

Dear Chavraya,

This week's Torah portion, actually a double portion, *Parashat Tazria-M'tzora*, is arguably one of the most dreaded by *B'nei Mitzvah* students. *Parashat Tazria* begins with a brief introduction concerning the offerings attendant on childbirth, replete with reference to conception and to blood. All the rest of the two portions concern leprosy and other afflictions of skin and body. I have witnessed the horror of more than a few young people upon realizing the content of these, their Torah portions. I have used such opportunity to share what has come to fascinate me as part of an ever-unfolding dance with Torah. The Torah is a Torah of life, and so we approach it, whatever the content of a particular portion. Like the beauty of a bright summer's day, it is easy to find delight among the gardens of *B'reishit*. The more difficult portions, opaque at first, require a more diligent search to find the gates that lead to hidden gardens. As in life so in Torah, beauty and meaning are not always apparent.

Most importantly this is true in our encounters with people. There are those whom it is very easy to embrace, to appreciate, to love. And there are those who by manner or appearance may repel or simply make us uncomfortable. How to get close, how to see the image of God? Searching the text for meaning is a metaphor for searching the face and soul of a human being. Whether for an adolescent or an adult, it is a holy challenge. Of all the unlikely *parshiot*, *Tazria* and *M'tzora* offer powerful teaching on human dignity and compassion. In the end, it is precisely in these portions that describe people who are disfigured with disease, in whom it is more difficult to see the image of God, *tzelem Elokim*, that we are reminded of the holiness that infuses the afflicted as human beings.

The humanity of every person is affirmed in the very first word of the chapters on leprosy. The leper is referred to as *adam/human being*. The word does not mean "man," as most often mistranslated. The first human, referred to as both male and female by the rabbis, is called *adam*, one who is of *adamah*, the earth. Of all the words that could be used to refer to a person, the Slonimer Rebbe points out that *adam* refers to the highest spiritual level; as it is written, "for in God's image did God create the adam/the human."

Far from affirming her or his humanity, the leper has been treated most often as pariah, a status transferred with equal fear and loathing to others who are vulnerable or who don't conform to regnant social norms; those with AIDS, the disfigured, the socially awkward, lesbians and gays, the transgendered and others whose sexuality is not readily identified. Those who would justify and rationalize such cruelty in God's name appear animated by the spirit of a tragically misread and misunderstood verse at the end of *Parashat Tazria*, whose proper reading teaches a very different way of response. The Hebrew, *v'tamei tamei yikrah*, is generally translated as, *and s/he shall call out: "Unclean! Unclean!"* The leper appears to be required to call out for the sake of protecting others. *Tamei* does not mean unclean, however, a word of stigma, but is a technical term that refers simply to a state of ritual impurity that can affect anyone. It is also a noun referring to the person, not a word describing the person. Most significantly, in the traditional text a vertical line appears between the two words. Called a *p'sik*, the line is one of the *ta'amim* or trope signs, and it indicates

a pause between the two words, like a rest in music. Grammatically, the phrase should be read, *v'tamei | tamei yikrah/and the one who is tamei | the one who is tamei shall cry out*. Read this way, the rabbis saw a call for compassion, explaining the intent of the phrase in the Talmud as: *teaching that one needs to make known their pain to others so that others can seek compassion upon the one who cries out*. A beautiful 19th century commentary, the *Torah T'mimah*, says that the one who is suffering should cry out at night, when in the stillness others will hear, even as God hears, and will cry with the sufferer, shedding tears of prayerful sympathy.

In a careful reading of the text, the text of page and of face, we come to find the quiet spaces where God dwells. If we would only look, the gates will open. How much we shall have to share and to speak of then, at whatever age, when called to be *B'nei Mitzvah*, children of the commandments. Rising to the challenge to look more carefully, into the book and into the person that is before us, we shall come to look beyond the barriers of difference that are but skin deep, and affirm the human dignity of each and every one.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor