

Durban II: When Words Become a Disease

Parshat Tazriah-Metzorah 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

It seems especially appropriate that we should be reading *Parshat Tazriah-Metzorah* today in the aftermath of Durban II, the UN conference on racism which took place earlier this week. At first glance, the events of the week – in particular the hateful remarks of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- and the description in our Torah of a mysterious disease called *tzara'at* appear to be unrelated. But I'd like to suggest that there is a connection. Our Torah portion deals with a malicious disease called *tzara'at*, and words, as we saw so dramatically this week, can be a disease that infects not only the one who says them and those against who they are directed, but even those to whom they are spoken.

As we heard from our Bar Mitzvah, today's Torah portion is deeply troubling. It deals with an illness called *tzara'at* that was considered to be highly contagious, and was dealt with in ancient times by removing the person from the community and isolating the victim from society. *Tzara'at* is referred to as a *nega*, an affliction, not a disease, implying that it was inflicted on the individual by God and was the consequence of some unacceptable behavior.

The Talmud, the great compendium of Jewish law and lore, takes this idea a step farther: the sages searched for the sin that was the catalyst for this disease. The Talmud says that leprosy was the just punishment of someone guilty of having “a haughty eye, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a mind that hatches evil, feet quick to do wrong, a witness who testifies falsely, and one who incites a quarrel.” In particular, the sages focused on *lashon harah*, gossip and slander. Because the term for someone with *tzara'at* is *metzora* and this word sounds like *motzi shem ra*, the word for slander, the rabbis concluded that *tzara'at* is the just deserves of anyone who maligns another. Countless sermons have been given on this subject throughout the ages.

But such an assumption is troubling. Once we open the door connecting physical illnesses and moral failings we enter the no-man's land of self righteous judgment and condemnation. Besides, the last time I checked most people who malign others, including Mr. Ahmadinejad, are not stricken with leprosy, and I would guess there are many people who are completely innocent and yet suffer from the worst of ailments. Also when you connect sin and disease there is no end to the presumptions. Where do one draw the line: AIDS; cancer; heart disease? How about children born with birth defects?

The sages were neither foolish nor naïve. They knew full well that if there was a connection between gossip and leprosy, the entire world would be one big leper's colony. They also advised compassion and understanding when dealing with the victims of this or any other disease. No one has a right to presume to know why some people suffer and others don't. As Andrew told us, it is our job to reach out to those who are suffering, to show compassion, care for and support them.

So why did the sages connect slander and *tzara'at*? I'd like to suggest that the rabbis saw *tzara'at* as a metaphor for understanding the destructive nature of slander and gossip. Like *tzara'at*, slander isolates and alienates a person from community. It has the ability to turn a person into a moral leper, shunned

by others and feared by society as a whole. Like *tzara'at*, slander is highly contagious; a lie repeated often enough gains a certain amount of legitimacy no matter how outrageous it is. And like *tzara'at*, slander affects both body and soul. It breeds distrust, anger and hurt. Because something is a metaphor doesn't mean it isn't real and doesn't affect us in very personal and physical ways. A broken heart may be a metaphor but it has real implications for a person's well being. People can die of a broken heart just as slander can destroy a life.

Durban II was the worst possible example of 'official' slander and hate mongering that we've seen since world war two. It is but another example of the moral bankruptcy and the cynicism of the United Nations. This conference was nothing less than an attempt to turn Israel into a *metzarah*, a moral leper. When the primary subject is Israel in a world that is still witnessing genocide in Sudan, something is seriously wrong. When the representative of Venezuela can attack Israel while ignoring his government's threats against the Catholic Church, then there is no legitimacy in the words being spoken. And when Egypt and Syria talks about Palestinian human rights while ignoring the basic rights of their own citizens, then this conference was not about addressing racism but de-legitimizing Israel. And when the key note speaker of such a conference was probably the most dangerous man in the world today – and people were thankful that he didn't deny the holocaust, what meaning can such a conference have?

Durban II was nothing but an opportunity for hate mongering and attacking Israel. We could dismiss the message delivered this week as empty words but words are never empty and they are not without power. We teach our children to say "Sticks and Stones my break my bones but words will never harm me," but that's just not true. Consider the fact that for every chapter of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, a million and a half Jews died; for every sentence thousands of Jews were burned to death. If we have learned nothing else it is that words can be a destructive disease.

If words can be a contagious disease they can also serve as a cure. Words can isolate people from one another and breed divisiveness or they can inspire love, peace and understanding. And they have the power to bring people together. It was Anwar Sadat's willingness simply to address the members of the Knesset in 1977 that changed the course of Middle East history.

As Israel prepares to celebrate its birthday this coming week, we need to speak words; not words of hatred or condemnation of Israel's foes but words of pride and love for what Israel represents. We need to speak true words, even when they are critical of Israel but we need to preface them with our unconditional support for this little county, with our undying belief that Israel has a right to exist, that Israel is a country striving constantly to become better and stronger. We need to remind the world why the words of people like Mr. Ahmadinejad are not true. Silence is assent, and we can not allow the repeated lies of hate mongers to go unchallenged. But we need to do so without rancor or hatred in our voices. We need to make the argument strongly, calmly and convincingly.

Too much is at stake: not just the existence of Israel but the moral legitimacy of society. To remain silence is to allow evil to triumph! All we need to do is think back to the appeasement of Neville Chamberlain before World War II. To quote the well known aphorism – all it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to remain silent....

Tzara'at, moral leprosy, is as real today as it was in the time of the Bible, not only in our personal lives but in society. Let us choose our words carefully and use them to heal rather than to harm!!

Shabbat Shalom