

Dear Chavraya,

For many, it is not easy to speak up for one's own needs. Often easier to speak up for another, it takes a certain way of courage to cry out and tell of one's own pain. I think of these dynamics as we make our way through this difficult time of the pandemic, fearing for the many who suffer in silence, whether of loneliness, of food and financial insecurity, of the illness itself. There is a powerful tension in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Tazria-M'tzora* (Lev. 12:1-15:33), that celebrates one who would speak up and cry out their own pain, while revealing in the same moment why it takes courage to tell of one's own needs.

There are those who use sacred verses as cudgels, who dare to twist God's compassion into expressions of hate and exclusion. There is a classic instance of such twisting of words meant to heal into words used to harm in *Parashat Tazria*. In regard to the leper as archetypal pariah, one so in need of love and yet cast out, the Torah says, *his garments shall be rent, his head shall remain unshorn, he shall cover himself down to his upper lip, and he shall call out:....* Here I pause, unable to complete the verse without taking sides, and I must take a side. I must cry out with the leper, pleading for compassion, for social nearness, not distance, even if for now we must be apart for the sake of health. Compassion is about more than whether we can physically hug and hold another. It is about the entire social and spiritual context in which we hold and care for others, how each one is seen in all of their humanity, in the full context of their personhood.

I pause in reading that verse in order not to read it in the way it is most often read, in the way of being waved as a cudgel. The last three words of the verse are most often read and understood as, *and he shall call out: "Unclean!*

Unclean!" /v'tamei | tamei yikra. The emphasis is clear, the "leper," though not likely about leprosy as we understand it, is to warn people away, not to come near to them in their illness and pain, whether of body or spirit. So have those who suffer been ostracized through time, sent out of the camp literally and figuratively.

Through careful and brave reading of the text, we find ourselves crying out with the one who suffers, realizing that we are often the very one who is suffering, that their voice is ours and our voice is theirs. The way that the Hebrew is written is very important, *v'tamei | tamei yikra*. One of the *ta'amim*, the "trope" signs, to guide us in correct reading and chanting, there is a vertical line between the two appearances of *tamei* that is called a *p'sik*, indicating a pause, as a rest in music. Often translated as *unclean* or *impure*, in either case meaning in a ritual context, it is helpful to understand the word as referring to one who is ritually or socially unavailable due to being in another state, needing to engage with another reality, with other needs that require one to be apart. In such a way it has seemed to me that in this time of being apart for the sake of health and healing we are all *tamei*, all physically unavailable to each other, and that as such we are all crying out for connection.

That is exactly how the verse is meant to be read and understood, a matter beyond language, not as telling of a person in need of succor warning others

away, but of that person bravely crying out their pain to tell of their need. In the face of how this verse has been abused in order to abuse other human beings, we realize why it takes such courage to cry out and tell of our own needs. The fear of being shunned and driven away is palpable, and so the Torah makes its point. We can feel the fear and pain of the one crying out. The rabbis long ago recognized that it takes courage to so cry out, offering a powerful teaching meant to encourage us in speaking out on our own behalf, and so to hear the cries of others. We too are created in the image of God, each one a child of God. Challenging all of those who would abuse God's Torah and any one of God's children, the rabbis say of these three words, *v'tamei | tamei yikra: it teaches that one needs to make known their pain to the many/m'lamed she'tzarich l'hodiyah tzaro l'rabim/and the many will seek compassion on their behalf/v'rabim m'vakshim alav rachamim* (Mo'ed Katan 5a).

In case we have any doubts of how the rabbis meant for the verse to be understood, from the nineteenth century, the ever-sensitive Torah commentator known as the *Torah T'mimah*, Rabbi Boruch Ha'levi Epstein, weaves gentle strands of connection meant to illumine the way of healing: *those who hear will seek compassion for the one who suffers, that they be healed from their pain*. Drawing from the Book of *Eicha/Lamentations*, *bacho tivkeh ba'laila/she shall surely cry out at night*, the *Torah T'mimah* emphasizes that we too should cry out at night, *for of one who cries at night, those who hear their voice will cry with them/ha'sho'me'a kolo bocheh k'negdo*.

From each of our own places, when we are able to cry out even silently, may we know that willing hearts will hear and hold our tears, crying with us. It takes courage to acknowledge and then to tell of our own needs, to speak up on our own behalf. That is the power of a verse in Torah that itself has been so abused, that itself cries out for understanding. Toward healing of Torah and of people, may we listen for each other's cries in the night, together turning toward the dawn, cries of lament become songs of healing and hope, tears gathered into waters of life. Our voices tell of who and how we are, and so too our silence, our ability to hear, to listen, and to hold. Joined by a thin line that marks a place of pause, a calling out for human connection, together, may we be the means for each other's healing.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor