

"A MORAL DIAGNOSIS"

The rabbinic comment on today's Sidra reveals the moral bias of Judaism. Life and history, and all their vicissitudes, are not ~~merely~~ merely a series of accidents without rhyme or reason, but the playing out of a moral drama of sin and punishment. Usually the reasons for sickness and tragedy, for joy and good fortune, are a mystery to us. But sometimes we can penetrate the veil of the cosmic enigma and discover the ways in which God works. Occasionally, though very infrequently, such insights are available to us.

Thus, the disease known as tzaraat -- which is usually mistranslated as leprosy, but which is actually a largely extinct fungus infection -- was considered by the rabbis to be not just a pathological medical condition which occurred by happenstance, but the reflection of an ethical failure, and therefore a condition which lends itself to moral diagnosis.

This does not mean that only this ill person committed a crime; that in itself would be immoral, for we would then complicate the misery of a patient by accusing him of some unknown sins. All of us, say the rabbis, are nitfas be'avon...be'khol yom, we are ensnared by sins every day of our lives. Therefore, we cannot and do not know why one person is ~~aff~~ afflicted and the other spared -- even by tzaraat. But we are told that in some way beyond our comprehension, life is sensible even if it does not always make sense to us. The presence of

tzaraat establishes the guilt of the patient, but by no means exonerates those who are fortunate enough to remain healthy. There is, then, a moral rule that ultimately prevails even though we can never know its details.

In this context, let us analyze three sins which, according to the rabbis, constitute a kind of ethical etiology, and which are responsible for tzaraat.

The first of these is slander, the circulation of false and defamatory reports about a neighbor. This is called, in Hebrew, motzi shem ra, which literally means: one who brings out or circulates a bad name. The rabbis even pointed to the similarity in sounds between the words metzora and motzi shem ra or motzi ra. What is the relation of the sin to the punishment? The slanderer seeks to isolate his victim; by defaming him, he ruptures his normal relationships with his friends, neighbors, and society, and so effectively seals him from his peers. Therefore the metzora is himself isolated from society. He is sent hutz la-mahaneh, outside the camp of Israel, until he recovers.

The second sin which our rabbis identified as a moral cause for tzaraat, is that of gasut ha-ruah, which means vulgarity of spirit, arrogance, presumptuousness. Thus, the rite of purification includes the use of etz erez, cedar-wood, for the cedar tree grows tall and straight and is a symbol of pride. The purification of the metzora requires the symbol of the breaking of pride, the lesson of humility which makes up for the original arrogance.

The third sin which the rabbis discovered as being responsible for tzaraat is that of lashon ha-ra, "the evil tongue." By this is meant the circulation of unfavorable information which is not false, but true. The evil in this act lies in the gossip exposing what his victim wishes to keep private; he intrudes into the intimate affairs of his neighbor and discloses secret information. That is why the punishment for gossip or lashon ha-ra, "the evil tongue," is: tzaraat, a physical affliction which reveals by its outward symptoms the inner sickness. Thus too, part of the purification requires that the metzora expose all parts of his body: ve'gilah et kol se'aro, he must shave the hair from all his body, exposing his skin. The purification consists of exposure, even as the sin consisted of exposure.

I mention these matters not only because of their obvious timeliness with regard to today's Sidra, and not only because these three sins are fairly ubiquitous, everyday occurrences for most people; but also because in recent days and weeks the entire Jewish community as a whole has become the victim of such nefarious activities involving all three sins.

I speak not only of anti-Semitic attacks on the Jewish community; we will always find them. For instance, the recent anti-Shechitah advertisement was such an anti-Semitic calumny which diabolically disguised abominable lies behind half-truths.

I refer, rather, to an attack on the committed Jewish community by one who locates himself within it, by an ostensibly obser-

vant Jew and one of the leaders of a great Jewish organization -- and an irresponsible individual whose fanaticism has destroyed his sense of proportion and put all of us in a bad light.

Last week, the lawyer for the American Jewish Congress testified in Trenton, New Jersey, before a Committee of the Senate of New Jersey, on the problem of state aid to private and parochial schools. In the course of protesting this proposed state aid, he delivered himself of a blistering attack on Hebrew Day Schools, peppered with innuendos and half-truths -- or better, half-falsehoods. He told the New Jersey Senate Committee that Jewish parents send their children to Day Schools not because of conviction, but in order to avoid the integrated public schools. He therefore accused Jewish parents of Day School children of hypocrisy.

It is my assertion that in this intemperate, tasteless, and vile broadside against Jewish parents, this man is guilty of all the three sins of which we spoke. To the largest extent, it is a case of motzi shem ra, plain slander, defamation; ^{it is} utterly false. In the minority of cases where he is right, it is a case of lashon ha-ra, the disclosure of true information in an unfairly unfavorable light. And in all cases, his presumption in ascribing unworthy motives to others, and his unfelicitous language, stamp him as a man of brazen gasut ha-ruah -- obtuse vulgarity.

It is mostly a case of slander; it is a lie. I declare that most parents of Day School children send them to Yeshivot because they are aware of the bankruptcy of other methods, and because they know

that if they want their posterity to survive as Jews there is no alternative but to give them the maximum Jewish education available, which is, in today's world, a Day School education.

To hear this man speak, one might imagine that Jews never educated their children before the Supreme Court decision on integration. Let me therefore testify from my own experience. My generation of students of elementary Yeshivot did not go to Day Schools because the public schools were integrated or because their teaching was poor, or because we did not want to mingle with the poorer classes. In those days, there was rarely a Negro child to be seen in our neighborhood, and we usually did not know where Puerto Rico is. The general educational level of Day Schools then, in contrast to the situation today, was quite low, lower than the public schools. And most parents of Day School children in those dark days of the 1930s were themselves part of the poor class. Indeed, they could little afford the cost of the Yeshiva education, and envied those who obtained for their children a superior secular education in the free public schools. Yet, they sacrificed, frequently borrowing in order to pay tuition, not because they were hypocrites but because they loved Torah.

I might add that this comment by the American Jewish Congress spokesman is a slur on the Catholic community as well. This community largely favors state aid for parochial schools in certain forms, yet it is absolutely incorrect to accuse them of being against integration. Of all the communities in this country, they were among the first to integrate their schools.

Second, there is the element of lashon ha-ra, "the evil tongue." Even in that minority of cases where his ascription of unworthy motives is right, his peppery statement is offensive, destructive, unethical, and immoral.

Are we happy with such parents? Yes and no. We are not happy with them because all too often they form the bulwark of those who resist the intensive Jewish education and conviction we try to impart to our children. But at the same time we are glad we have them. We abide by the famous statement and insight of our Rabbi: mitokh she'lo li'shmah ba lishmah, although one begins to study Torah from unworthy motives, he will ultimately arrive at studying because of the proper motives. Our experience has shown us that more than one family has returned to Torah because of a Day School education for a child originally undertaken not for reasons of Torah.

The question, therefore, is not integration; naturally, I am in favor of it. Neither is the question that of state aid; it is irrelevant to our discussion. The question is whether integration is the single most important consideration in our lives and in our history. Most of the time, our choices are not between good and evil, between black and white, but between two competing evils or two competing goods. Our problem is to weigh, on the one hand, more integration in American public schools, against, on the other hand, the survival of Judaism through Day School education. This problem is rather unique to the Jewish community; few outsiders can appreciate the importance of Jewish education to the future of Judaism, indeed the general role of study in our religion. Most outsiders would therefore regard this

statement of the problem as duplicity. Hence, to brand Day School education as an evasion of integration is to put the observant Jewish community at a disadvantage in a public which does not share our private concerns.

Even, therefore, if this spokesman were correct, he has no moral right to criticize us publicly. It is not that we cannot stand criticism; not all is well with Orthodoxy, nor is the entire Day School movement beyond reproach. But our genuine critics have always spoken to us directly, not about us to others. The greatest critic Jews ever had was Moses, yet he always directed his rebuke straight to us, and never spoke ill of us to others. The great prophet Isaiah was critical of Jews and he reproached them. There was only one time that he spoke critically about them and not in their presence -- when he referred to them as "a people of unclean lips" in speaking to God. For this he was terribly punished with a horrible death: it was the sin of lashon ha-ra -- although his words were addressed to none other than God!

Third, he is guilty of gasut ha-ruah. No man has a right to set himself up as the arbiter of the motives of others. To seek to punish all Jewish parents because of his suspicion of their motivation is an incredible and intolerable presumptuousness. The charge of hypocrisy comes with particular ill grace from one who educated his own child or children in a fashionable and unintegrated private school, and ^{who} ~~he~~ represents an organization whose leading members do not, to my

knowledge, live in Harlem or Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Finally, at the risk of over-reaching my independent right to individual interpretation, I would like to add a fourth and last source for this disease to the rabbinic diagnosis of moral tzaraat -- and that is, self-hatred, which is not only a fourth cause but perhaps responsible for the other three.

The metzora is a man whose contempt for others is caused by his contempt for himself. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" -- unless you love yourself and respect yourself, you can have nothing but contempt for others.

Only a man who lives a lie will tell lies about others: the motzi shem ra.

Only a man who hates his inner self and wants to get rid of it, will seek to destroy the private life and self of others: that is lashon ha-ra.

Only a man possessed of cringing insecurity and self-abhorrence will compensate for that self-contempt by gasut ha-ruah.

No wonder that the metzora was instructed by the Torah to call out the words "tamei, tamei" -- "unclean, unclean" -- to forewarn those approaching him not to come too close. He had to proclaim "tamei" twice -- once because he had defiled others with his contempt, and second because he had defiled his very self by his lack of self-respect.

The most recent incident in Trenton, N. J. has implicated all of us as innocent bystanders in a sick and sickening drama of self-flagellation. Can anyone doubt that if this spokesman were himself a

Gentile, that the American Jewish Congress would have immediately condemned him as an anti-Semite?

What a strange people we are to permit ourselves the liberty of such verbal self-abuse in public! What weird mechanism must be at work within man to make him willing to be his own victim -- whether it is an American Jewish Congress spokesman who excoriates Jews on integration in public just when Negroes are becoming sufficiently acculturated to learn all about anti-Semitism; or Jewish groups who, of all the works of Shakespeare and Dickens, find nothing better to entertain themselves with than their most anti-Semitic creations; or, to take the most extreme case, that of young Jews who join the KKK or the American Nazis -- as happened last year.

In some ways, our case is the worst of all. The Talmud tells us: mai takantei shel mesaper lashon ha-ra? -- yaasok be'torah (Arakhin, 15b). How can one who gossips correct his weakness? -- let him study Torah. In our present case, however, the lashon ha-ra itself is aimed at undercutting the study of Torah, talmud torah! Here, therefore, the patient has spilled out his medicine, and the vile deed and its obnoxious consequences are incurable and irreparable.

No Jew, no matter how important, can slander the entire Jewish community with impunity. He cannot expect to get away with it. Even the great Miriam, the prophetess, who spoke ill of her brother Moses, was punished by being excluded from the camp of Israel, even if that exclusion kept up the progress of Israel in its journey through the desert.

Unless this Jewish organization expells or disowns or otherwise isolates this spokesman for self-contempt, for slander, for lashon ha-ra, and for gasut ha-ruah, it will find that it has placed itself chutz la-mahaneh, outside the camp of committed and self-respecting Jews.

Intelligent and dedicated Jews will know that we will be redeemed not by powerful organizations with oversized budgets, but by our own actions, individual and collective, towards the sanctification of the Divine Name.

What we shall learn from this incident is to guard our tongues and hesitate before speaking ill of anyone, especially of an entire community.

We shall remember what a home-spun Yiddish folk philosopher once said: all of life is like the Shemoneh Esreh...and we shall recall that this exemplary Jewish prayer both begins and ends with a plea for the purity of speech: Ha-Shem sefatai tiftah, "O Lord, open Thou my lips," and Elokai netzor leshoni me-ra, "My God, guard my tongue from speaking evil."

Let this indeed be the ethical prescription that results from the moral diagnosis taught by the rabbis. And all this shall then lead to the grand conclusion: Oseh shalom bi'meromav, may He Who creates peace in the Heavens above, grant the blessing of peace to us below: to our families, to all Israel, and to all mankind. Amen.