

On shingles and leprosy!

Given the rabbinic love for symbolism and metaphor, I figured it would be okay to ignore the *actual* topic of Parshat Tazria in this column. Who wants to think about leprosy? The rabbinic tradition gives wide berth to sidestep actual discussion of the disease and focus on other issues. Leprosy is tied to Miriam's sin of *lashon hara*, and it is often traditional to link this and next week's parsha with evil speech. The actual disease? Didn't interest me.

Then I came down with shingles.

I was lucky; I caught it early, and I didn't have much pain. Still, as my doctor told me, I was highly contagious. Ethically, I felt I had a responsibility to avoid passing the virus to others, so I remained quarantined for six days. Suddenly, the leper in our parasha came alive for me. Here I was, in a comfortable apartment with many modern conveniences to make the time pass more easily. But the leper had none of these: no cellphone, no food delivery, no television... just wilderness as far as the eye could see. Yikes.

As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch argues, the Torah makes clear that *tzaraat*-- what we call leprosy-- was more of a spiritual concern than anything which was actually medically contagious. The leprosy of a non-Israelite was not considered a threat, even if it was in the camp itself, and if a person was completely infected, then the person was treated as clean. We know, then, that the isolation outside the camp was not a medical consequence. Instead, the rabbis understood it as punishment for moral failings: like selfishness or speaking *lashon hara*.

The Talmud suggests a number of spiritual problems which might bring on *tzaraat*. "Rabbi Yonatan said: Seven sins are punished with *tzaraat*: slander, bloodshed, vain oath, incest and adultery, arrogance, robbery and selfishness." (Arachin 16a) In a lighthearted way, I had a good time trying to decide which of these was the cause of my illness. Was it my gossiping that had gotten me in trouble? My arrogance? Or my selfishness? It was easy to see how a week of quarantine had changed me, making me more eager than ever to participate in community and to be less self-involved!

But while it felt good to attach spiritual meaning to my quarantine, I had to wonder if it was theologically useful. Of course, the rabbis of the Talmud teach that when one gets sick, he should "check his actions." They understand difficult situations to be "*yisurin shel ahavah*," sufferings of love, a sign that God is actually giving us a blessing and helping us to avoid later suffering. This is a powerful idea which may actually help people to get through difficult moments. Believing that there is meaning to suffering can be helpful. But we need to be careful not to overdo this, especially when it comes to *other* people's suffering. It may be fine for a person to say about one's own difficulties "this is what I have learned," but it is far less effective to make the case to someone else.

Perhaps this is why the Torah gives the leper time apart. Taking time alone takes away the distractions that can interfere with our own self-reflection. It pushes us to make our own meaning of our lives. With no one else to direct us, we are forced to realize the aspects of our lives that may need more attention.

For me, having shingles for a week turned into an opportunity for self-reflection, but we don't have to be quarantined to get the benefits of quiet time alone. Taking regular time for prayer and meditation can be just as useful, allowing us to see our own actions in the most honest light and to make meaning for ourselves. Spiritually speaking, carving out a little "leprosy" time each day might not be such a bad thing. May we choose to do so even in the best of health! Shabbat Shalom.