

Tazria What story are you going to tell תזריע

We're on the road, we're on the way, we're almost there. When do we get there? We're almost there. This coming week we'll be welcoming in the month of Nisan, the month of miracles, the month of Pesach, the month of liberation, the month of freedom.

It's an auspicious Shabbat, this Shabbat, because we read the fourth and final of the special four Shabbatot, four Parshiyot, the four specific readings, began a month ago and we'll be finishing this coming Shabbat morning, tomorrow morning. We'll be reading about the miracle of the new moon, the first mitzvah given to the Jewish people, Dafka specifically, when they were in the land of Egypt. Va'idaber Adonai el-Moshe leimor be'erit mitzvayim leimor. Ha'chodesh hazeh lachem rosh chadashim. Rishonu lachem lechodshei ha-shana. That in the depth of mitzvayim, the depth of the dark place called mitzvayim, the narrow place, we were given a light called kidush levana, kidush ha-chodesh. Ya'chad em'zeh, together with that, we also have the profound joy of being able to read about leprosy, which comes every year at this time. There isn't a rabbi in town who would be worth his salt if he wouldn't say to you from the get-go that this portion is not the easiest one in which to find very deep lessons in which to apply to our lives, but I'd like to try. And I want to connect the moon and the commandment to be able to renew the moon, whatever that means, we'll talk about that in a moment.

I want to connect it to this affliction called tzara'at, erroneously translated as leprosy, a disease that we have no idea, actually, if it even exists any longer, we don't have any clue what it is exactly, but nonetheless, this week's Torah portion deals with it extensively. And so one of the things that I was struck by is a conversation about illness in the Gemara. The Talmud relates, basing itself on a particular story in our tradition, that when Miriam the prophetess, Miriam the sister of Moses, spoke about Moses, spoke about Moses, spoke what is called lashon hara'ah, spoke gossip about her brother Moses, she was immediately stricken with this thing called tzara'at, this thing called whatever it is, let's just call it tzara'at.

So of course the Talmud gleaned from this that there is a direct relationship between evil speech, or speaking about someone else, and this disease. Now without getting into that itself, which can be used, of course, to scare the bejeebies about talking, who here hasn't spoken gossip, and gossip is definitely one of the more fun things that people engage, come on, isn't gossip a little bit fun, a little bit. And instead of working on the level of skillful speech, which of course, skillful speech and using language appropriately, is the heuristic value, it's the deeper value of being able to say to someone, listen, when you speak about someone else, it impairs your skin, it impairs that place where you have contact with another human being, you feel separate, and this highlights it, it's a beautiful Torah, right? But on a very basic level, I have a problem with the Gemara.

How does the Gemara, how does the Talmud have the hubris to point to one particular behavior and then say that that behavior leads to an illness? Something that came up in a class this week. Ken Wilber, a great philosopher, wrote in a very personal book, maybe the only one that he wrote that was very, very personal, Grace and Grit, about his wife's battle with cancer. He writes, in any disease, a person is confronted with two very different entities. One, the person is faced with the actual disease process itself, a broken bone, a

case of influenza, a heart attack, a malignant tumor, called this aspect of the disease illness. Illness is more or less value-free. It's not true or false, good or bad, it just is. Just like a mountain isn't good or bad, but just is. But two, the person is also faced with how his or her society or culture deals with the illness, all of the judgments, fears, hopes, myths, stories, values, and meanings that a particular society hangs on each illness, called this aspect of disease sickness. Science tells you when and how you are ill. Society tells you when and how you are sick. Science tells you when and how you are ill. Society tells you when and how you are sick.

What's at stake in this week's Torah portion is no less than a conversation between science, a science of the day, and religion. Science is about facts, so to speak. Science measures things and quantifies them. Science, notwithstanding paradigm shift in Thomas Kuhn, science is not a story we tell, but a terrain we discover. Illness is a fact. But oh, the stories we tell about illness, the stories about guilt and culpability, the stories we tell about, fundamentally, how we can possibly control and gain some access to the mystery of how things happen. In the moment that we move and shift from the explicable to the inexplicable, and assign a myth, a story, we've done a great thing, but also a dangerous thing, because there are always two stories in every at least two stories. There are always more than one perspective on any given thing. And so some stories are really debasing. Some stories make us feel less than. Many stories make us feel sick. Many stories are the stories of guilt and shame. Many stories are stories we've inherited, stories that don't fit. And then there are stories that are liberating stories. Stories that lift us, that uplift us and inspire us.

So which of these two stories is the story of Tzarat in this week's Torah portion? When we read about this mysterious disease, the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that anyone afflicted with this disease must do one thing, must come directly and immediately to the priest. And then the Torah, no less than 10 times in the span of eight verses, tells us that the priest will look and see. And then the priest will look and see again. And then the priest will look and see and look and see. Two times would have been enough. Four would have been interesting. Maybe seven would be really over the top, or 10 times really. Do we really need to know the process that the priest engages in to detect? We really need to know? Well, of course, because he has to decide if it is or it isn't, but something deeper is at play, say the Hasidic masters. In the eyes of a Kohen, in the eyes of the priest, the eyes of the one who knows how to tell the story, the difference between illness and sickness is much clearer. The etiology, the source, is cleaner. The priest must perspective the dis-ease, the illness. The priest must bring the compassion, must bring the awareness and the subtle diagnostic tool that doesn't misdiagnose what is taking place and ascribe it to something that isn't really there.

Now, guess what, everybody? I have news for you, as my grandmother would say. I have news for you. This little mitzvah that we are gonna be celebrating tomorrow called Kiddush HaChodesh, Renewing the Moon, is not about science, it's about story. How do I know that? You see, in order to name the new moon, we were forbidden to use math and calculation and science. The only way to establish a new moon every month in the time of the Beit HaMikdash, in the time of the temple, was how? And anybody know? Anybody know? Max, I think you know. Max, how did you establish the new moon? Two people have to see it.

A pishnei edim, you have to have two witnesses. Two witnesses have to come and say, I saw the moon. And let's say the two witnesses, everybody, let's say the two witnesses saw the moon and it really wasn't true. And we know it because we could whip out our Google, our iPad, our moon, our ephemerai, or whatever we use. Let's say it's not really, really the month. Doesn't matter. HaChodesh Hazelachem. The new moon is given to you to decide. It's not about science, it's not about facts, it's not about illness, it's about the story you tell.

What story are you going to tell? The Torah wants to know. The only mitzvah, the first mitzvah, the most important mitzvah given to the Jewish people when they were in Egypt was you have the power to decide which story you tell. You can establish a new moon, you can bring the moon out of hiding. You and you and you, we can all bring the moon out of hiding depending on what story we tell. So what's your story? What story are you going to tell? What myth are you going to believe in? And this distinction is not a vort. I'm not telling over a nice idea tonight. It's a fundamental distinction in where we put the majesty in religion and how we appropriate space for science.

I had the unfortunate experience of going to a lecture this week where someone came in from Israel and had a very large group gathered and this person is a quote unquote Kabbalist. And like other Kabbalists of this school of thinking, he wanted to convince the audience that Kabbalah is not religion. Kabbalah is not religion. It's not even Jewish, he said, unbelievably. But what is it, he said? Kabbalah is science. Kabbalah is science, he said. Metaphysics, mystical science. It's very simple. You do this, you see this. You wear tzitzit, right? You wear these fringes and it's a cause and effect relationship. This is not a new idea.

All of these notions of science are at their core manipulative. If I can convince you that it's not about the story you create but about what is already there. It exists whether you like it or not. Somehow I can guilt you into keeping all of these mitzvot, keeping a Jewish life because who wouldn't want to be scientifically airtight? You wouldn't walk off a building, would you? But I humbly submit, my friends, the world is not given to us. We are given to her. We are given to the world and the stories we tell, the stories we tell about our experiences, the facts that are given, that's what determines the extent of our liberty, our liberation.

And that as Passover approaches in the next 14 days or so from Monday night, we have two weeks and every year I say this to think about the stories that we tell because we're gonna tell a good one on that first night and the second night about how we were in Egypt and people are gonna say, well, wait a second, did it really happen? You'll say, you know, it doesn't matter if it really happened. I'm telling a liberation story and that liberation story is the vision that will pull me even as pain pushes, our visions pull. So let's be clear with ourselves about the stories we tell them, the power that they have.

The more we become clear on the stories we tell and their impact on others and especially ourselves, the more we will weave tales that speak of freedom.