

D'Var Torah
Parashah M'tzora
Leviticus 14:1 – 15:33
April 8, 2022

For those of you concerned about my taking advantage of this opportunity to speak and deliver a long-winded D'Var Torah, you need not worry. This week's Parashah is M'tzora (which happens to be on Shabbat Hagadol – the Shabbat preceding Pesach). It is a continuation of last week's Parashat, Tazria, in which we learned that the person with an affliction or condition (incorrectly translated as leprosy) that brings impurity (or Tumah) must be removed from the community. This week's Parashah speaks to the person's emergence from that isolation and describes in detail the rituals of return and reintegration.

Our People's Pesach journey from the affliction of slavery through the wilderness to freedom is like the quest for purification that begins with isolation from the community. The priest goes outside the camp to diagnose the condition, confirm recovery, and then prepare the victim through ritual sacrifices to reenter the camp, followed by additional guilt, sin, burnt and meal offerings at the Tent of Meeting or the Mishkan. Only upon completion of all these steps can the person be declared purified or cleansed.

While we “moderns” may dismiss the sacrificial rituals as primitive and “hocus pocus”, the underlying teaching remains: no matter what condition or affliction comes our way (internal or external), there is a way to return and reintegrate into the community and reconnect with the Divine. In short, healing, recovery and return to relationship with others and God is attainable – even after 400 years of exile in Egypt!

It is interesting to note that the Torah remains silent concerning the “cause” of the condition. This silence has sparked numerous Rabbinic theories. All begin with the assumption that God is angry and causes the plague or affliction. But that begs the question of Why??

Is the condition punishment for a sin? According to the Talmud, Evil Speech or Lashon Hara (which is defined as derogatory, demeaning, or offensive words) kills three people: the one who says it; the one who listens to it; and the one about whom it is said. Thus, Jewish tradition connects the laws relating to skin disease and mildew (Tzara'at):

“The slanderer spreads his lies in private, but his evil is exposed in public. First, the walls of his house proclaim his sin, then the leather objects on which he sits, then his clothes, and eventually his skin itself. He is condemned to the shame and humiliation of isolation.”

Rather than a bodily disease, the ancient Rabbis argued that Tzara’at is a physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise, a punishment designed to show a malefactor that he must mend his ways – a form of supernatural spiritual discipline.

As noted by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, the Sage’s interpretation of the law of Tzara’at constitutes one of the rare instances in the Torah of punishment by shame, rather than guilt. Rabbi Sacks points out that it is difficult, perhaps impossible to punish the malicious gossipier using the normal conventions of law, courts, and the establishment of guilt. Lashon Hara is more subtle than uttering a falsehood, such as is the case in slander or libel. It is done not by falsehood but by insinuation. Shaming and Shunning is thus the best way to deal with people who poison relationships without uttering falsehoods.

Lashon Hara, or derogatory, demeaning, or offensive language, undermines Trust – Bitachon. It makes people suspicious about one another. It weakens the bonds that hold the group together. If unchecked, Lashon Hara will destroy any group it attacks: a family, a team, a community, and even a nation. Hence, its uniquely malicious character: It uses the power of language to weaken the very thing language was brought into being to create, namely, the Trust that sustains the social bond.

Turning to my own commentary on this Parashah, there is no need to theorize that the affliction is a punishment caused by God. The use of malicious language to demean another is a choice. By such Evil Speech, we bring on our own isolation and affliction, which spreads like a virus to the victim and the listeners. We are currently experiencing not only a virulent physical illness in the form of COVID 19; we are also experiencing a spiritual illness as hateful speech permeates social media, contaminating human relationships, undermining trust throughout the fabric of society, and ultimately leading to self-isolation. The “We” is gone; all that remains is “Me”!

Parashah M’tzora gives each of us a way to return to community and to connection with the Divine. While the sacrificial ritual rites are no longer applicable since the destruction of the Temple, the Torah teaches that

recovery from the spiritual illness of isolation and restoration of relationships with others and God is ours to claim. It starts with each of us making a commitment to never speak ill of others, and to stay away from those who do. That is not to say that we cannot disagree with each other on issues, just as the Rabbis did as they debated Torah. It is when we use invective, discriminatory trope, and derogatory language that disagreement devolves into Evil Speech. Our path out of self-imposed isolation involves constant vigilance and practice— listening more than speaking; discerning what needs to be said and how to say it in a way that is respectful of the other person, as a fellow B'tzelem Elohim – a Holy Soul made in God's image. Free speech respects the freedom and dignity of others.

Such a commitment by each of one of us will bring healing in our relationships with others and allow the bonds of trust to strengthen within our community. Each of us is endowed with the power to emerge from isolation and feel connected to others and community. The challenge may seem daunting; it is not for us to finish our work, yet neither are we permitted to desist from it.