

Torah Table Talk

Those Who Live “Outside the Gates”

Parshat Metzorah

Leviticus 14:1 – 15:32 / 2 Kings 7:3 -20



Like today’s Torah portion, the Haftorah deals with a group of people afflicted with a scale skin condition that usually referred to as leprosy. We learn from Parshat Metzorah that those who were afflicted with this condition had to be excluded from the city: “Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (Leviticus, 13:46) Ironically, these lepers emerge as the national heroes who save the nation in a time of national crisis.

The haftorah takes place during the time of the prophet Elisha. The city of Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom, was attacked and under siege by Aram and its King ben Haddad. The siege was so bad that parents were resorting to cannibalism and the price of even the most modest food was out of control. When the king came to complain to the prophet Elisha about this, Elisha calmly reassured him that a miracle would take place the next day to relieve the people’s suffering.

Against this backdrop, four lepers find themselves caught in a no-man’s land between the besieged Israelites city and the camp of the cruel Aramean army. When they realize they have nothing to lose, they decide to defect to the Aramean camp. To their surprise, they discover the camp deserted. Apparently something had spooked the Arameans and they and they had fled. At first the Lepers help themselves to food, silver and gold. But then realizing that it is wrong to keep all the wealth to themselves, they inform the people in the city of their good fortune. Initially the Israelites are reluctant to trust the lepers. In the end they discover their good fortune and realize that Elisha’s prophecy had come true.

2 Kings 7:3 – 4

There were four men, lepers, sitting outside the gate. They said to one another: Why should we sit here waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; if we just sit here, we shall die. Come let us desert to the Aramean camp... *(After they ate and drank the lepers said:)* “We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent! If we wait until the light of morning we shall incur guilt!”

2 Kings 6:33 – 7:1

While he was still talking to them the king came to him and said “This calamity is from the Lord. What more can I hope from the Lord?” And Elisha replied, “Hear the word of the Lord, this time tomorrow a seah shall sell for a shekel at the gate of Samaria and two seahs of barley for a shekel...” (Note that this price is extremely cheap – Elisha was predicting that there would be food readily available overnight.)

Devarim Rabbah 6:8

Hanina said: Plagues of leprosy come only on account of speaking calumny. For, as the sages said, you can see for yourself that such plagues come on account of calumny. Even the righteous Miriam, who spoke calumny of her brother Moses--plagues clung to her, as a sign [and a warning] to all given to speaking calumny. Hence, "remember what the Lord thy God did unto Miriam" (Deut. 24:9). Now, the matter may be reasoned a fortiori: if Miriam--who made certain not to speak to Moses directly, did so for Moses' own benefit [so he would take back his life and have more children], and spoke for the glory of Him who is everywhere and for the increase of the population of the world--was punished thus, how much more and more will he who speaks publicly in disparagement of his neighbor be punished!

Numbers Rabbah 7:5

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi ben Shalom said: Because of eleven sins a person is struck with leprosy: for cursing the name of God, for sexual immorality, for blood shed, for falsely suspecting someone, for arrogance, for stealing someone's rights, for false oaths, for desecrating the name of God, for worshipping idols. Rabbi Yitzhak added: for miserliness. The sages added, for despising words of Torah.

Questions for Discussion

1. It seems strange that the rabbis chose to leave Elisha's prediction out of today's Haftorah by beginning with verse number three. In the sources above I have included the opening verses in which Elisha tells the king that there will be food available "at this time tomorrow." Why do you think they left this crucial verse out of the Haftorah? How does it change the story?
2. While the city of Samaria was suffering beneath a terrible siege, the lepers are seen, "sitting outside the city gates." Were the lepers cast out of the city out of fear, prejudice, or pragmatic considerations? How does their position between the besieged city and the Aramean camp give them certain opportunities others would not have? How do outsiders sometimes see the world differently than others?
3. Unfortunately we still have people who are made to feel like outcasts in the contemporary Jewish community and in society in general. Who are they? Who are the people who are "sitting outside the gates" of Jewish life and what can we do to be a more inclusive community?
4. The Torah devotes several chapters to *Tzara'at*, to this mysterious skin disease which is usually translated as leprosy. The sages associated this disease with *lashon harah*, gossip and slander. Why did they make this connection? What is the problem with making an association physical disease and wrong doing? Surely the Rabbis must have been aware that not everyone who gossips contracts leprosy? Why do you think they made this association if it is not real?

Torah Table Talk is a weekly e-publication of Rabbi Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center on Long Island, New York. If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org or contact Rabbi Mark B Greenspan at Haravmark@Optonline.net. Readers are invited to sponsor a weekly edition of Torah Table Talk.

Announcing a New Haggadah Commentary

I am pleased to announce that I am in the process of publishing a new commentary on the Haggadah as I do each year. This will be the fourth year that I have translated a traditional commentary on the Haggadah that heretofore was unavailable to non-Hebrew readers. This year's commentary is called the *Yismach Yisrael*. It is a Hasidic commentary by Rabbi Jerachmiel Danziger the leader of the Alexander Hasidim in Poland during the second half of the nineteenth century. This year's commentary has been a challenge to translate but it has been worth the time and effort that I put into it. If you would like a copy of the Haggadah please send me your address and a check for \$15 to cover costs. Checks should be made out to the Rabbi's Discretionary Fund at The Oceanside Jewish Center, 2860 Brower Avenue, Oceanside, New York 11572. If you would prefer, I can send the text as attached PDF file. Be warned – it will be over 100 pages. By the way, if I am mailing it, I will try but I cannot promise to have it to you before the Seder – I will make every effort to do so.

*“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*