

## Torah from Around the World #162

We Wear Our Sins / Parashat Tazria-Metzora (Leviticus 12:1 - 15:33)

by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, Vice President, Philanthropy, [World Union for Progressive Judaism](#)

This week's portion, Tazria - Metzora, is the greatest homiletic challenge to a preacher, for it deals with the issues of leprosy. No doubt, the Biblical writer did not mean Hansen's disease, as we know it today, but some skin malformation that caused those who saw it to take a step back in fear. The text itself centers on the ways the "leprosy" is diagnosed and the ritual purification that occurs after an imposed quarantine, which lasted until the disease evidenced remission.

The rabbis, rather than focus on the "*p'shat*" or literal meaning of the text, treat this material in a completely different - allegorical or midrashic - way. For the rabbis, tzarat is not a disease of the body, but the physical manifestation of a disease of the soul. Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, known as Resh Lakish (2nd generation Palestinian Amora living in 3rd century CE) states that *Metzora* (one plagued with *tzarat*) is a contraction of three words, *motzee shem ra*, one who spreads slander, the one who brings forth a bad name (Arachin 15b).

Picking up on this theme, on the following page of Talmud (16a), R. Samuel ben Nahmani said in the name of Rabbi Johanan (2nd generation Palestinian Amora living in the 3rd century CE): "The plague of leprosy is incurred because of 7 sins: slander, shedding of blood, perjury, incest, arrogance, robbery and envy." All of these sins are sins one perpetrates upon another, and by doing so isolates the victim from the community - therefore, the Biblical mandate to quarantine the *metzora* is to subject that person to the kind of punishment that has been inflicted upon the victim. By being quarantined, perhaps the perpetrator can feel the isolation and turn from the evil ways through teshuva (turning in repentance), and thus return to society.

Maimonides (12th century physician and sage) suggests that Tzarat is a Divine Sign to the sinner that God is not very happy with this kind of behavior and that God has removed the Divine Presence from the sinner - now the time has come for the sinner to examine his/her deeds and see what must be improved. Alshekh (16th century student of Joseph Caro, writing in *Torat Moshe*) states that *Tzarat* was brought upon Jews during an era when the Nation was great and holy - therefore, they were much more zealous in their attempts to avoid lashon hara (slander or evil speech). Yet now, when most people don't seem to care about what they say, there is no tzarat - why? Alshekh says that *Tzarat* is a Divine warning to an essentially healthy person that he/she has a spiritual malaise buried within. As much as it is a punishment, it is also a blessing because it alerts the sinner to a problem that person must address. But today we live in a time when we have become spiritually degraded and the sins that cause tzarat have become so rampant, we do not deserve this Divine reminder that something is amiss.

In our own day, slander still exists, even within our Jewish world. We have become strident in our words, and rather than state the issues upon which there may be disagreement within our community, we hear words of denigration and derision hurled like spears at those whose thoughts are opposed. "Chief" rabbis and "Torah Sages" thrash Progressive and Reform Jews as if we were bent on the destruction of the entire Jewish world. Political opponents seek to maim one another with words and press releases. And our words have made us ugly - we look bad in the eyes of those who judge us by our words. We do wear our sins, and they reveal an inner ugliness - challenge for us all to overcome.

Perhaps our challenge is to so transform our community and our society that the spiritual degradation of one person becomes noticeable again. If we call out those who use words to harm, and use care with our own words, we may start the transformation that the Biblical writer mandated. The Psalmist wrote: "*Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile...*" (34:13) This is a tall order - but that is why we are people of faith. It starts with keeping in check our inclination to slander, and it ends with the elevation of our society.