

# SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

TAZRIA-MESORA

APRIL 13, 2013 - 3 IYAR 5773

DEDICATIONS: In memory of Lorraine Bat Victoria – 4 Iyar

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## Editors Notes

This Sunday's NY Times will feature an article entitled, "When Home Is a Campus Parking Lot". The author Ken Ilgunas, describes how after being accepted to Duke he was reluctant to go back into debt and in order to save money, he bought a van and that van became his home.

He writes: "Though the van-dwelling lifestyle had its share of hardships, I adapted. On my isobutane backpacking stove, I cooked lavish meals each night, usually some combination of vegetables, noodles and peanut butter. I had only one pot, so all my meals were stews: spaghetti stew, rice and bean stew, vegetable stew, with healthy, calorie-dense dollops of peanut butter mixed in. For breakfast, I'd have cereal with powdered milk, and for lunch I'd make sandwiches and carry them to campus. At the gym, I showered, shaved and brushed my teeth, and filled up large water bottles for cooking.

"I washed my clothes every few weeks at a Laundromat a short walk from my parking space, and I did all of my studying at the campus library, where I used the free Wi-Fi and charged up my electronics. The van offered no protection from the cold, but once I shivered into my thermal underwear and slipped into my sleeping bag, burritoed in my own body heat, I'd fall into a deep and peaceful slumber."

There was one line in the article that stood out, "If you put a man in a country club, he'll feel the need for a yacht. But if you drop him in the wilderness, his desires will be only those essential to his survival."

I was thinking about the terms, need and desire.

This week, we read a double perasha of Tazria and Metzora. One of the focuses of both parshiot is the physical/spiritual leprosy. The Rabbis tell us the

cause is generally Lashon HaRah or evil speech. But a few years back I taught a class and wrote that a better understanding of the cause might be ego or extreme pride. To better appreciate this, let's take a look at the Haftarat related to this week's Torah portion. Keep in mind that most scholars suggest that the reading of the Haftarah was instituted when the Jews were under the rule of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes of Chanukah infamy. His law forbid public reading of the Five Books of Moses, so the sages instituted that a section of the Prophets be read instead, usually an idea that was related to the Torah reading that should have been read that week. So what message did they sages seek to convey in their selection of the Haftarah.

Had it been a leap year we would be reading the Parshiot separately along with two Haftarat. The first Haftarah would have told us the story of Naaman, the commander-in-chief of the forces of Aram (Syria). Aram was the dominant power in the area, and Israel was subject to their control. Naaman had contracted leprosy for which his physicians were unable to offer a cure.

A younger maidservant, who had been taken captive in a raid on Israel, suggested that Naaman go see Elisha the Prophet for a cure. The king of Aram composed a letter of introduction to Yehoram the king of Israel, who upon hearing Naaman's request that he be cured of leprosy rent his garments in misery over the seemingly impossible request. Elisha, upon hearing about the request and the king's reaction, criticized Yehoram and said, "send him to me."

When Naaman arrived at Elisha's home, Elisha didn't even greet him. He sent a message to Naaman to bathe in the Yarden (Jordan) seven times and he would be healed. Naaman was at first angered over Elisha's conduct and seemingly ridiculous prescription, but was then convinced to do as Elisha had said. Upon emerging from the Yarden his skin had regained a much more youthful appearance than it had been before the leprosy.

Naaman offered Elisha great wealth, but Elisha refused. Naaman asked permission to bring some dirt from Israel back to Syria. He accepted the truth of G-

d's divinity and promised to serve only G-d in the future.

The end of the story leads us into the Haftarah we will read this Shabbat, the Haftarah of Mesorah. Although Elisha rejects Naaman's offer, his servant Gei Chazeh runs after Naaman and takes the money. Elisha confronts his servant and the leprosy of Naaman transfers to Gei Chazeh and his three sons.

Now almost a decade has passed. We are still under the reign of Yehoram who ruled over the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yehoram was a sinful king whose actions resulted in Aram laying siege to the capitol city Shomron causing a terrible famine. The famine was so severe that mothers were eating their own children.

Yehoram confronted the prophet Elisha demanding that he bring an end to the siege and the hunger. Elisha told Yehoram that G-d would perform a miracle the next day and there would be so much food that the food market would bottom out. The Kings chief of staff ridicules the prophet who warns him that his eyes will see it happen, but he will not taste the food.

The Haftarah begins, There were four lepers (Gei Chazeh and his three sons) who had been banished to live outside the walls of Shomron. Like the rest of the people, they were starving from the famine and decided to chance approaching the enemy camp in hope of begging some food or at the very worst, a quick death.

During the night Hashem had performed a miracle and the massive forces of Aram had fled leaving behind their tents, horses, and supplies.

The Lepers returned to Shomron and as the guards to inform Yehoram about the miraculous events. Yehoram investigated the report and confirmed the miracle. The people of Shomron were allowed out of the besieged city and plunder the vacated enemy camp. In the commotion, the chief of staff is trampled to death by the crowd. He saw, but never tasted. The massive amount of food was so great that the price of food immediately plummeted and bottomed out as Elisha had prophesied.

What is the connection between the two Haftarot and the two parshiot. It seems obvious that it is the fact that Naaman was a leper and Gei Chazeh and his sons were lepers.

But is their leprosy a punishment for Lashon Haraah? Is a gentile subject to punishment for Lashon Harah?

And how does the punishment of Gei Chazeh and the trampling of Yehoram's chief of staff fit in?

Lashon Harah is a direct result of haughtiness, arrogance and overbearing pride. One thinks of how great he is and to make himself greater must knock down others. But what the Rabbi's call Gaavah or Gasot Ruach – the arrogance we mentioned - on its own leads directly the sara-at or leprosy. Naaman is so proud at the outset. He is the leader of the world's super power. He cannot fathom the disrespect paid him by Elisha. Why dip in the Jordan when there are greater rivers in Syria? But finally he is convinced to set aside his pride and goes into the Jordan. We see he is cured when humbles himself so much to ask permission to take dirt home. Gei Chazeh thinks he should be the prophet and he deserves the reward, but ends up saving the day eight years later when he is simply willing to give up his life by walking into the enemy camp. And finally, the chief of staff who refuses to accept the word of the prophet and even goes so far as to ridicule him is lowered under the feet of the mob.

Ego run amok is a dangerous thing. Is it a coincidence that the message is relayed to us in this week's Haftarot? Ego can bring down leaders of superpowers, titans and even aspiring prophets. Sometimes we forget that of the thousands of prophets the Jewish people were given, only the writings of a very few of them were incorporated into the Tanach. And the reason for this is that their message is timeless. They warn, but they offer solutions. In the case of Naaman his life turned around to the point where his descendants became great scholars and all because he left his ego at the bottom of the sea!

The Gemarah teaches, the one who wishes to die should live (a high and haughty life) while the one who wishes to live should die (play dead). The Talmud's statement comes without the parenthesis and is quite shocking – want to live then die? But the simple message as my dad often reminds us is that blessing comes to that which is hidden from the eye. If we want to enjoy life we need to play dead by first deflating our egos because if we can do that we become hidden from accusation and attract only blessings. If we work on our egos than our other vices disappear as well. Take Moses as an example. The greatest prophet the world ever knew was not coincidentally the most humble man the world knew. This is the trait of our first forefather Abraham and of our greatest king David.

And this brings me back to the writer who moved into his van and his statement, "If you put a man in a

country club, he'll feel the need for a yacht. But if you drop him in the wilderness, his desires will be only those essential to his survival."

We create our own appetites; our own need for honor. When we exceed the speed limit of life, G-d sends us a message to slow down; to reassess that life, temper our egos and determine what we do need. The person with saraat is sent beyond the camp; he is exiled, beyond the city. He is isolated and dropped into the wilderness. He is given time to ponder and to adjust his priorities. Only when he reaches the level of altering those desires does the malady leave him and is he invited back into society,

In a world where G-d's presence was tangible (and balanced by a tangible dark side), Saraat in each of its stages was an early warning sign – a bright light telling someone to change the brakes of their lives. Today, heavenly signs are muted. We need to listen closely to the coughs in life's engine, to the squeak in life's brakes and constantly appraise the pressure in life's tires. And when we notice that we're out of alignment, we need to take a trip to the spiritual repair shop. We need to get everything back in order and get the car back on the road.

We can survive a night in the back of the van in some parking lot, a moment to stop, correct and return. But none of us wants to make that van our permanent home.

Shabbat Shalom.

David Bibi

**PS:** The following was emailed to me from R. Saul Kassin via Sam Gindi. Some years back I was teaching about the mind over body concept from a Kabbalistic view ( or at least the fraction I understood or thought I understood, I began looking into the concept of mind over body, of spontaneous remission and more recently the body's innate ability to at early stages of damage, cure itself.

**Spontaneous remission**, is defined as "the disappearance, complete or incomplete, of cancer without medical treatment or with medical treatment that is considered inadequate to produce the resulting disappearance of disease symptoms or tumor." We have many stories of such unexpected recoveries in Jewish lore. Some scoff at these stories as bringing false hope.

Over the past century, there has been a steady flow of published case reports along with flashes of increased interest in this topic. In the late 80s IONS launched the Spontaneous Remission Project, which

culminated in the publication of a comprehensive bibliography of documented cases. Since then, about twenty new cases of unexpected remission are published each year.

Many conventional doctors feel threatened by these "miraculous" cures and don't wish to talk about them—much less research them—for fear that they will give "false hope" to their other patients. And this is understandable as spontaneous remission is rare, about as likely as winning one of those hundred million dollar lotteries, but it does happen.

The sad part is that little scientific research is done to see if there is anything we can learn from these cases, few as they are. And I believe that even miracles act through some level of nature and there is always something to learn.

The following is a true story .... Saul Kassin writes:

**My mother in-law (Mrs. Toni Massry)** was once diagnosed with a cancerous growth cyst. She was told by her doctors that she must undergo surgery to have it removed immediately. Right away she called Mrs. Rochelle Shasho who was very close with the Great and Holy \*Tzaddik\* Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Weinkrantz to see if she can go to the Rabbi for a \*Beracha\* and advice what to do (Rochelle Shasho was also the organizer of a ladies class that Rabbi Weinkrantz gave for many years).

Mrs. Rochelle Shasho said that the Rabbi was on his death bed and preparing for his journey for the next world. My mother in-law, seeing the state in which the Rabbi was in, started to think about other \*Gedolim\* to seek.

My mother in-laws mother Mrs. Rosette Haber, not knowing of the call to Rochelle Shasho, called my mother in-law and said, "Were going to Rabbi Weinkrantz right now." My mother in-law told Grandma Haber of the state in which the Rabbi was in and it's was not possible to visit the Rabbi. Anyone that knows Mrs. Rosette Haber, would know of her great persistence, so Grandma Haber insisted and said, "I'm coming to pick you up right now, get ready."

In front of my in-laws home Grandma Haber told her daughter to come in the car and they would head to Borough Park to the Rabbi's home. My mother in-law insisted that she was not going. Of course she stood no chance to Grandma Haber's persistence.

As they were driving towards the Rabbi's home, my mother in-law said she will not bother the Rabbi at a time like this. When they pulled up to the Rabbi's home, my mother in-law refused to get out. Of course

Grandma Haber insisted and they both approached the Rabbi's door.

"Hello Mrs. Haber", replied Rabbi Weinkrantz's daughter. "What can I do for you". Mrs. Haber said we need to see the Rabbi. Rabbi Weinkrantz's daughter began to explain the status that her father was in. Mrs. Haber exclaimed, "It's a matter of great importance", so the daughter let them in the house.

My mother in-law said she saw Rabbi Weinkrantz lying in bed dressed in a \* Kittel\* (white robe which serves as a burial shroud for Jewish men). Rabbi Weinkrantz said, "Come in, what can I do for you?"

My mother in-law told Rabbi Weinkrantz of her situation. Rabbi Weinkrantz took his arms and hands upward and moved them outward three times while saying, "It left you, It left you, It left you". (As if pushing out the growth)

My mother in-law then said, "Rabbi, but what about the surgery? Should I do the surgery?"

Rabbi Weinkrantz answered, "There is no reason to do the surgery, it has already left you. Do not do the surgery."

Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Weinkrantz ZT"L passed away the very next day.

When my mother in-law went back to her doctor, true to the Rabbi's word, there was No trace whatsoever of the growth.

PSS ... And they say we should trust historic sites to the Arabs in the middle east .... Perhaps within the Pesach rush you missed this - **Historic Damascus synagogue looted and burned**

The 2,000-year-old Jobar Synagogue in the Syrian capital of Damascus was looted and burned to the ground. The Syrian army loyal to President Bashar Assad and rebel forces are blaming each other for the destruction of the historic synagogue, according to reports on Sunday.

The government said the rebels burned the synagogue and that so-called Zionist agents stole its historic religious items in an operation that had been planned for several weeks, the Arabic Al-Manar Television reported, citing the Arabic Syria Truth website. The rebels said the Syrian government looted the synagogue before burning it to the ground, Israel Radio reported Sunday.

The synagogue, one of the oldest in the world, was damaged earlier this month by mortars reportedly

fired by Syrian government forces. A video posted online by the Syrian opposition shows extensive damage done to the outside of the synagogue. The Jobar synagogue was built atop a cave that, according to tradition, was used by the prophet Elijah to conceal himself from prosecution. The synagogue is said to have been built by Elijah's successor, the prophet Elisha, and repaired during the first century by Eleazar ben Arach.

### Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: The laws of purity and impurity as they pertain to child-birth are discussed. The basic laws of Tzaraat involving the diagnosis of the Kohain and possible quarantine, as well as the laws of Tzarrat as it relates to healthy skin and infection are stated.

2nd and 3rd Aliya: The laws of Tzaraat as it relates to burns, a bald patch, dull white spots, and the presence of a blemish on clothing is discussed.

4th Aliya: The purification process of the Mitzora involving two Kosher birds, a piece of cedar, some crimson wool, a hyssop branch, fresh spring water, a clay bowl, a Kohain, the Mikveh, seven days, a haircut and a Korban with its Mincha offering is detailed.

5th Aliya: The Korban of a Mitzorah who is poor is discussed.

6th and 7th Aliya: The laws dealing with blemishes that appear on a house are detailed. Following the laws of Tzaraat, the Torah turns its attention to various laws dealing with bodily discharges that render the individual Tameh. Male discharges, seminal discharges, menstruation, and other female discharges are detailed. Note that the basic laws of Family Purity are stated in verses 15:19-26.

This week's Haftorah is from Kings II Capt. 7. It took place during the reign of Yehoram who ruled over the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Yehoram was a sinful king whose actions resulted in Aram laying siege to the capitol city Shomron causing a terrible famine. The famine was so severe that mothers were eating their own children.

Yehoram confronted the prophet Elisha demanding that he bring an end to the siege and the hunger. Elisha told Yehoram that G-d would perform a miracle the next day and there would be so much food that the food market would bottom out.

There were four lepers (the most obvious connection to our Parsha) who had been banished too outside

the walls of Shomron. Like the rest of the people, they were starving from the famine and decided to chance approaching the enemy camp in hope of begging some food or at the very worst, a quick death.

During the night Hashem had performed a miracle and the massive forces of Aram had fled during the night leaving behind their tents, horses, and supplies.

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### EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

#### **"When a woman conceives and gives birth to a male." (Vayikra 12:1)**

Our perashah begins with the laws of a woman who gives birth to a baby boy or girl. As we know, there is great significance to the order of the perashiot of the Torah. Rashi quotes Rabbi Simlai who says, "Just as the creation of man came after all cattle, beasts and fowl, in the Torah's account of the act of creation, so is man's law explained after the laws of cattle, beast and fowl." Rashi means that last week's perashah discusses the laws of kashrut of the animals, that they need to have split hooves and chew their cud. This week's perashah discusses the laws of humans, such as the importance of birth and berit milah. The reason for this order is that this was the order of their creation. First the animals and then man.

The Rabbi Pene Menahem z"l gives us an added insight. The laws relating to animals refers to the basic bad character traits (midot) that reflect the animal side of man. Only after they are dealt with can one discuss the higher level of laws related to humans.

This is illustrated in the haftarah that talks about the four men who had leprosy. Our Sages tell us this was Gehazi and his sons. Gehazi was a close disciple of Elisha the Prophet. Yet we find that he suffered from a number of serious character faults, and ended up being punished with leprosy. The question is that how could it be that he was a close student of Elisha the Prophet, which means he was learning to achieve the levels of closeness to Hashem that are a prerequisite to prophecy, and still

be so low? The answer is that he entered the yeshivah of Elisha under the assumption that he already worked on the earlier levels of improvement. He didn't climb the ladder of achievement taking the lower steps first.

Our children are exposed to all the problems of society, violent crime and immorality and dishonesty, to name a few. It's important to impress upon them and to teach them that these are more of the animal side of man. This comes first. After the message is very clear and accepted, then we can teach them the elevated laws of the Torah that makes a man. Rabbi Reuven Semah

#### **"When the affliction has turned white, the Kohen shall declare him tahor." (Vayikra 13:17)**

The Torah stresses a number of times that if the plague of leprosy turns into white, it will become tahor, that is, no more impurity. The word l'p'v' (nehepach) means transforms or turns around, and the Rabbis say that if the letters of the word g'd'b (nega) which means plague, are turned around, it will spell out the word d'b'g (oneg) which means pleasure.

The lesson here is that even something so difficult as leprosy can be turned around into something constructive which will be a source of pleasure. If a person understands that the reason he has leprosy is because he spoke "lashon hara" (gossip) or some other sin, and resolves not to repeat it, he has "turned around" his life and become a new person. Even today, when we don't have leprosy, whatever happens to us should be viewed as Hashem communicating to us to improve. When we do, we then are transformed into greater people. The g'd'b (nega) becomes a source of d'b'g (oneg). May we always merit to see the good in everything that happens. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

### ETHICS OF THE FATHERS

#### **"Be cautious with the people who govern."**

In this statement Rabban Gamliel is probably speaking from a knowledge of the wide experience that his father, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, had with Rome, the power that ruled Israel then. His father was quite friendly with the governors appointed by Rome, as well as with the Roman emperor himself. They often asked this Sage's advice and learned much from Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. Yet, when he needed them to help his land, the help was not given. Rabban Gamliel wisely warns: Beware of these politicians. They use you when they need you; but when you need them, they are not there.

There is another vein in which we can interpret the word zehirin – be cautious: Perhaps the “ruling power” about which our Mishnah warns us to be careful is not a human agency, but the ultimate ruling power, Hashem! Pay careful attention, says Rabban Gamliel, to your relations with the Creator. This is the power in which you must ultimately place your trust. Congressmen and statesmen are only messengers. Their power and influence are truly limited and finite. They are in power today and forgotten tomorrow. Insecure and fearful for their future, “they draw a man near in friendship only for their own needs, purposes, and will not stand by a man in his hour of hardship,” as the Mishnah concludes. How wisely the Psalmist says, “Do not put your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no help.” Pray rather to the Almighty, and rely on the true ruler of the world, the Power behind all powers. (Ethics from Sinai)

**RABBI ELI MANSOUR**  
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**Looking Out for Today's Mesora**

Parashat Tazria deals mainly with the subject of Sara'at, a type of skin disease that in ancient times would affect people who were guilty of certain sins. Sara'at was manifested in the form of discolorations on the skin, and when a suspicious discoloration appeared, the individual would be brought by his family or friends to a Kohen, who would examine the skin and determine whether the discoloration indeed constituted Sara'at. If the individual was determined to have been stricken with Sara'at, he would have to reside outside his city until the skin returned to its normal color.

One of the concepts underlying this law of Sara'at is the reality that most people are reluctant to acknowledge their problems. When a person would notice a mysterious discoloration, he would likely dismiss it as a temporary medical condition, perhaps eczema, some kind of virus or allergic reaction. The last thing he would think of is that he is being punished by G-d for sins he committed, such as Lashon Ha'ra and arrogance. For this reason, the people around him are instructed to bring him to a Kohen for a “diagnosis.” Given our innate reluctance to recognize our own flaws and behavior problems, the people around the Mesora (the person stricken with Sara'at) bore the responsibility of bringing him to the Kohen to initiate the process of atonement.

The laws of Sara'at do not apply nowadays, as this supernatural punishment no longer occurs. Still, the basic concept underlying this process applies as

much today as it did in ancient times. The Mesora'im of today are those suffering from addictions or other types of self-destructive behaviors and tendencies. Unfortunately – and let us not delude ourselves into thinking otherwise – there are many people in our community who are ruining their lives and their families through harmful habits and behavior patterns. As in the case of the Mesora, these people generally respond to their problems with insistent denial. More often than not, people with addictions deny that they have a problem and thus refuse to seek the help they so desperately need. This is the normal and natural reaction to such situations, and this is what makes these situations so dangerous and so difficult to handle. The responsibility therefore falls upon the people around the suffering victims – family members, friends, the Rabbi, and the community at large – to get involved. Just as the Mesora's family members and peers would bring him to the Kohen for guidance, we, too, must take the initiative to help those who need help but refuse to initiate the process. We must look out for the “Mesora'im” in our midst to ensure they receive the assistance, support and guidance they need to overcome their problem and resume normal, healthy, productive lives.

Even if the law of Sara'at does not apply nowadays, the fundamental message of communal responsibility most certainly does.

#### Rabbi Wein

We are currently in the season of the counting of the days of the Omer that will lead us to the grand holiday of Shavuot. In the tradition of rabbinic commentary regarding this process of counting the days between Pesach and Shavuot, the emphasis has always been on the countdown towards Shavuot – towards the revelation at Sinai and the granting of the Torah to Israel.

Tradition forced us to count towards something, towards a goal and an achievement. Yet in reality the count of the days of the Omer is not only a counting of time towards something – it is also a counting of days away from something. The count reflects the departure, both in memory and in actual time from the great and miraculous events of the Exodus from Egypt.

The great moments that Israel experienced at Yam Suf, of faith and trust in God and in His servant Moshe, faded away in time elapsed and in new experiences and challenges as the Jews entered the desert of Sinai. The farther away in distance and especially in time that Israel traveled, from the

miracles of their release from bondage, the more they rebelled and grumbled against the Divine and Moshe.

Time passing dulls memory and weakens recall. The past is buried in the rush to anticipate the future and all of its blessings. That is the nature of humans - to count forward and rarely to look back. The counting of the Omer is fixed firmly in our minds as the anticipation of Shavuot and not as the memorial to Pesach.

We are witness to this phenomenon in many areas of our daily life. I was riding in a taxi recently and the taxi driver – a friendly and voluble soul – was relating that he lives on a certain street here in Jerusalem. The street is named for one of the members of the pre-State of Israel Jewish underground who was hanged by the British before they were driven out of the country. The taxi driver complained that most of the children who live on that street have no concept as to what, who and why the name of their street has an historical and emotional significance.

They are not taught of the struggles to establish a Jewish state in the Land of Israel – merely a few decades ago. Neither at school or at home are the events and lessons of the past recounted and emphasized. Only the current situation and the potential brighter future occupy attention and discussion.

Thus, within a few short years the sacrifices, beliefs and even the facts of the immediate past are forgotten and neglected. We count forward towards the next Yom Haatzmaut but the original events that led to the first Yom Haatzmaut are only dim memories of the fading generation. The count of time is always inexorably forward and therefore it must inevitably erase the past and its story and events. Counting time passing is always a double-edged sword – anticipating the future while dimming the memory of the past.

In order to counteract this human tendency, the Lord, so to speak, in beginning the words of the revelation at Sinai introduces Himself as "I am the Lord your God Who took you forth from the Land of Egypt, the house of bondage." That was intended as a wake-up call, a jog to our collective memory.

The Lord reminds us that as we counted forward to the great day of the granting of the Torah to Israel, we were also obligated to count backwards, again so to speak, to refresh ourselves with the miraculous events of our past - of the Exodus from Egypt and the deliverance of the Jewish people at the waters of Yam Suf.

The Torah emphasizes again and again the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt. It appears in the Kiddush of Shabat and the holidays. It is associated with every event and commandment in the Torah and in Jewish life. It is ordained as being a constant and daily memorial as to our existence and purpose in life.

As time passes and we look towards our great future, the Torah reminds us that the wondrous events that accompany our ultimate, complete redemption are to be of the nature that they were at the time of the Exodus of Egypt. As we count forward, we are also to count back and bring to life our past so that we can safely guarantee the success of our future. This is an important facet of counting of the Omer.

**Sir Jonathan Sacks  
Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations  
of the Commonwealth**

The sidrot of Tazria and Metsorah contain laws which are among the most difficult to understand. They are about conditions of "impurity" arising from the fact that we are physical beings, embodied souls, and hence exposed to (in Hamlet's words) "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Though we have immortal longings, mortality is the condition of human existence, as it is of all embodied life. As Rambam explains (Guide for the Perplexed, III: 12)

We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species, the species themselves would not exist permanently . . . He who thinks that he can have flesh and bones without being subject to any external influence, or any of the accidents of matter, unconsciously wishes to reconcile two opposites, namely, to be at the same time subject and not subject to change.

Throughout history there have been two distinct and opposing ways of relating to this fact: hedonism (living for physical pleasure) and asceticism (relinquishing physical pleasure). The former worships the physical while denying the spiritual, the latter enthrones the spiritual at the cost of the physical.

The Jewish way has always been different: to sanctify the physical – eating, drinking, sex and rest – making the life of the body a vehicle for the divine presence. The reason is simple. We believe with perfect faith that the G-d of redemption is also the G-d of creation. The physical world we inhabit is the one

G-d made and pronounced "very good." To be a hedonist is to deny G-d. To be an ascetic is to deny the goodness of G-d's world. To be a Jew is to celebrate both creation and Creator. That is the principle that explains many otherwise incomprehensible features of Jewish life.

The laws with which the sedra begins are striking examples of this:

When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy, she shall be *teme'ah* for seven days, just as she is during the time of separation when she has her period . . . Then, for thirty-three additional days she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean. Until this purification period is complete, she shall not touch anything holy and shall not enter the sanctuary.

If she gives birth to a girl, she shall have for two weeks the same *teme'ah* status as during her menstrual period. Then, for sixty-six days after that, she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean.

She then brings a burnt-offering and a sin-offering, after which she is restored to "ritual purity." What is the meaning of these laws? Why does childbirth render the mother *teme'ah* (usually translated as "ritually impure", better understood as "a condition which impedes or exempts from a direct encounter with holiness")? And why is the period after giving birth to a girl twice that for a boy? There is a temptation to see these laws as inherently beyond the reach of human understanding. Several rabbinic statements seem to say just this. In fact, it is not so, as Maimonides explains at length in the Guide. To be sure, we can never know – specifically with respect to laws that have to do with *kedushah* (holiness) and *teharah* (purity) – whether our understanding is correct. But we are not thereby forced to abandon our search for understanding, even though any explanation will be at best speculative and tentative.

The first principle essential to understanding the laws of ritual purity and impurity is that G-d is life. Judaism is a profound rejection of cults, ancient and modern, that glorify death. The great pyramids of Egypt were grandiose tombs. Arthur Koestler noted that without death "the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent." The English metaphysical poets turned to it constantly as a theme. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

Webster was much possessed by death

And saw the skull beneath the skin . . .

Donne, I suppose, was such another . . .

He knew the anguish of the marrow

The ague of the skeleton . . .

Freud coined the word *thanatos* to describe the death-directed character of human life.

Judaism is a protest against death-centred cultures. "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence" (Psalm 114) "What profit is there in my death, if I go down into the pit? Can the dust acknowledge You? Can it proclaim your truth?" (Psalm 30). As we open a *sefer Torah* we say: "All of you who hold fast to the Lord your G-d are alive today" (Deut 4:4). The Torah is a tree of life. G-d is the G-d of life. As Moses put it in two memorable words: "Choose life" (Deut. 30: 19).

It follows that *kedushah* (holiness) – a point in time or space where we stand in the unmediated presence of G-d – involves a supreme consciousness of life. That is why the paradigm case of *tumah* is contact with a corpse. Other cases of *tumah* include diseases or bodily emissions that remind us of our mortality. G-d's domain is life. Therefore it may not be associated in any way with intimations of death. This is how Judah Halevi explains the purity laws in his work *The Kuzari*:

A dead body represents the highest degree of loss of life, and a leprous limb is as if it were dead. It is the same with the loss of seed, because it had been endowed with living power, capable of engendering a human being. Its loss therefore forms a contrast to the living and breathing. (Kuzari, II: 60)

The laws of purity apply exclusively to Israel, argues Halevi, precisely because Judaism is the supreme religion of life, and its adherents are therefore hypersensitive to even the most subtle distinctions between life and death.

A second principle, equally striking, is the acute sensitivity Judaism shows to the birth of a child. Nothing is more "natural" than procreation. Every living thing engages in it. Sociobiologists go so far as to argue that a human being is a gene's way of creating another gene. By contrast, the Torah goes to great lengths to describe how many of the heroines of the Bible – among them Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah and the Shunamite woman – were infertile and had children only through a miracle.



Clearly the Torah intends a message here, and it is unmistakable. To be a Jew is to know that survival is not a matter of biology alone. What other cultures may take as natural is for us a miracle. Every Jewish child is a gift of G-d. No faith has taken children more seriously or devoted more of its efforts to raising the next generation. Childbirth is wondrous. To be a parent is the closest any of us come to G-d himself. That, incidentally, is why women are closer to G-d than men, because they, unlike men, know what it is to bring new life out of themselves, as G-d brings life out of himself. The idea is beautifully captured in the verse in which, leaving Eden, Adam turns to his wife and calls her Chavah "for she is the mother of all life."

We can now speculate about the laws relating to childbirth. When a mother gives birth, not only does she undergo great risk (until recently, childbirth was a life-threatening danger to mother and baby alike). She is also separated from what until now had been part of her own body (a foetus, said the rabbis, "is like a limb of the mother") and which has now become an independent person. If that is so in the case of a boy, it is doubly so in the case of a girl – who, with G-d's help, will not merely live but may herself in later years become a source of new life. At one level, therefore, the laws signal the detachment of life from life.

At another level, they surely suggest something more profound. There is a halakhic principle: "One who is engaged in a mitzvah is exempt from other mitzvot." It is as if G-d were saying to the mother: for forty days in the case of a boy, and doubly so in the case of a girl (the mother-daughter bond is ontologically stronger than that between mother and son), I exempt you from coming before Me in the place of holiness because you are fully engaged in one of the holiest acts of all, nurturing and caring for your child. Unlike others you do not need to visit the Temple to be attached to life in all its sacred splendour. You are experiencing it yourself, directly and with every fibre of your being. Days, weeks, from now you will come and give thanks before Me (together with offerings for having come through a moment of danger). But for now, look upon your child with wonder. For you have been given a glimpse of the great secret, otherwise known only to G-d. Childbirth exempts the new mother from attendance at the Temple because her bedside replicates the experience of the Temple. She now knows what it is for love to beget life and in the midst of mortality to be touched by an intimation of immortality.

#### **AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL**

#### **"A plague of Leprosy " (13:2)**

As a preface to this important subject, we must note our dread of this fearsome malady and our sympathy for the man that experienced the symptoms of leprosy and the extreme hardships which he is forced to endure as a result of his sad condition. Hashem foresaw this reaction by the readers of the Torah, and He certainly intended to cause such a reaction by means of this Parasha. The fear of leprosy is a cause to Fear Hashem, and it generates gratitude to Hashem for protecting us from such sad misfortune.

Yet we must understand that the miracle of leprosy is actually a model for all forms of misfortune, which must be considered the work of Hashem. "When a man sees misfortune come upon him, let him search in his deeds" ( Berachot 5A ). The purpose of the plague and misfortunes in general, is to make me more Aware of Hashem and especially to remind them how great was Hashem's Kindness hitherto.

Even if the leprosy had been sent upon a man for no sin that he committed, yet by his affliction he performs an important service to Hashem; for he provides a lesson and a warning to all men that they take heed and guard against evil-doing. Similarly, poverty is sometimes visited upon entirely virtuous persons for some purpose, such as "that we should be rescued by them from the judgment of Gehinom" (Baba Batra 10A) by aiding them.

Thus, although leprosy or poverty may be Hashem's retribution upon a sinner, yet when an innocent man is similarly afflicted he may thereby be considered as one chosen by Hashem to perform an important service of teaching others by his suffering what could come upon them, for which he shall gain a great merit of reward. Quoted from " A Kingdom of Cohanim " by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT"L

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