

Parshat Tazria, *Mah Nishma*, Leffell School Newsletter

How do people learn generosity of spirit? Who teaches us ways of responding to others? As a high school teacher, I see so many examples of teens who seem to have inherited different ways of responding to requests for help. Some jump at opportunities to be generous. “Sure! How can I help?” Others seem to meet any request with suspicion, a sense that someone is trying to take advantage of them. I often wonder, what accounts for the difference? Why do some people respond kindly to requests for help and others do not? It is a question that seems to be at the heart of an interaction in our Haftarah this week.

Our story (in II Kings 5) begins with a web of interconnectedness, as citizens of different nations and different social classes join forces to help heal a man. Naaman, the military commander of Aram, is a leper. A young girl, a Hebrew captive, works as a servant his home. She tells Naaman’s wife that “she knows a guy;” Elisha, the prophet of Israel, could heal Naaman’s leprosy. The wife tells Naaman, Naaman tells his king, and the king of Aram jumps right into action, sending a messenger to the king of Israel. This is social networking at its best. King, servant, man, woman, Aramean, Israelite: everybody wants to help! When it comes to getting a sick person well, social boundaries do not seem to matter.

The chain of support comes to a sudden, surprising stop when the messenger arrives at the king of Israel. The messenger brings a letter from the king of Aram, gifts of silver and gold in hand. “Behold, I have sent Naaman my servant to you, that you may heal him of his leprosy.” (II Kings 5:6) It is a simple enough request. With all the cooperation of the last few verses, we might expect that the king of Israel would at least be somewhat helpful. Wouldn’t he be honored to do a favor for the king of Aram? Wouldn’t it look good to have a prophet from his own nation ?heal a great commander

And yet, instead of passing the message on to Elisha, the king of Israel tears his clothing in mourning! “Am I God, to kill and to make live, that this man asks me to recover a man of his leprosy?” (II Kings 5:7) Instead of jumping at the opportunity to help, the king of Israel suspects ”!the messenger of having ulterior, sinister motives. “He seeks a pretext against me

What just happened? How did a lovely series of connections turn into a suspicious paranoid ?moment on the part of the king

While the story refers to him as “the king of Israel,” a brief look back into his biography suggests why he may have met a simple request for help with such suspicion and fear. It turns out that this unnamed king is Yehoram, son of Ahab and Jezebel, the two most evil royals of Israelite history, who set up an elaborate conspiracy to kill their neighbor Navot and take his vineyard. Ahab and Jezebel deceived the townspeople into believing that Navot was a .blasphemer, and they convinced the townspeople to do their dirty work for them

Is it any wonder that Yehoram grew up to be suspicious of others? Raised by malicious narcissists, the only world he knew was filled with manipulation and deceit. When someone came to him with an honest request for help, he could do nothing more than suspect the worst

Although we may be surprised by the king's response, we shouldn't be. Nobody is a blank slate. We each come with history and a whole set of preconceptions about each interaction which inform our behavior. Some people seem to be born trusting and generous; others inherit a sense of mistrust and fear. A Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* teaches us to judge each person "*l'chaf zechut*," with the benefit of the doubt, but Yehoram reminds us that the precept does not come easily to everyone. Fortunately, the Mishnah offers us a way in: advice for those who may need to be taught generosity. *Aseh l'cha rav, ukneh lecha chaveir*. "Get for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend." If only Yehoram had known the lesson of the Mishnah! Imagine what might have happened if Yehoram had gone out and tried to learn a new way of doing things. Growing up in the equivalent of Sodom, he certainly had his work cut out for him, but one has to wonder if he could have counteracted the lessons of his childhood with new models, .more generous teachers and kinder friends

The rabbis are reminding us that we can move past Yehoram's lead. Certain *middot* (virtues) may never come naturally to us, and yet we do have moments, perhaps, to change our approach to the world. We can surround ourselves with people who teach us generosity of spirit, and we can learn to judge others "*l'chaf zechut*," even if we need help to do so. *Shabbat Shalom*.