

This Week in Torah *Metzora*

New York Times columnist Tom Friedman has wondered out loud if our political party system is leading to tribalism, akin to what was the fractionalization in Rwanda that led to mass murder. I hope not. But we also need to admit to the disjointed nature of our society—political differences lead to ineffective governance, socio-economic stratification creates an oligarchy which leaves voices unheard and unrepresented, racial/religious/sexual orientation/gender-definition differences have challenged the status quo and have been the source of “push-back.” Unfortunately, as Ecclesiastes said: “there is nothing new under the sun.” But don’t be exasperated as historical patterns seem to repeat themselves. Rather, use the historical model as a palladium of sorts; a true source of protection to ensure that we can learn from the past and appropriate them for true impact on our world.

Enter now this week’s *parasha*. It deals with leprosy, in Hebrew—*tzara’at*. A person with this disease is called *metzora*. The interpretation of this disease is that it is a response to gossip and malicious speech. The Rabbis of old have suggested that it might be an onomatopoeia of sorts--- it sounds like *motzia ra*, which is another way of saying *lshon harah*—evil speech. As a result, the one who speaks and the one who hears get infected—as if they have a disease. Not only that, the room in which these things are uttered becomes contaminated. And only a *kohen* can purify the space as well as the people affected.

Remedy for our society, part #1: know that ugly speech is a contagion.

In the Talmud [Baba Batra 164b], the text acknowledges that “not a day goes by when we are not spared” by the destruction power of improper speech. Profanity and derogatory terms for another seem to litter the internet, social media and television. News outlets shamelessly assert their bias which distorts a perception of reality. The Talmud shrugs as it admits that this is part of human nature, but it doesn’t have to be!

Remedy for our society, part #2: question and challenge assertions heard. Check citations and sources. And don’t pass information on that you have not verified.

There is a story in Midrash *Yakira Rabah* of Rabbi Yannai who sitting in his house in Tzipori around the 3rd century CE. The Romans were trying to break Jewish resistance to their rule; the Bar Kochba revolt had failed but Jewish militants kept fighting with persistence. As Yannai studied, he heard a peddler hawking a magic elixir: “who wishes to purchase the elixir of life to guarantee a healthy and happy life?” The Rabbi shouted to the man that he wants that, but the peddler shook his head and said: “what I am selling is not for you!” When Yannai insisted that he wanted some, the peddler opened the Bible to the Psalms and pointed at a passage: “who is a person that desires life? One who keeps his tongue from evil.” To which Rabbi Yannai echoed with words from Proverbs: “He who guards his mouth and tongue guards his soul from trouble.”

Add to this that in Tzipori around this time were spies who sought to entrap Jews who might be prone to rebel against Roman authority. They relied on gossip for their information. According to the Midrash, the Romans also pitted Jew against Jew to sow the seeds of resentment.

Remedy for our society, part #3: understand the manipulation that accompanies gossip and hurtful speech. Understand the unspoken agenda that breeds hatred and untruthfulness.

Our tradition has used the idea of leprosy as a metaphor for being careful on how we speak. It is a lesson needed regularly over the course of our history. Now is no different to the Talmudic times or Biblical ages. There is nothing new under the sun—but we don’t have to accept it as it always has been. We can guard our tongue and demand from others. We can hold people accountable to share the truth rather than a spin. We can demand that news outlets and media platforms double check their sources before announcing outlandish claims that are filled with spite and hatred, rather than a healthy and healing discourse. We can model proper etiquette by the way we choose to speak. It is in our hands to right these wrongs.

Metzora—one with a contagious disease. No different than the place where rumor mongering and people who seek divisiveness rather than unity. And our remedy is a three step process: acknowledging, accountability, and modeling. In that way we can

right the wrongs and maybe this will be the pattern that Ecclesiastes seeks to find each day under the sun!