This applies to a child who was bullied at school, ostracized and friendless.

Any damage done, any wounds incurred, are only on the exterior, conscious level. The inner soul can never be damaged by another. It always maintains its potency, and with effort and persistence, it can be brought back to the surface.

⁹ Job, chapters 38 and 39.

¹⁰ See Lamentations 3:38.

This is the meaning of the two Torah portions which discuss the leper, Tazria and Metzora. Out of the pariah's isolation greatness can be conceived. True, the leper is a lonely sufferer, outside the camp and community, but the Torah also relates how this is part of the process of his healing!

9. A Beautiful Person Within

With this principle in mind, the rabbi told his pitiful visitor that no matter his experiences, he was a beautiful person within. At first, the man snickered, making it clear that nothing would convince him. But the rabbi did not relent, and proceeded to demonstrate to him that the power of light and hope is stronger than the erosive power of darkness and resignation.

“You may feel that you were born a leprous pariah,” the rabbi said, “but that very sense doesn't allow you to be complacent. It compels you to see this as an opportunity to dig deeper ... This may indeed be your Torah portion, but not the way you see it. Instead of your having been conceived a leper, allow your pariah-like feelings to conceive new dimensions of light, that have never been revealed.”

10. Existential Loneliness

How is this relevant to us?

At times, we all experience existential loneliness ... the feeling of “not belonging,” of aloneness, of being different and isolated, without a sense of camaraderie and community. We then have two choices: 1) we can either give in to these sentiments and allow ourselves to be further demoralized, or 2) we can use the emptiness as an impetus to birth new possibilities.

Above all, perhaps the most freeing thing of all is the mere fact that the Torah dedicates nearly 100 verses to discussing the plight of the lonely soul, not to mention his healing journey. A certain strength and powerful healing forces – forces of rebirth – are unleashed when we study these holy words and share them with others who are suffering just as we are.

And what better time to internalize and communicate this message than now – just a couple of weeks after Passover, when we celebrated our rebirth after the denigration of Egyptian slavery, recalling what it took to climb out of the pits of Mitzrayim (a word which shares its root with *metzora*).

11. End of the Story

What happened with the fellow who sought counseling from my colleague?

Years have passed since their initial encounter. Today, after much hard work and the acceptance that it may take a lifetime of work, this man is married with several children. He has found some measure of peace and happiness amidst his anguished life. He now soothes many other tortured souls, gives hope to the hopeless, and teaches people by example of how light – the deepest light – can be found in the most forsaken places.

And often he shares with others, who may consider themselves social lepers, that his turning point came on that sad afternoon, when he heard for the first time that the Torah does not describe a leper being born, but a leper giving birth.

Amen.

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