

D'var Torah
Kol Sasson
Parshat Tazria-Metzorah
April 28, 2012

Shabbat Shalom.

This week's parsha is Tazria-Metzorah. These are the parshiot where we learn all about the various forms of tzara'at, commonly translated as leprosy, that can afflict people and objects, how to identify them, and how to purify them (if purification is possible).

As you probably know, this is a notoriously challenging parsha for a lot of reasons not the least of which is the seemingly limited ways to spin it for a D'var Torah. So, before I get the parsha itself, I'd like to say something about the process of writing a D'var Torah.

When you look at the book of Vayikra, you notice that final chapter we read last week, chapter 11, and the chapters we read this week (chapters 12 through 15) are something of a break from the narrative of the plight of B'nai Yisrael in the desert. Chapter 10 is about the death of Nadav and Avihu. And next week's parsha, begins with the words "*Va-yidaber kadonai el Moshe Acharei Mot B'nai Aharon..*" Gd spoke to Moshe after the death of Aaron's sons. Seemingly picking up right where the narrative was dropped last week.

What do we find in between? We find a long list of laws and regulations regarding what we eat, giving birth, skin diseases, and bodily emissions. Dr. Alan Cooper, the Provost at JTS points out that in addition to their all being issues dealing with purity and impurity, they are also the very things that make people different from Gd. These human attributes: eating, reproduction, and other needs for our physical selves are the very things that we give up on Yom Kippur when we are trying to emulate angels and become our purest selves.

The Torah, in essence, is interrupting the narrative of B'nai Yisrael to teach us another definition of what it means to be holy.

One of the real gifts that we all receive by being members of Kol Sasson is our obligation to participate in making Shabbat for our community. When any of us agree to give a D'var Torah, to layn, to chant Haftorah or to lead a new part of the Service, we are forced to interrupt the narrative of our lives. We close our office doors, shut ourselves in the basement, turn off the TV and turn the Chol of our week into the Kodesh of preparing for Shabbat. It's never easy and it's often inconvenient. But I know that for me, the dreaded obligation almost immediately transforms into a grateful

opportunity to study. It is a chance to bring some holiness into my week, to metaphorically give up my body and to elevate myself. It is one of the things I like most about belonging to our small but thriving minion.

And now, back to the parsha. The traditional drash for this parsha is to discuss tzara't as a punishment for the sin of Lashon Hara. Why Lashon Hara? Because we can find several instances when people spoke badly and were subsequently inflicted with leprosy. Probably most famously, we remember that when Miriam speaks with Aharon about Moshe's decision to marry a Kushite woman that she is struck with leprosy.

We also find that when Moshe is asked in front of the burning bush to be Gd's messenger he objects saying that no one will listen to him. Gd then asks Moshe to put his hand into his chest and when he draws it out, it is leprous.

A third more subtle connection is in Gad Eden when the snake speaks to Eve. Midrash Rabah teaches that the scales on the snake are like leprosy and, let's not forget, that the other sign that Moshe was given at the burning bush along with his hand was to turn his staff into a snake.

So, from these things we learn to connect tzara'at with lashon hara and then we can go on from there.

But right now, my mind just isn't in a place to talk about any of that. As most of you know, I have just begun a new position with The ARK. These past two weeks have been incredible. And, I really wanted to find a connection between all the fantastic, new things I have been learning and experiencing at The ARK with the parsha in order to share just a little bit of it here with you.

The more contemporary way that people talk about Tazria Metzora these days is as an opportunity to remind us how to deal with people who live in the margins of society. As such, I found a nice reference in the Sifra for this week's parsha. The Sifra, of course, is the halachic midrash about Vayikra that is often quoted in the Talmud. In there we find the comment that "*Even in times when the Jews are tamei (impure), the Shechina, the Divine Presence, is still with them.*"

I hope you'll agree that in this particular case, tamei doesn't have to mean only people who are impure. I think it can also mean those people who have been separated from the community. After all, what do we do with people and objects diagnosed with tzara'at? We separate them.

I would like to suggest that the people who make up the clientele of The ARK are those people who are, in one way or another, separated from the community.

Some of our clients are in a place where their separation is probably temporary. They may have overextended themselves on their home and lost their job and need just a little assistance to keep them going until they are back on their feet. They might get

help with identifying state services they are eligible for, receiving medical care, and/or get a week's worth of food from our food pantry each month.

Some other clients' state of separation might not be so temporary. In our main facility in Rogers Park, among many other things, we run a day program for about 80 adults who are chronically mentally challenged. They will never be able to function completely within society. For them, the ARK is a nurturing environment providing activities, classes, meals and an opportunity to be with friends.

In the parsha, the end positive goal for each type of tzara'at listed is to do whatever it takes to reconnect that person, that garment, that home, with the klal yisrael.

The ARK has the very same goal. We serve people in need. We treat them as a whole person with wrap around services. Whether it is through social service, medical service, dental service, psych service, spiritual guidance, pharmaceuticals, food, clothing, job counseling, temporary housing, paying a utility bill, distributing bus passes, or giving out loans. Our mission is to find a path for our clients back into their community

There is one more connection between this week's parsha and the ARK that I would like to just quickly suggest.

In order to purify the individual, the parsha proscribes the use of cedar wood and hyssop among other things. The cedar of the Torah is the proudest, tallest of trees while the hyssop is the lowliest of plants. Rashi, Ibn Ezra and others observe that the cedar represents the person's inflated self-importance, while the hyssop teaches us that in Gd's hands, this fragile plant can be elevated to the same worth as the mighty cedar because they are equally involved in the purification process.

This duality can be seen as a lesson in humility. For those of us who are fortunate enough to be as strong as the cedar, active members of a community, we must keep in mind how easy it is for us to be brought down to a hyssop. And for those of us who might find ourselves as a hyssop, somehow separated from normative society, we need to remember to stand tall and proud, that the *shechina* is with us.

My short tenure with the ARK has already profoundly reshaped me. The people I am getting to know, the staff and volunteers as well as the clients, are all so special. That I can share this journey with you all, my own community, is so important to me. Virtually every member of this congregation is deeply involved in helping to maintain the presence of the *shechina* for those in need through our professional and volunteer activities. It makes me wonder what we as Kol Sasson might do someday to serve the community AS a community. But that, I think, is a D'var Torah for another time.

Shabbat Shalom.