

Projection: We All Do It, But Some Dangerously More than Others

Shabbat Tazria-Metzorah

Have you ever been told to “stop projecting”? It usually comes up in some sort of disagreement, when you are accused of transferring your own issues, your own mishegas, your own problems onto someone else, and then lashing out against them. And we all do this! We do it with spouses, with children, with co-workers and friends. The result of projection is that we act with criticism, antagonism, and hostility toward the person or people to whom we’ve transferred our own undesirable attributes.

I wanted to understand this phenomenon more deeply so I contacted one of Har Shalom’s resident mental health professionals, Dr. Marc Nemiroff, and I asked him for his working definition of projection. Marc told me that projection occurs when I have a feeling that’s inside of me that is undesirable or unacceptable to me; it could be anger, it could be repressed urges, it could be unacceptable thoughts or feelings; whatever it is, I can’t tolerate it being inside of me...so I take that loathsome part of my subconscious and I conveniently place it inside of someone else; I attribute it to someone else. Now that it is conveniently transferred to that other person or people, I can defend against it or attack it or condemn it. When it’s inside of me I can’t get to it, I can’t deal with it. But when it’s offloaded to you, that’s when I can retaliate against it.

I couldn’t help thinking about us when considering the bizarre case of the leper, which is described in jarring detail in this morning’s parasha. The Torah instructs that a person afflicted with this contagious disease must publicly announce their presence to others—presumably to warn them not to get too close and become contaminated themselves. Leviticus 13:45 states that the leper must call out: *Tamei, tamei Unclean! Unclean!* Coming through...Watch out! Remember that if one is rendered impure, they are forbidden from participating in any of the sacred rites and rituals of the Tabernacle until they undergo a process of purification and reentry into the community. And even spiritual impurity was considered contagious. So the leper’s warning was to the uninfected. Get out of the way; I and my contagious infirmity are coming through! Now

the Talmud puts a beautiful, humanitarian spin on this by suggesting that the leper makes this public announcement of his or her presence not just as a warning to others, but to elicit their prayers, and their support...and the leper's own community is indeed obligated not to shun the afflicted person, but to offer their care and comfort.

But it was the deeply penetrating commentary of the 16th century rabbi and kabbalist Isaiah Horowitz that made me think about the whole issue of projection. Horowitz says that when the leper announces: "Unclean! Unclean!" what he is actually doing is proclaiming *everyone else to be unclean*. The infirmity and shame is so difficult for the leper himself to bear, he instead goes around telling others that they're the ones who are afflicted...they're the ones who are the outcasts. To this the Talmud—not Freud, not Jung, but the Talmud— adds that "a person who insults others generally projects his own defects onto them." This is what the leper is doing...projecting his own defects, which are too painful, too humiliating for him to own up to, upon everyone else around him.

The more I thought about this, the more I started to see those patterns in my own life. Oy, I thought, I do that. I started to connect the dots in my own life and relationships, and I anxiously asked Dr. Nemiroff if there's anything we can do to stop projecting! To get control over this pervasive human tendency. When he told me that it was mostly unconscious, I really got nervous. Then he recommended a form of Buddhist meditation, which also didn't make me feel much better. But then he said, it's also possible to really think deeply about the people in our lives with whom we have negative relationships. To ask ourselves searingly honest questions like, Why is it that I just can't seem to get along with that person? And why do I constantly dwell on that person's behavior in such a critical way? Trying to answer those questions honestly rather than defensively might be the first step to releasing ourselves from this behavior. Unless you like Buddhist meditation, in which case please see Dr. Nemiroff at the Kiddush.

This Shabbat is known as *Shabbat Tekumah*, at least in Israel. The Hebrew word *tekumah* means recovery or revival. This Shabbat is the bridge between Yom Hashoah, the day of remembrance of the horrors of the Holocaust and Yom Ha'atzmaut, the day on

which we celebrate independence and sovereignty for the Jewish people and the State of Israel; the Shabbat on which we begin to imagine a future of hope, of rebirth, and renewal. As I think about Israel's 65 year existence in the world, it has become so obvious to me that Israel is perhaps the world's most obvious example of projection in the world. It seems to me that the states that most often sit in judgment of Israel, who level sanctions and cast censure votes against Israel at the U.N. are the very states that project their own failures and dismal human rights records upon Israel. These regimes are the lepers calling Israel and the United States unclean while they themselves are soiled by an extreme defilement of their own. The Iranian president has called Israel a cancerous tumor, a cruel and racist regime, an insult to humanity; Ahmadinejad claims that he confronts Israel in an effort to protect the dignity of all human beings; but this is the very same Iranian president who has wreaked havoc on the Iranian Baha'i community; who insisted that there is not a single homosexual in Iran even as his regime vigorously persecutes them; who serves as the world's top underwriter of terrorist regimes across the Middle East; who deprives women and religious minorities and the press of basic liberties and human rights; who is pursuing nuclear capabilities in order to intimidate and threaten the entire region if not the entire world. If this is not projection; if his bellicosity about Israel is not some kind of projection writ large, Dr. Nemiroff, then I don't know what is! As nations like Iran declare *tamei, tamei*, unclean, unclean about Israel, America, and the West, how can we not see that they are projecting the very real infirmities of their own regimes upon others?

Social theorists of racism have written about the projection of the majority population's fears that they will eventually be overcome and outnumbered by the very minorities they seek to oppress. We should recognize that trope from ancient Egypt. Pharaoh, remarking on the high birthrates of the Israelites in Egypt responds in Exodus Chapter 1 with the infamous words: "The Israelite people are much too numerous; Let us deal shrewdly with them so that they may not increase..." And with those words, hundreds of years of brutal slavery begin. How many other episodes of ethnic cleansing and genocide were premised on this fear? How much of the polarization in Europe today, for example, is fueled by this fear? How many conspiracy theories involve global domination by this

group or that group who will inevitably take away my rights or my property or my identity?

Friends, projection can be destructive to interpersonal relationships when we don't take the time to figure out why we are treating others with such contempt. And projection can lead to the most devastating human tragedies when it is not called out for what it is by the international community.

The story is told of a German soldier who paid a visit to Picasso's art studio as he was completing his massive 11 X 26 foot mural called *Guernica*, a panoramic, frightening interpretation of a German aerial assault on Spain in 1937. Surveying the mural, the German soldier said to Picasso, "Did you do that?" To which Picasso responded, "No, you did." Today, Picasso's *Guernica* hangs in the entry way of the UN Security Council chamber. We can only pray that it inspires deep reflection and honesty by those who pass beneath it. And let us begin to address the deleterious effects of projection in our own lives and relationships by contemplating Dr. Nemiroff's recommended questions: Why am I so critical of certain people? What prevents me from getting along with them? How can an honest engagement with these questions improve our rapport with others, as we hope and pray for larger scale healing and tikkun in the world around us?