

Parashat Tazria-Metzora: The Courage to Be a Leper

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

This week we read a double Torah portion - Tazria and Metzora - and they are the most abhorred in the Torah. We all prefer to keep our distance, because these parashot describe diseases of the skin, bodily emissions, various sores and bruises of body, clothing, and even the walls of the house.

In a leap year (a year in which there are two months of Adar) we read each portion separately. In a non-leap year like this one - they are read together.

Each of the parashot has its own Haftorah, and both tell stories of Elisha the prophet. When the parashot are combined we read only the Haftorah of Parashat Metzora, and it is this Haftorah I would like to talk about this year.

The story takes place at momentous time in the history of Israel. The city of Shomron, which is the biggest city in the Kingdom of Israel, is under extended siege by the Aramean army. It seems that the Arameans made a decision not to wage war, but simply to let the Israelite city starve. The hunger is indeed great and the little food that is available is sold at exorbitant prices. Elisha prophesies that the hunger will soon be over, and that in the next few days the prices will go down dramatically. The minister of the king of Shomron hears Elisha's words and laughs at him, scorning his prophecy. In response, the prophet adds a provision to his prophecy: the minister will see the miraculous events unfold, but will not benefit from them.

Because the parasha deals with leprosy, the haftorah focuses on the story of four lepers. These men sit outside of the gates of the city under siege, because according to the Torah, lepers were removed from social contact. The four lepers get bored and decide to go on an adventure. They figure that since they are destined to die shortly of their illness, they might as well go and look for food and sustenance in the Aramean camp. They make their way to the edge of that camp and discover that it is empty; the Aramean army has fled! The lepers devour the food they find there and take as much as they can loot from the camp as well. Only after they have feasted do they remember that perhaps they should let the king of Israel hear the good news.

The king of course suspects a trap, and so he sends spies to check out the situation. They find a long trail of clothing and utensils strewn haphazardly around, proving that the Aramean army had indeed retreated in great haste. The rumor spreads rapidly,

and the Israelites rush to the abandoned Aramean camp to enjoy the abundance left behind. As Elisha has prophesied, the price of food dips immediately. The king's minister standing at the city gates hears what has happened, realizes that the prophecy was correct, but he is trampled to death by the ravenous crowd. (The full story may be found in Kings 2, Chapter 7.)

It is a wonderful story, but we are left to wonder about the reason for the Arameans' hasty retreat. Was it the lepers? Definitely not. They had nothing to do with it. A strange, Divine miracle caused panic in the Aramean camp and sent them running back to their country.

“For the Lord had caused the Aramean camp to hear a sound of chariots, a sound of horses—the din of a huge army. They said to one another, “The king of Israel must have hired the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Mizraim to attack us!”” (Melachim 2, 7:6)

The Aramean army hears imaginary sounds of war, and they are sure that the King of Israel has managed to recruit all of the neighboring kingdoms to help him.

If the lepers were not the cause of this great salvation, why tell their story? What is their role? They definitely don't arouse compassion, being selfish outcasts who “answer to no God.” They abandon the Israelite position and seek to find food and shelter with the enemy Arameans. Later, when they realize that army has gone, they celebrate on their own before thinking to share the good fortune with their starving countrymen.

Yet, along with our distaste for the lepers, there is also something captivating about them. The Israelite city of Shomron has abandoned and betrayed them. They have been banished outside of the safety of the walls, leaving them prey for the enemy. These unfortunate men are left to fend for themselves, and this is what they do.

And then, in a formative moment, these poor lepers undergo a transformation: they cease feeling sorry for themselves and accept their plight: **“They said to one another, ‘Why should we sit here [at the city gates] waiting for death? If we decide [insist] 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 [at the hands of the Arameans]. Come, let us desert to the Aramean camp [since we have nothing to lose]. If they let us live, we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die.’”**

The lepers find a great treasure outside of the city walls. Never mind the food and the loot; **they discover freedom!** While the Israelites are under siege inside the walls of the city - practically imprisoned - the four lepers enjoy complete freedom of movement. They can discover the world, travel and seek treasures. This is how they

are the first to enjoy the abundant food and gold which the Arameans leave behind. They are actually the only free people in this story.

Clearly it is not easy to be a leper! A leper is an outcast, forcibly separated from his loved ones, his friends, his community, his livelihood, and the entire support network which a "settled" person enjoys. On the other hand, for a week at least, the leper is a free person, enjoying the kind of freedom no one else has!

Our Sages defined a leper (metzora = motzi-ra) as one who spreads evil through gossip, slander, and so forth. This is why both his punishment and his treatment is removal from the community.

I would like to suggest another definition for a leper: he is one who is an ultimate outsider. He refuses to play the social game. He is strange, perhaps even bizarre. He is the "Fool on the Hill".

Elisha the prophet was also an outsider, as were most of the great prophets. They lived on the edge of society, and were definitely outside of the consensus. Many times they were persecuted. The king of Shomron and his minister wished to kill Elisha! But the prophets, loyal to their beliefs and their paths, had no use for social considerations. Their lives were no doubt much harder, but from their point of view, conforming would have been much worse. Just the thought of being enslaved to fashion, to public opinion, to popularity, to social etiquette would feel like a daily betrayal.

We expend so much energy in our lives trying to fit in, to be normal, to look good, to do the right thing. If, God forbid, we were banished, most of us would sit at the city gates until we were allowed back in. We would do anything and everything to be accepted again.

The Fool on the Hill

John Lennon & Paul McCartney

Day after day, alone on the hill
The man with the foolish grin is keeping perfectly still
But nobody wants to know him
They can see that he's just a fool
And he never gives an answer

But the fool on the hill
Sees the sun going down
And the eyes in his head

See the world spinning around

Well on the way, head in a cloud
The man of a thousand voices talking perfectly loud
But nobody ever hears him
Or the sound he appears to make
And he never seems to notice

But the fool on the hill
Sees the sun going down
And the eyes in his head
See the world spinning around

And nobody seems to like him
They can tell what he wants to do
And he never shows his feelings

But the fool on the hill
Sees the sun going down
And the eyes in his head
See the world spinning around

He never listens to them
He knows that they're the fools
They don't like him

The fool on the hill
Sees the sun going down
And the eyes in his head
See the world spinning around

I don't have the courage to truly be a leper, but today, inspired by Elisha the prophet,
I take my kippah off to those free people in our city under siege.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha