

A Thought For Shabbat

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This week's double Parsha of Tazria Metzora is usually something we find very little relevance in - infections, isolation, quarantine, counting days, waiting to be released. This year, of course, we will read these Parshiyot with a very different perspective.

But I want to draw your attention to an aspect of the Parsha that should always have been deeply familiar. In connection with the 'tzaraat' affliction that can affect a person's home, the Torah uses the phrase "Vinatati negeh tzaraat bvayit" - I will GIVE an affliction in a house." Rashi comments that the implication of this is that there is an aspect of this plaque that is beneficial (through demolishing an afflicted house, hidden treasure left by the Canaanites will be discovered)

Plagues and epidemics are unwelcome. The one we are living through, especially so. It continues to take a terrible toll on everyone, in so many ways. In no sense is it a 'gift'. But, what the Torah is hinting is that even the most tragic times can be used in ways to find hidden benefits. We can (re)discover things that we might never have known. Difficult times can, paradoxically, bring the best out of us.

Yesterday I shared a story on Facebook about something that happened in my own family that continues to fill me with joy.

My mother, in her early 80s, like many people lives by herself and doesn't leave her house at the moment. She lives hundreds - and thousands - of miles from her children and grandchildren. She doesn't have a computer, email, smartphone or any other modern technology and of course although we phone frequently, she has been very isolated. My older brother ordered her an ipad and sim card (she doesn't have wifi!), but for people not familiar with technology, she wasn't in a position to use it. One call to the inspirational Rabbi Moshe Rubin of the main shul in Glasgow (Giffnock and Newlands) and a volunteer from the community collected the ipad, set up an email address, Facetime etc etc and we just had our first Facetime call! Now she can 'see' her family whenever she wants, and join in with so many community events now taking place online. As a friend remarked to me the other day - we would be lost without our communities right now.

I highlight this story for the following reason. To help a senior person learn to use new technology would always be considered a Mitzvah. But I imagine, we might have rated it as a relatively 'small' Mitzvah. But that perspective is now

seen to be incorrect. In these days, even the 'smallest' of Mitzvot is actually revealed to be of such incalculable value.

We all know the value of calling people to wish them Shabbat Shalom, or to check if they are feeling well. But in these truly horrible days, those calls turn out to be of infinite value. 'Simple' acts that show you care, or are willing to help someone, turn out to be genuine lifelines to other people.

In his sefer "Ahavat Chesed" the Chafetz Chaim discusses the importance of doing acts of chesed, kindness, for other people. Towards the end of the book he relates a striking talmudic incident.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi met Eliyahu the prophet in a marketplace, and they walked together. They came across a section of the market absolutely thronged with people, each pushing and jostling to make their purchases. The rabbi noticed that the market stalls were selling putrid, inedible flesh for great sums of money. As they continued walking, they came to a part of the market that was almost completely deserted. Here, the rabbi noticed that prime, fresh meat was for sale, for mere pennies.

Asked for an explanation, Eliyahu explains to the rabbi - this is a parable for human existence. We jostle and rush to consume things that provide us with no value, and are willing to expend vast sums of money on these things. And yet, things of inestimable - indeed eternal - value are in everyone's reach, and no one seems interested.

And that I suggest is the 'gift' the Parsha reminds us can be a feature of even the most challenging times. We easily forget what really matters. And we truly overlook how easy - absurdly easy - it is to do Mitzvot and make genuine, sometimes even life saving differences in people's lives. In the times we live in, Mitzvot of eternal and lasting significance have become absurdly easy to do. If we don't adjust to this new reality, we will only have ourselves to blame.

Rav Yakov Meidan draws our attention to an incident in the book of Melachim. After the Prophet Elisha cures the non-Jewish general Naaman of tzaraat, he absolutely refuses to take any kind of payment or reward from him. But one of Elisha's household Gechazi, surreptitiously follows after Naaman, and arranges a large gift for himself. When Elisha confronts Gechazi, he is enraged. Not merely for the disobedience, for the turning of a miracle into a grubby financial transaction, but over Gechazi's astounding lack of awareness.

"Is this a time to take money in order to buy clothing and olive groves and vineyards, sheep and oxen?" Elisha demands.

Times in which many people are suffering make demands of us all. And present us with opportunities. Some people, like Gehazi, will look for the chance to profit, to ask how they can come out ahead. The rest of us, Please G-d, will make different choices.

Shabbat Shalom and Chodesh Tov!