Sermon | Parshat Tazria
April 2, 2022 | ראש חודש ניסן תשפ״ב
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
B'nai Israel Congregation

I did not see it happen live, because I wasn't watching. But you can bet that shortly thereafter I heard about it because it became an instant sensation. Everyone was quick to fire off tweets, post on Facebook, and text family and friends about what they just saw. Was it part of an elaborate joke? Was the whole thing an act? Or did Will Smith really just stand up and slap Chris Rock across the face on live television? Smith barely hesitated in his response to Rock's joke. The world barely hesitated in response to Smith's slap. Everything was happening so quickly. And in the days since, the American media has been obsessed with analyzing who was more wrong, determining which values are at play, and attempting to convince us all that this interaction between Rock and Smith is somehow significant world news. In comparison, the media has given relatively little attention to the recent uptick in terrorist attacks in Israel, claiming the lives of eleven Israelis in the past two weeks. The innocent victims were Jews, Druze and Christians, immigrants and Israel-born natives. On this matter, relatively few have spoken up, even though the situation is quite literally a matter of life and death. This is not a sermon about what accounts for the difference between the *quantity* of the responses (I'll leave that to you to judge), but instead I wish to explore the differences between the *character* of the responses to each of these very different situations. Embedded in Parshat Tazria is a dose of Jewish wisdom about how to respond in a situation where your actions and words have significant consequences.

Parshat Tazria is admittedly one of my favorites. Typically read along with next week's *parsha*, Metzora, this is one of those *parshiyot* that b'nai mitzvah students dread (you did a

great job, Zachary!), but some of us rabbis love. Unlike the parshiyot of Genesis and Exodus, these do not have grand narratives with miraculous encounters between God and any particular character. Rather, this is a story about a skin disease and a *kohen*, the priest responsible for inspecting and diagnosing *tzara'at*, a leprous infection that could be found on someone's body, on their clothing, and even on the walls of their homes.

If the *kohen* determined that someone was in fact afflicted by this ailment, then the individual was forced to leave the camp and dwell outside of it alone. As they departed, the afflicted one cries out, "Impure! Impure!" and the people clear a path to keep themselves safe from infection. To be declared *tamei*, impure, and a *metzora*, one afflicted by *tzara'at*, was no small matter. The consequences were severe. Such a person was forced to separate themselves from their family and friends, and from their community. Such a person was forced to exist as a solitary individual, isolated from everyone and cut off from their networks of support.

Perhaps this is the reason why the process by which one is deemed to be a *metzora* was so long and drawn out. Leviticus 13 describes what the *kohen* should look for when a person comes forward with a suspected case. When the matter is not absolutely clear, they must quarantine in their home for seven days, and then return to the priest for a second inspection. (They did not have PCRs and rapid antigens—they relied upon the evaluation of the priest alone.) This pattern is repeated in the guidelines for diagnosing *tzara'at* on clothing and on the walls of a home. Here again, the priest sees a suspected but inconclusive case, waits seven days, and inspects again. This pattern of inspecting, waiting, and reinspecting teaches us that the Torah wants the *kohen* to hesitate, to second-guess himself, and to patiently wait for more conclusive evidence. In other words, Parshat Tazria serves as a reminder to us that we should

not rush to judgment, we should not immediately cry out when the stakes are high and the consequences significant. The Torah wants us to hesitate when we approach matters that are complex and multifaceted. It is no small thing to declare a person a *metzora*. The consequences for that individual and their family are real. The *kohen* is obligated to take this matter seriously and to approach it cautiously. Hesitate before you rush to act.

Which brings me back to the slap. I am not a critic of comedy, but I do believe that making a joke at one's expense because of their medical condition is insensitive. If only that was the headline on Monday morning! But the situation escalated when Smith ascended the stage and slapped Rock—with only a moment's hesitation, seemingly no real time taken to consider the consequences of that move. Perhaps a bit of hesitation and second-guessing would have changed the course of events for that night, and at least an entire week's news cycle.

But let us turn to a more serious matter for a moment. In Israel, the past two weeks have been the most deadly since the Second Intifada. Meanwhile, the Israeli government is acting with the utmost restraint, or what you might call intentional hesitation. Rather than taking measures to inflame the situation and stir up more violence, the government of Israel is seemingly holding back. In the past, such attacks might have been met with a limitation on the number of Muslim worshippers who could attend Friday prayers at Al Aqsa in Jerusalem. Those moves often instigated more violence and aggression. To its credit, that is not what the current administration chose to do. Less than a year ago, escalation of violence around the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins today, led to a war in Gaza—something that we certainly wish to avoid. The Israeli security apparatus has warned government ministers not to take actions

that can be interpreted as collective punishment of Palestinians. Indeed, they must address the situation, but they must do so with intentional hesitation and with restraint. The unity government in Israel is doing just that—finding ways to protect Israelis without exacerbating an already tenuous situation. When a particular decision has far-reaching consequences, the Torah instructs us to show restraint.

I recognize that showing restraint is hard to do, especially when you are provoked and agitated. One of my teachers always reminded us that rabbis are people too, so I know what that feeling is like. But our tradition repeatedly emphasizes the value of restraint. In the Talmud, Rabbi Elazar praises God for exercising restraint in all of the moments when God could have reacted strongly and unequivocally to the wrongdoings of the Jewish people.[1] In another passage, the sages wonder why the words of Beit Hillel became established Jewish law whereas those of Beit Shammai did not, even though God deemed both to be דִּבְרֵי אֱלֹהִים חַיִּים, "words of the Living God." The answer is that, Beit Hillel, unlike Beit Shammai, were agreeable. When they were attacked, criticized, or rebuked, they showed restraint.[2] They did not rush to respond or fight back. After all, they were leaders in the community, and their actions would have far-reaching consequences. Thus they led by example. They were kind and agreeable, without being weak or pathetic. They were confident and strong, without being boastful and domineering. This is no simple task, but when the stakes are high and the consequences significant, the Torah obligates us to pause, to hold back, and to show restraint. May we all find the strength and patience that this sacred obligation of restraint requires. Shabbat shalom.

[1] Bavli Berakhot 7a.
[2] Bavli Eiruvin 13b.