

Parshat Tazria Metzora
April 13, 2013
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas
Unlikely Heroes

As you might imagine, a rabbi's week can encompass quite a range of emotions. From the serious to the silly; from the inconsequential to the momentous, I can stand one moment at a hospital bedside or comforting a congregant whose loved one has just died and minutes later find myself sitting on the floor with our pre-schoolers or joking with the students in our Machon Hebrew High School. It is all in a day's work for a rabbi. One of my unexpectedly entertaining moments was when I met with our B'not Mitzvah, Hannah and Ali to go over their preparations for their Bat-Mitzvah and during our conversation we reviewed and discussed their *divrei-torah*, the speeches they had prepared as introductions for the Torah and Haftarah readings for this morning.

Now this is not headed where you might think I am going. It is not about their Mitzvah project, which received some nice publicity and was actually featured in an article in Newsday this week – where they collected clothes for preemies for the Neo-Natal Unit at Winthrop University Hospital. No, that is not where I am headed. Two sisters – two *divrei-torah*. One gets to speak about the torah portion – *Tazria-Metzorah*, which focuses almost completely on the fascinating subject of skin disease, the process of diagnosis and treatment by the *koheyn* of the leper. And the other gets to explain a rather interesting incident in Jewish history in the days of the prophet Elisha. Ali got the Torah reading D'var Torah and tasked with the challenge of explaining about leprosy, which she did beautifully, I might add. And Hannah, the ever so slightly older sister, got to begin her *D'var Torah* with the following words: "Once again I got my way with my sister! She had to talk about leprosy and luckily, I get to talk about today's Haftarah!"

And I was chuckling to myself as I sat down to prepare my comments for this morning and I thought, should I speak about leprosy and skin disease and the torah portion? Or do I too choose the Haftarah?

Well, as the diplomatic rabbi that I am, I will try and do both. I will try and incorporate Ali's hard work in explaining the torah portion with Hannah's efforts in explaining the Haftarah and let's see if I can help make sense of the whole morning's enterprise.

Tazria Metzora: As Ali eloquently summarized my challenge: "Yuck. Oh my God, how am I going to talk about this!"

The subject of the torah reading is the ancient treatment of the leper who we now know were people who had certain types of skin diseases. What is relevant to our understanding of the Torah, as Ali expertly pointed out, is the question of *how* the torah treated them and *who* treated them. People's natural reactions were to shun the leper, to exile them and cast them out. They were extremely contagious so the natural reflexive response of the community was to assert its needs of self protection over any consideration for the individual needs of the leper. The needs of the leper were ignored in the rush to protect the rights and needs of the larger community. It is in this context that the torah enters and sets down rules regarding the treatment of the leper; laws that balance the legitimate needs of the community with the rights and dignity of the leper. Isolate them if you must – but the *koheyn* – the man of God, the purest, holiest representative of the community must maintain contact with them, check them

regularly –so that when cured they could be immersed, purified and allowed to re-enter the community.

And if the torah portion deals with the laws regarding how we as an *am kadosh and mamlechet kohanim* – as a holy people, as a nation of priests – would deal with these most marginal of our people in general – the *haftarah* focuses on four particular lepers who lived in the time of the prophet Elisha and may well be the unlikeliest and most fascinating heroes you will ever meet. Yes, Hannah you lucked out on this one.

Let's take a closer look at the *haftarah*. It can be found in our *humashim* on page 676. Now it actually helps to know the larger context of the Book of Kings from which this *haftarah* is excerpted. It is part of the Elijah/Elisha narratives and their purpose is to demonstrate the power of these prophets. The general form of these stories is that the prophet makes a prediction in the name of God, the prediction seems unlikely if not downright outrageous – the people, or the king – mock the prophet, but then the prediction comes true and the power of the prophet as a true spokesperson for God is enhanced.

In this particular story – the northern kingdom is under siege from the King of Aram – “King Ben-hadad of Aram mustered his entire army and marched upon Samaria and besieged it.” (2 Kings 6:24) As the notes in our *humash* point out on page 675, “the siege is described as brutal. Famine and cannibalism were rampant, and the price of food was out of control...the King of Israel, utterly helpless, sent his messenger to threaten the prophet Elisha begging him to please do *something*- who replies that “by this time tomorrow” all would change...the royal messenger scoffs at the prophets message and dismisses it.” Now this is the background to the remarkable chapter seven of the second Book of Kings that is our *haftarah*.

In our *haftarah*, there are two groups of people – the unfortunate Israelites who are *inside* the city walls – *under* siege – *suffering* from hunger: They are desperate and hopeless. And *outside* the city are camped the foreign troops of the king of Aram, *well fed, empowered*, on the verge of total victory.

And then in the opening lines of the story we are introduced to a third group -- who occupy a place in between those who are inside and those who are outside – who literally sat in between - outside the gates of the city but in front of the encamped troops: “There were four men, lepers, outside the gate. They said to one another, ‘Why should we sit here waiting for death? If we decide to go into the town, what with the famine in the town, we shall die there; and if we just sit here, still we die. Come let us desert to the Aramean camp. If they let us live we shall live; and if they put us to death, we shall but die.’”

These four anonymous lepers are, in my humble opinion, amongst the most fascinating characters in the entire Bible. We are never told their names – to some extent their anonymity merely exaggerates the lowliness and desperation of their situation. They are nobodies; they are the least of the least, the most marginal of the marginal.

Definition of tough times: You know things are tough when the lepers who have been cast out of the city have better options than you do!

The calculations of the four lepers to defect to the enemy camp is less a comment on the desperation of the lepers than it is a description of the sad situation that was the lot of Israel besieged. When the lepers are defecting things could not be much worse. But wait, after

showing the lepers defecting, the point has been made and I would have expected the camera to pan back to the Israelites under siege. I get it, the rats are jumping ship, but the camera stays with the lepers. Something is going on here. And it certainly piques our interest.

“They set out at twilight for the Aramean camp; but when they came to the edge of the Aramean camp, there was no one there.” Now the story adds an editorial note that what had apparently happened was that God had caused the Arameans camped there to hear a sound of chariots and horses – the din of a huge army. They panicked, and as they would say in the old Westerns, “they high tailed it out of town...” They just picked up and left, leaving everything behind, abandoning their camp and all their possessions, and as the Bible puts it, “they fled headlong in the twilight, abandoning their tents and horses and asses just as it was – they fled for their lives!”

Well you can imagine the reaction of the lepers. The Arameans are gone, the Israelites know nothing of their retreat, and only these four lepers have the opportunity to eat and drink and enjoy the booty they left behind. And then comes the pivotal moment in this narrative. These four lepers who had been cast off by their fellow Israelites and could easily rationalize that they owe them nothing – these four lepers who stand inside the enemy camp – which had they been there might just as easily have killed them as fed them – these four lepers make one of the most incredible comments in the entire Bible: “*lo cheyn anachnu oseim*- We are not doing the right thing.” Can you picture this scene? Can you imagine this moment? The enemy is gone, the Israelites are back inside their walled city, starving to death. Here these four lepers sit with all the food, gold and silver for themselves, and rather than enjoy it, rather than rationalize that a world that has kicked them and rejected them and thrown them out can go fly a kite – no these four lepers have a conscience - “*lo cheyn anachnu oseim*- We are not doing right.”

The Bible gives us the rest of their speech: “This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent...come let us go and inform the king’s palace.” Now from here out the story is fairly predictable. The people are saved, the prophet is vindicated and everyone lives happily ever after – at least for a little while. But, before we close the book on this episode, I want you to remember these four lepers, the unlikeliest heroes in the Bible, maybe in all of literature.

Now, why do I insist on calling them heroes?

Look at the note in our *humashim* – it is on page 676 – it says it better than I ever could: “It is intriguing that the fulfillment of the divine oracle begins with the defection of the four lepers, who dramatize the polarities and precariousness of the situation as a whole. What is more, it is precisely their social and ritual marginality that puts them beyond the walls and in a position to flee to the Aramean camp. As aliens among the aliens, they bring “good news” back to the city once they overcome their private desires and think of their starving compatriots in Samaria. Their moral turning is at the core of the narrative.” Once they overcome their private desires and think of their starving compatriots - that is the moral turning point in the narrative.

Who are *our* heroes? The strongest amongst us? The bravest amongst us? Those capable of feats of enormous daring? We Jews have a very different definition of what it means to be a hero. For us a hero is the one who does the right thing – no more, no less. For us a hero is the one who, “overcomes their private desires and think of their starving compatriots...” This is in keeping with that wonderful *mishna* from the fourth chapter of *Pirke Avot* where Ben Zoma

asks: "Who is strong? The one who can conquer his own passions." Such is the nature of a Jewish Superhero.

This past week we were given the opportunity to meet some remarkable people. On Sunday we met Anat Hoffman, the leader of the Women of the Wall, the group that is fighting for pluralism in Israel, for the right of a woman to say kaddish at the Kotel, to ride in the front of certain segregated buses that transverse Jerusalem's Ultra-Orthodox communities. Anat Hoffman is a woman who just demands that Israel do the right thing and for those of us who were privileged to meet her, we were reminded, in the spirit of today's Haftarah what a Jewish hero is. Later that same day as part of our TBS Yom Hashoah we were privileged to meet Steven Berger a modest man who shared his remarkable story of survival and triumph during one of the darkest chapters of modern – indeed human history. He too reminded us of what enormous character it took merely to do the right thing in a time of such evil and darkness. On Thursday night Ruth Calderone, the newly elected member of the Israeli Knesset spoke at JTS. Some of you may remember the sermon I delivered after her first speech on the floor of the Knesset, not long ago when she modestly yet eloquently reminded us that torah is the possession of the entire Jewish people, not just a few and not just men. How amazing that just doing the right thing, saying the correct thing can so often be an act of heroism.

The new movie 42 about the life and times of Jackie Robinson, the first black man chosen to play in the baseball major leagues by Branch Rickey back in 1947, opened in theaters this week. I haven't seen the movie – it just opened last night – but in A.O. Scott's wonderful review in the NY Times he observes a moment in the movie where Branch Rickey describes his new prospect as "superhuman" in his baseball ability. And Scott correctly understands that labeling Jackie Robinson as such was more of a curse than a blessing. "To be accepted as human, as equal to whites, the black pioneers of the era had to rise above all kinds of ordinary human temptations, to fight back, to show anger or fear, and become flawless exemplars of their race." Too often to qualify as a hero in America, one is expected to be a super-hero. I am not surprised to hear that a new version of the comic book hero Superman is due in a movie theater near you this summer.

Much has been written on the fact that Superman was created by two Jews, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in Cleveland, and that they based their story on the model of Moses from the Bible. Like Moses he would be placed by his parents in a small ark and set adrift in space instead of the Nile to be saved from destruction, and that he would rise to be the salvation of his people - -and it is no coincidence that like Jackie Robinson – they lived around the same time – the 1930's when we Jews confronted the same kind of prejudices and threats that blacks did. And while it is understandable that these Jewish writers would embody their frustrations in the creation of a super-hero, they became more American than Jewish when they did so.

We Americans love our Super heroes but we Jews never saw Moses, or any of our heroes as super. On the contrary the four lepers in today's Haftarah were our truest form of heroes. Ordinary people who, under trying circumstances simply do the right thing, which as we know is not so simple at all.

Yes, it makes a great movie when Superman flies to the rescue and saves the world from destruction, or when Jackie Robinson makes a super-human play. But the message of today's Haftarah is that we are not trying to make a movie – we are trying to make a better world and

to achieve that we need fewer Supermen and more Anat Hoffmans, Ruth Calderones and Steven Bergers – heroes, men and women willing to do the right thing.

So my dearest Hannah and Ali – on this your Bat Mitzvah day I, your rabbi, do not expect you to fly faster than a speeding bullet, or leap tall buildings in a single bound. If you want to impress me, if you want to be my hero – you will do more of what you have started doing – like your mitzvah project. Just keep doing the right things and you can be my hero! But don't be fooled. It is not as easy as it sounds. In some ways it is easier to leap a tall building. It takes enormous strength, incredible commitment, and amazing fortitude. Just to do the right thing. That's why we live in a world of so few real heroes.

“There were four men, lepers, outside the gate...” how often we Jews felt marginalized by the world, how easy it would be to rationalize that we owe the world nothing and yet our strength, like the strength of those four lepers is that we have, time and time again remained true to our values and done the right thing, and in the doing have transformed the world.

Just do the right thing, and you too can be a hero.