

The Insight of the Outsider
Parshat Tazria-Metzora 5781
Rabbi Garth Silberstein

This week, we read a double parsha, Tazria-Metzora, which describes the laws of the metzora, the person who suffers from tzora`as, a mysterious dermatological affliction, which is often translated as “leprosy,” though it was not leprosy.

The Torah says of the metzora, *Badad Yeisheiv* (he shall live alone) *michutz lamachaneh Moshohvo* (his dwelling is outside the camp.) This pasuk in our parsha describing the metzora living outside the camp gives rise to common expression, describing someone whose views or practices are outside the bounds of communal norms, as being “*michutz lamachaneh*”.

The metzora is both literally and figuratively *michutz lachamaneh*—physically outside the camp, and metaphorically outside the mainstream of society. And yet the metzora is not completely banished. The Torah teaches us that a kohen, a priest, the ultimate insider, must leave the sacred precincts and go outside the camp, both to diagnose the metzora's condition and to facilitate the reentry of the metzora once they have been cured. There is a powerful lesson here about Jewish values. The job of the kohanim, our leaders and representatives before God, were not just to serve the needs of the mainstream of the community. They did that, to be sure, through teaching and through the temple services, but it was also explicitly part of their job description to go outside of the community to involve themselves with the people on the fringes, those dwelling *michutz lamachaneh*.

My teacher, Rabbi Avi Weiss likes to give the example of a circle of people dancing. When you have a circle of people dancing, inevitably, you have people who are part of the circle dancing, and people who are standing outside the circle. And Rabbi Weiss tells his student a leader is responsible not just for the dancing but for the people who are not dancing. Lest you think this is just a theoretical parable, when I used to daven at Rabbi Weiss' shul, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, each

week, I would watch as Rabbi Weiss would first start dancing during Kabbalat Shabbat, leading people in dancing. And just as surely as Rabbi Weiss would start the dancing, a few moments later, he would break out of the circle he'd started in order to dance with someone who was not participating in the larger circle.

More than just maximizing the number of people who are dancing and included, Rabbi Weiss was modeling for the whole community how to be someone who thinks about the whole of the community and who cares about the involvement of everyone. Every circle has its inside and its outside. As the Jewish people, whom the Torah refers to as a *mamleket kohanim*, a kingdom of priests—we are responsible for those outside the circle--*michutz lamachaneh* as well as those inside.

Thank G-d, we don't have *tzora`as* in the world today, though if it is caused by *Lashon Hara`*, as the rabbis tell us, it's hard to understand why. Even without actual *tzora`as*, we have plenty of *metzora'im*, people who live outside of the community's inner circle. Strong communal norms are a good thing, they are a repository of values and identity, but they can also isolate those of us who cannot or will not conform to those norms. It's a beautiful thing to dance in a circle, but in doing so, we divide the room into those inside the circle and those outside.

In our community we have norms not just of how we keep Shabbat and *kashrut*. We have norms of dress, of how we educate our children, norms of getting married, of having children. Some of our norms are not even about religion or morals—norms of what kinds of professions we occupy, how much money we have, what language we speak at home, who we vote for. We have norms of what we think a Jew looks like, as well as norms of physical and mental health and ability.

Another mentor of mine, Nigel Savage, the founder of Hazon used to say that in a room full of a group of Jews, every single one there is going to feel like there is some way in which they don't belong: I'm older than everyone else or younger, I'm poorer than everyone else or richer, I'm more traditionally observant, or the one with children, or who's not married, I'm too left wing, too right wing,

I'm the only one with my particular disability, I'm the only one of my sexual orientation. So perhaps we live in a world without tzora`as, but we also live in a world where everyone now and then feels like a metzora.

What do we do with the experience of being outsiders in our own community? And what do we do with the knowledge that at those moments when we are feeling most at home and secure in our community, there are others in our midst who don't share in that feeling?

Parshat Metzora provides one model, which is that the kohen, the leader, the insider, must take responsibility for reaching out, and bringing in the outsider. But the Haftarah brings another perspective, one that is perhaps even more powerful. Shomron has been besieged by the Aramean army. People are starving. Things are looking grim. We are told of four metzora'im, living at the gate of the city—they're in this liminal state, neither completely inside the community nor completely free from sharing its fate as the enemy armies close in. These four metzora'im decide to beg for their lives from the enemy rather than stay and starve to death with their fellow-citizens, and it is they who find the Aramean army has fled, miraculously frightened off by G-d, leaving behind all their food and supplies.

Had not the metzora'im, the outcasts, been there to make this discovery, how many more “good citizens” back in the city would have starved to death before G-d's miraculous intervention became known? Their perspective as fringe-dwellers, living petach ha'sha`ar, in the gate of the city, enabled the metzora'im to make their life-saving discovery. It is no accident that these marginalized individuals were the agents and the instruments of salvation.

Throughout Tanakh, outsiders bring salvation. Yoseph was an outsider in Egypt, a foreigner, a slave and a prisoner, and yet saved the country from famine. Moshe Rabbeinu, our greatest prophet, was an outsider everywhere he went, an outsider among the Egyptians, being an Israelite, among the Israelites being raised among the Egyptians, and among the Midianites where he

fled. Rachav, a non-Jew and a prostitute, an outsider to us and even among her own people, was instrumental in saving Israelite spies, and winning safe passage for her entire family.

This motif of the outsider saving recalls the verse from Hallel, “Even Ma'asu Habonim Hayta lerosh pinah”. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

The metzora's importance to society arises paradoxically from the very fact of their exclusion from society. Though their lot is not easy, the metzora is not an unfortunate deserving pity, but someone with a necessary part to play in the life of our people, someone whose outsider perspective gives them valuable insights unavailable to those in the mainstream. The metzora deserves respect, not just because we all of us at some point or in some dimension of our life play the role of metzora, but because as a people, we need the metzora in order to survive. We need the outsider to be an outsider, because no one else can show the insiders what they can't see on the other side of the wall.

A friend of mine once told me that lifelong Orthodox Jews shouldn't look down their noses on converts and ba`alei teshuvah, because if it weren't for them, there would be no such thing as kosher sushi. This particular example may be trivial, but it illustrates how the world of the insiders is enriched by the perspectives of the outsiders. One day it might just be kosher sushi, but another day, the survival of the community may depend on the insights of those who have spent time michutz lamachaneh.

This year in particular, who among us hasn't felt isolated and outside of community in some way? As more and more people become vaccinated and we return to more and more shared communal experiences, let us remember that outsider perspective and carry it with us, both so that we can help bring in others who may still feel on the margins long after COVID is over, and so that we can enrich the life of our community with the perspective we have gained as outsiders.

Shabbat Shalom!