

Brennan F.'s D'var Torah — April 12, 2008

The Torah portion I read from today is called, “Metzarah.” It is about an apparent skin disease called Tza’arat and the cure for that disease — a ritual.

In Hebrew the disease is called Tza’arat, and in the English translation the word “leprosy” is used. However, there seems to be a clear distinction between what would be known today as “leprosy,” and what the skin disease described in the Torah as tza’arat is. The distinction is found more in the cure and the cause than in the symptoms.

The portion first describes what the blotches look like, and then the rituals to perform to be cured of the disease. The portion never talks about the cause of the disease — but I will.

One of the very first things I questioned about this portion is the strange fact that to cure an apparent medical disease, they call in a Priest, a Kohen, instead of a doctor.

So of course I had to ask, “why?” Priests, the Kohanim, are used to cure spiritual problems, so why would they call in the Priest for someone with a physical disease?

Here is something to think about:

If this disease is cured by a Priest then it is not a disease of the body, but of the spirit. And if it is a disease of the spirit, how does one get it?

Well, I read some commentary that addressed this question and it brought up the term “slander,” or gossip and misinformation.

How did these rabbis and scholars come to the conclusion that biblical leprosy, or tza’arat, is caused by slander? I read some other commentaries and studies that addressed this. What they did was examine all of the Torah. Each time a person was afflicted with tza’arat, the rabbis noticed that just before the disease was put on the person, that person had said something “unfavorable” about another person. The Hebrew phrase for speaking unfavorably about another person is: “Lashon Ha-rah.”

It might surprise you to learn that Miriam, Moses’ and Aaron’s sister once got tza’arat, leprosy. The rabbis say that the story of Miriam clearly illustrates the Lashon Hara example. The Torah never reveals to us the content of her comments, but the rabbis figure from the story that what she whispered to Aaron about Moses was some sort of criticism.

Over the course of my studies this has taught me a lot about the things I say. No, not that if I slander I will get a nasty skin disease.

It’s the fact that when we speak gossip or misinformation we hurt *three* people: the person speaking gossip, the person who listens to gossip, and the person being spoken about.

This may sound pretty ridiculous, but think about it. When you know you’ve said something bad about someone else, do you feel good about it? And if you know something, you know you shouldn’t know, well you don’t feel good either. And of course, nobody feels good when they have been spoken about.

I think one reason it is *not* written in the Torah “what” Miriam said, is like I explained, slander affects *three* people; the gossiper, the listener, and the person being spoken about. So the reason what she said *isn’t* in the Torah is because then every time we read *that* Torah portion, then this would include *us* in the cycle of the slander, like being “the listener.”

The Torah, our siddur, and many Rabbis stories have writings about the power of the harm of words.

There is a famous Talmudic story that illustrates Lashon Ha-rah.

*Once there was a man who had said awful things about someone. Realizing that he had done something awful, he goes to his rabbi and asks, "Rabbi, what can I do?"*

*The rabbi thinks a bit and tells the man to bring him a feather pillow.*

*The man brings the pillow, and the rabbi tells him to go outside, rip open the pillow and shake out the feathers.*

*The man does this. He comes back to the rabbi and says, "I did what you said, now what?"*

*The rabbi says, "Now go back outside and pick up all the feathers."*

*The man looks startled and says, "How can I? The wind took them! I don't even know where they are now."*

*The rabbi says, "Exactly, just like your words. Once they're out, it's impossible to get them back."*

Here is an example I wrote, and it helped me better understand this, and hopefully it will for you too.

So, Bob gets into an argument with Jon. Jon wins. Bob is not happy about it so he tells Sally that Jon lost the argument. Sally tells this to Jill and pretty soon the whole school finds out. This of course means Jon heard too. So then Jon tells Jill that it is untrue, who tells Sally, but Sally does not believe her because she thinks Bob would not lie. Sally and Jill then get in an argument and the whole cycle repeats. Now do you understand the bad affects of slander?

In our siddur, you might have noticed that the Amidah prayer section begins with the phrase: "open my lips so my mouth may declare your praise" and it ends with a Concluding Meditation, "let my tongue be guarded from wrong and my lips from speaking deceit..."

The meditation ends with the phrase, "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart turn me towards health of body and soul and towards Shalom, peace.

This meditation is a lot like what my Torah portion is about: Lashon Ha-rah are words from your mouth that affect the health of your body and your soul, and you don't have Shalom because of what you said.

So how does one get cured from this biblical leprosy called Tza'arat?

Well, there are two parts to the cure. Part One: separation from the community, and Part Two: the ritual the priest performs. I will be speaking about each of these parts to the cure.

Part one; the leper is separated from his community to allow the slander to settle down, and to give the leper time to think about what he or she did.

I will use my earlier example of Bob and Jon to illustrate this.

Say the teacher finds out about the situation caused by Bob and Jon and decides to separate them from each other and from the school ... suspension.

What do you think would happen?

My guess is that Bob and Jon being gone from school would allow the rumors to settle down, and give them time to think about what they have done. Not only will they think about it, but they might realize they should not do it again.

Nobody likes to feel like they have been left out. For example, I recently watched a movie called “Disturbia.” It is kind of a modern version of Hitchcock’s “Rear Window.” The boy who stars is very troubled and is put under house arrest for 3 months. His mom cancels his X-Box subscription and pretty much everything else. He almost goes crazy.

I think this is a good example of how people learn a lesson by being separated from the outside world. During my Bar Mitzvah studies my dad showed me a famous poem by John Donne. The part of the poem that I remember is the phrase... “No man is an island.” What I think this means is that humans are simply not made to be separated, which is why it is such a harsh punishment.

I am just barely a teenager and I already belong to several communities, such as my school, my friends, family, and of course, Kadima. If I were ever removed from any of these groups, I would freak out. Even if it was just for a week, or even a day, it would be unbearable. I think it is the feeling of guilt it gives you. You feel like nobody wants you because of the way you acted.

The only type of separation I have experienced is from a situation that I am sure many of you can relate to.

You know when you are little and you do something bad, often your parents send you up to your room. Well, that has happened to me a lot, and I have to say that it was an awful feeling. My parents would only have me stay in my room for 15-20 minutes, so I can hardly imagine what it is like being suspended from school for a whole week.

The second part of the cure for the leper is a ritual. It consists of offering relatively expensive animals, performing blessings, and other very specific things that the priest would do when he came to the home of the leper to see if he, or she, was ready to be cured.

When I first got my Torah portion, in the very beginning of my lessons, Sharron asked me to read through it and tell her anything interesting I found in it. To be honest, I didn’t find much, but I did think the rituals were sort of interesting. I was really curious to discover the reasons for all these strangely specific steps and the items required for the ritual, including birds, cedar wood, and hyssop. Many of these questions were answered for me in a study Sharron gave me to read by Dr. Meir Gruzman, a scholar at Bar-Ilan University.

I found reason for the two birds, the cedar wood, and the hyssop. I have to say, compared to the rest of the Torah it is actually quite simple.

The reason for the birds was because the birds are babblers, like the leper, so he was told to offer babbling birds for sacrifice. As for the cedar wood, the leper had made himself haughty, or arrogant, proud like a cedar tree. Therefore the leper was to offer cedar wood also. And finally the hyssop was offered because it is the lowest of all plants, and he had also made himself lowly by speaking about another.

Now I want to share something really important that I noticed in my Torah portion. Think about this— when the ritual to cure a leper is described, first it describes which animals to offer for the guilt offering. But, then the Torah also describes the optional plan, for the leper who has lesser means, what animals that leper can offer for the *same ritual* and the *same cure*. Both the rich

leper and the poor leper received a ritual and the cure. Does this remind you of a very big issue going on today?

Isn't it hard to believe that in a time we consider "primitive," they had a universal healthcare plan, but here in the U.S. we can't make a plan in our modern time? After finding this out, I wanted to learn more about healthcare and why America doesn't have a plan to provide equal access to medical treatment for all of our citizens.

In order to learn more about this topic, I emailed some questions that I wanted to know more about to Rich Kovar and David Loud, two members of our own Kadima community that Sharron told me were knowledgeable on this subject. They helped me a lot, and obviously put a lot of time into their responses.

For that I would like to thank them both.

To sum up what I learned from Rich's and David's responses, I learned that we should begin by educating *ourselves* about this subject.

To sum up some of the most important things I learned while studying this Torah portion, I would say what I am learning about words is that they can hurt, sometimes even more than physical pain.

Another lesson I have learned is that the pain caused by words can sometimes never be made good again. I have also learned that slander can affect people a lot worse than people think, and it has taught me that I should think more about the things I say.

It is important to remember that words can also do miracles. They can make a sad person smile, a depressed person laugh, and even share vital information that can sometimes save lives.

Another important lesson I have learned is how we should work everyday more towards building a health-care plan for America. And this begins with us educating ourselves about the situation. My generation can talk to adults to help find solutions and when we get older, turn the ideas into actions.

Over the course of my studies I've come to realize that *being Jewish* is mainly about being a good person. I also learned that there *is* something interesting in every Torah portion, even if you don't think so at first.

I would like to thank Sharron Lerner, my tutor for, what else, teaching me, my family for motivating and encouraging me, and everyone here that took time out of their lives to come and share this day with me.

Shabbat Shalom