



Sermon Tidbits

APRIL 20, 2015

Parashat Tazria-Metzora

Asking Tough Questions

He shall be brought to Aaron the priest (Leviticus 13:2)

והובא אל אהרן הכהן (ויקרא יג:ב)

We just concluded the Passover holiday and hopefully you all enjoyed wonderful Sedarim with your families. While I'm sure that the food was great and it's wonderful to spend time with relatives, the essence of the Seder wasn't just the conversation or the matzah balls. Rather, during the Seder we focus on questions. In fact, many elements of the Seder are specifically designed to prompt questions. According to the Tosefta, (Pesachim 10:9) "Rabbi Eliezer Hagadol said, 'We grab the matzah on the eve of Passover so that the children will not sleep, and will ask [questions].'" The Afikomen that children "steal" today emanates from an ancient tradition designed to make the night different; to prompt our children to ask why we're acting so strangely and eating such an unusual meal. And we don't just want them to ask questions; we want them to ask tough questions. The Wise Son wants details, and the Wicked Son wants answers. We, more than anything else, want their questions because without questions there cannot be answers.

This right to ask tough questions is exactly what Congress is demanding in the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015 (S.615) that was [unanimously adopted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week](#). While we've all heard about the recent preliminary agreement that [the Obama Administration has reached with Iran](#), the announcement has prompted far more questions than answers about what a final deal will look like. What really are the exact parameters of the deal? Will it prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear state, or as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu warned, [pave a path](#) towards an Iranian nuclear bomb?

Most of Parashat Tazria describes the ancient affliction called Tzara'at, a disease that manifested itself on the body, but is universally understood in rabbinic literature as a spiritual affliction. Thus, when a person suspects that he is afflicted with Tzara'at he is brought not to a dermatologist, but instead, "he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests." (13:2) Why was the afflicted of a skin disease brought specifically to a priest? S'forno explains that, "he will teach the afflicted to examine his deeds and pray for himself..." In other words, the priest did not simply serve as a diagnostician, determining whether the rash was or was not Tzara'at, but his role was even greater. The priest looked deeper, to the root of sinfulness that brought about the disease in the first place. The priest looked at the skin, but he also spoke to his patient and asked critical questions: "What behavior do you think prompted you to suffer from this affliction? What change do you think you need to make to prevent such an affliction from recurring in the future?"

This is the role of the outside authority—charged to ask questions—that Congress must have in the coming agreement with Iran. Serious concerns have been raised over the framework understanding, and the stakes are immensely high for the United States, Israel and other important American allies. So, a final deal, with its immense national security implications, must be subjected to the constitutional system of checks and balances that is the bedrock of our democracy. We must [thank our Senators for supporting the legislation thus far](#), and encourage our elected officials to adopt the bill both in the full Senate and in the House, giving Congress the legal mandate to review any agreement with Iran and ask the critical questions necessary to ensure it meets American objectives of peace, safety and security for the world. ■

The International Forum of Slander against Israel

This shall be the law of the leper (Leviticus 14:2)

זאת תהיה תורת המצורע (ויקרא יד:ב)

“Said Reish Lakish: Do not [only] read the verse ‘leper’ (*metzora*), rather also read the verse to mean ‘slanderer’ (*motzi shem ra*).” (Babylonian Talmud Erchin 15b) With this statement, the Talmud drew a direct link between the Tzara’at, described in the Torah, and slanderous speech used to malign others. In the very first passage of his seminal work “Chafetz Chaim,” Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen Kagan (commonly known as the Chafetz Chaim) writes, “It is forbidden to speak disparagingly of one’s friend. Even if the information is entirely truthful it is called *Lashon Hara*. If the information also contains any fabrication, it is also called *motzi shem ra* (lit. ‘putting out a bad name’)...” While we take great care to choose our words carefully lest we malign our fellow man with our speech, the world seems to have designated the United Nations (U.N.) as the international body devoted to using speech to malign the Jewish state.

In a powerful [New York Times op-ed](#), Ron Prosor, Israel’s ambassador to the United Nations outlines how many countries cynically use the United Nations as a bully pulpit to criticize Israel. He writes that, “in the 2014-15 session alone, the General Assembly adopted about 20 resolutions critical of Israel, while the human rights situations in Iran, Syria and North Korea merited just one condemnation apiece.” Moreover, in the U.N.’s Human Rights Council in Geneva, “more than 50 percent of all condemnatory resolutions are directed at the Jewish state.” Instead of fighting for human rights and advancing the causes of humanity around the world, too often the United Nations simply serves as the international forum for *motzi shem ra* against the state of Israel. ■

Medical Miracles

And he shall be brought to the priest (Leviticus 14:2)

והובא אל הכהן (ויקרא יד:ב)

“Time is muscle.” If you’re not a doctor, you might not recognize this phrase. But any medical school graduate undoubtedly knows that every minute that passes after a heart attack or major cardiac event represents damaged heart muscle that cannot be regenerated. For this reason, hospitals carefully measure “door to balloon time”—or the time it takes to get a cardiac patient treated in order to stop even greater damage to the heart. For, once a patient suffers a heart attack, modern medicine knows no way to restore damaged heart muscle to its healthy status.

The Metzora—a person who suffered from Tzara’at—found himself in precisely the same situation. According to the text, when the priest positively diagnosed an individual with Tzara’at, he was considered unclean and for all the days of his uncleanness, “he shall dwell alone; outside the camp shall his dwelling be.” (13:46) Moreover, the priest offers no salve, ointment or medical treatment to heal the afflicted. He must contemplate the cause of his suffering alone, away from the rest of the community, hoping and praying for his sickness to fade. Kli Yakkar writes (on 14:2) “there is no natural cure for this Tzara’at.” Only the spiritual guidance from the priest can bring about the change of heart that will ultimately cure his disease.

While the Tzara’at sufferer had no medicine to turn to, he knew how to cure himself. Too often today, we lack any cure for many dangerous and deadly conditions—like the common heart attack. Yet, that does not mean that we are not trying. Researchers at Israel’s Weizmann Institute of Science in Rehovot recently published an article describing a process they discovered to [regenerate damaged heart muscle in mice](#). A team of biologists discovered the delicate balance between different proteins that control and limit the growth of heart muscle, and learned to use those proteins to regrow muscle in the hearts of mice after they had suffered from heart attacks. If they’re able to replicate this achievement with human heart muscle, they could radically improve the lives of many heart attack victims each year. As supporters of Israel, we can take pride in the incredible achievements that have been produced by Israeli doctors and scientists, whose ongoing work carries the potential to bring health and wellness to millions of people around the world. ■