

APRIL 20, 2009

Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Sitting Out Hate Speech

Zot tihyeh torat ha'metzora – “This shall be the law of the leper” (Leviticus 14:2)

Numerous commentators agree that *tzara'at* afflicted an individual for committing the sin of *lashon hara*. Maimonides writes that engaging in slander and hateful speech is “a terrible sin that causes the death of many souls of Israel.” (Laws of Attitudes, 7:1) His comments echo the teaching of the Mishnah, (Derech Eretz Chapter 1) which states that slander leads directly to bloodshed and that anyone who engages in slander is comparable to a murderer. Maimonides (7:6) further opines that in addition to not engaging in slander, one is also not permitted to “live in the neighborhood [of slanderers], and certainly [not] sit among them and listen to their words.”

Today, Maimonides' teachings about the danger of hateful speech continue to resonate, especially in the United States where the Obama administration has stated that it will boycott this week's Durban Review Conference.

The 2001 World Conference against Racism, commonly known as the Durban Conference, officially organized to combat racism and hatred worldwide. Unfortunately, the conference quickly devolved into an anti-Semitic forum to denounce Israel. The original document for the 2009 Durban Review Conference, beginning April 20th and commonly referred to as Durban II, maintained the theme of the first conference. “The preliminary conference document, which was initiated by Iran, Cuba and other third world countries... asserted that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians is grounded in racism,” the newspaper Yediot Achronot reported. While Russia initiated an effort to amend the text of the document, the modified version still ratifies the text of the original conference. The United States has taken the high road and decided to abandon the conference entirely. According to the State Department, “The Obama administration has decided ‘with regret’ to boycott a U.N. conference on racism...over objectionable language in the meeting's final document that could single out Israel for criticism and restrict free speech.” By utilizing the event as a format for hateful speech, the organizers have allowed the affair to devolve from a conference meant to rid the world of racism into a convention that perpetuates it.

As long as these international conferences on racism continue to be little more than fronts for anti-Israel rhetoric America should follow Maimonides' advice and “not sit among” these slanderers or “listen to their words.” ■

Modern-Day Healers

V'huva el ha'kohen – “And he is brought to the Kohen” (Leviticus 14:2)

After being healed from *tzara'at* we learn that the leper is “brought” to the Kohen. The Midrash asks why others must bring him, why does he not go to the Kohen on his own? Midrash Tanchuma suggests that we can read the word *v'huva* not as one word, meaning “and he is brought,” but rather as two separate words, *v'hu va* – “and he [alone] comes.” The Kohen then faced the challenging task of not only healing the leper's illness, but also returning him to his place in society.

The closest modern-day equivalent to the leper of the Torah, whose ailment required isolation and treatment, may be victims of debilitating and painful burns. Both the leper and the burn victim suffer external ailments that affect the skin, both require immediate specialized treatment and both can feel isolated and shunned due to their disfigurement.

In ancient times the Kohen alleviated the suffering of the leper by bringing him comfort and healing. Nowadays, a group in Israel has opened a camp to bring this same type of healing to Israeli children suffering from major burns.

“The Middle-East’s first camp for children who have survived serious burns was recently opened at Kibbutz Haon on the shores of the Kinneret,” the Jerusalem Post reported. Children from across Israel arrived at the camp to enjoy recreational activities, planned by the Burn Advocates Network, to help them with the painful treatment for their injuries. A staff of therapists, social workers and volunteers from the burn units of local medical centers take the children to nature parks and have them participate in drum circles to learn how to play different types of percussion instruments. Burn Advocates Network Founder and Director Samuel Davis said that “It is clear that there is a tremendous need for this type of camp [in Israel], especially among the many minority groups. It is amazing to see religious and secular, Jewish and Muslim children...together, singing the same songs and sleeping in the same cabins. Real bonding takes place. The cultural and religious differences are outweighed by the shared burn experience.”

By alleviating the pain of burn victims, Israelis today are following in the footsteps of the priests of old. Not only are they bringing solace to those who suffer, but through the care of social workers and bonding experiences they are also guiding these victims back into their communities. ■

The Gift of a Blemish

Ve’natati nega tzara’at - “and I put the plague of leprosy” (Leviticus 14:34)

The Torah states that “When you come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I will give you” a plague in a house. The verb *ve’natati* implies a gift, yet what type of present is *tzara’at*? Rashi explains that the people of Canaan hid treasures in the walls of the houses, and when the Jews removed the *tzara’at* they found the hidden riches. However, we can also interpret Rashi’s comments allegorically. While not enjoyable, excising impure and harmful elements from one’s midst can be a cleansing experience. Further, when the impurity is removed the surrounding environment becomes enhanced as it is no longer burdened by the contamination. From this perspective, bringing *tzara’at* to a home in order to allow the inhabitants to remove pollution is indeed a very valuable gift.

Just as the ancient Israelites removed the impurity of *tzara’at* from their homes, in modern times Egypt is working to remove the impurity of violence and terrorism from its midst. By detaining terrorists Egypt has bolstered its own security and has also elevated its stature in the eyes of the international community.

In recent weeks Egypt has engaged in increasing efforts to deal with and negate Hizballah influences. Recently, “Egyptian police detained three teenage Palestinian men...on suspicion of crossing illegally into Egypt and also found explosives near the border with Gaza,” Reuters reported. “Egyptian police said they found 900 kilograms [1,984 lbs.] of TNT explosives hidden in 18 sacks near the border with Gaza.” Egypt also tightened security on its border with Israel to prevent illegal crossings after authorities detained 25 men that Egypt said were linked to the Lebanese Shiite group Hizballah. The Hizballah operatives caught in Egypt planned to carry out massive terror attacks in Tel Aviv, the Egyptian newspaper Almasry Alyoum reported. After Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah admitted to the smuggling charges Egyptian state-run media slammed Nasrallah for his close ties to Iran. “I say to you what every Egyptian knows, that you are an Iranian party,” said one front-page editorial. “Are there instructions from Iran to drag Egypt into a conflict?”

Egypt must continue to reign in and capture violent militants who threaten both its own stability and the security of Israel. Egypt understands that while difficult, excising the impurity of terrorists who are undermining Egyptian society is ultimately a “gift” for its own people. ■