

פרשה מצורע – ויקרא 14 and 15

(Leviticus 14 and 15, The Leper Portion)

The Leprosy in Your Seder

I must admit that פרשת מצורע (The Leper Portion) is not my favorite, but that's probably true for most of us. I am not certain why I volunteered to address this פרשה (portion) because I have done it before and struggled with it then. I took umbrage then and still do over the inference that illnesses, deformities and disabilities are signatures of impurity and sin and must be punished by ostracism and expiation. However, I read it with a different lens this time, a technique called parallax by literary critics, and hope my דרש (explication and interpretation) might give you all a different angle with which to view it as well.

Traditionally, rabbinic scholars have viewed פרק 14 - פסוק 13 (Chapter 14, line 13) as a clue to the opaque and troubling meaning of the פרשה.

13. He shall slaughter the lamb in the place where one slaughters the sin offering and the burnt offering, in a holy place. For regarding the kohen ['s service], the guilt offering is like the sin offering. It is a holy of holies.

יג. וְשַחַט אֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁחַט אֶת הַחֲטָאת וְאֶת הַעֹלָה בַּמָּקוֹם הַקֹּדֶשׁ כִּי בַחֲטָאת הָאֲשָׁם הוּא לַכֹּהֵן קֹדֶשׁ קֹדְשִׁים הוּא

Somehow, the elaborately described skin ailment, the menstruation and the spilling of semen of תזריע, (she forms seed) were viewed as evidence of sin, of moral failure, and these physical manifestations stood as a punishment for the sinner - the sufferer. It is generally understood that a person has been afflicted by a spiritual malady which places him or her in a state of ritual impurity requiring ritual purification through sacrifice and the intervention of the Kohen before readmission to the community as a whole.

The dominant interpretive perspective appears to be that the person is being punished for uncleanness or, sometimes more specifically, לשון הרע. (Evil tongue). As you have undoubtedly read over the years, an associative linkage is commonly made to Miriam's skin manifestations in במדבר (Numbers 12:10).

After Miriam spoke against Moses, God's cloud was removed from the Tent of Meeting and "Miriam was leprous (מְצַרְעַת), as white as snow."

י 10 And when the cloud was removed from over the Tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow; and Aaron looked upon Miriam; and, behold, she was leprous.
י וְהָעֲנָן, סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל, וְהָיָה מִרְיָם, מְצַרְעַת כַּשֵּׁלֵג; וַיִּבֶן אֶהָרֹן אֶל-מִרְיָם, וְהָיָה מִצַּרְעַת.

In דברים (Deuteronomy 24:8-9), Moses warned the Israelites diligently in the case of skin disease (צָרַעַת) to observe all that the priests would teach them, remembering what God did to Miriam. Why was Miriam punished? It was Miriam's **speech** that made her impure. **Speech** – the emphasis is on the power of the word, of language, of personal expression, of reporting, of memory narrated, of free ideas or of anger, etc. Even in slavery one has personal expression. Many commentators interpret לשון הרע (evil tongue) more specifically as telling gossip, speaking blasphemy, saying malicious things, libeling someone, speaking heresy, and so forth.

I have not, in my cursory review of the literature, found commentators who associate or equate לשון הרע (evil tongue) with the absence of good, kind, laudatory, uplifting, spiritual, or pedagogic speech. In other words, someone does not become impure merely by not saying the right thing. לשון הרע (evil tongue) is a לא תעשה, an איסור – a prohibition

We are only a week away from פסח (Passover) when we are enjoined to 'tell' – a תעשה - an obligation, an injunction. We are compelled to 'speak' our collective history leading up to the receiving of the law and the accepting of the Covenant. We will all read the הגדה (Haggadah) and relate our shared story. We will all read the same text - just as our own families and our common ancestors have throughout the ages. With this in mind, I thought I would introduce an unusual personal retelling – a *recollected* הגדה (Haggadah) - of the פסח (Passover) story. Maybe you will recognize it. Maybe you will consider it impure - לשון הרע- (evil tongue).

“He stayed in his walk to watch a typesetter neatly distributing type. Reads it backwards first. Quickly he does it. Must require some practice that. mangiD kcirtaP. Poor papa with his hagadah book, reading backwards with his finger to me. Pessach. Next year in Jerusalem. Dear, O dear! All that long business about that brought us out of the land of Egypt and into the house of bondage Alleluia. Shema Israel Adonai Elohenu. No, that's the other. Then the twelve brothers, Jacob's sons. And then the lamb and the cat and the dog and the stick and the water and the butcher. And then the angel of death kills the butcher and he kills the ox and the dog kills the cat. Sounds a bit silly till you come to look into it well. Justice it means but it's everybody eating everyone else. That's what life is after all. How quickly he does that job. Practice makes perfect. Seems to see with his fingers.”

Anyone recognize this? Are there former English majors among us?

This is a passage from James Joyce's Ulysses. Parenthetically, because of Joyce's intratextual references to Jewish texts, rituals, traditions, and history some critics view Irish Catholic Joyce as the finest 'Jewish writer' of the twentieth century! The primary protagonist of the novel is Leopold Bloom – a non-practicing, secular Jew who lives in Dublin, a pervasively Christian society dominated by Catholics. His wife may or may not be Jewish. Joyce is contradictory on this point. Bloom is considered the first truly modern protagonist in twentieth century modern literature. The fact that he is a Jew and is not characterized by Joyce in an anti-Semitic manner, like Shylock, Fagin, or allusions in the poetry of Ezra Pound, an avowed anti-Semite and contemporary of Joyce, is of great literary and intellectual significance in the past century (twentieth). Bloom is presented as an Everyman, albeit an outsider. **However**, he is not a Jew with whom **we** can identify completely or comfortably.

The entire book, over 1,000 pages, takes place over the course of one day, June 16, 1904. The book opens with Bloom going out to buy breakfast – a pork kidney from another Irish, formerly Hungarian, Jew. He wraps the pork kidney in a local newspaper that contains an advertisement geared towards Jewish readers encouraging them to buy orchards in the Galilee through a fictional Jewish agency, misnamed 'Agendath Netaim'. Keep in mind that June 16, 1904 is only nine years after Herzl's letter to Baron Hirsch stating his Zionist manifesto and only eight years after the book The Jewish State, An Attempt for a Modern Solution to the Jewish Question, (Der Judenstaat) was published on February 14, 1896.

What irony! A wrapped pork kidney becomes the ad for a pre-state Zionist appeal to diaspora Jews!

So Bloom, the pork-eating Jew, tells the Exodus story from memory, inherited memory -- “that brought us out of the land of Egypt and INTO the house of bondage”. Wow! Is this לשון הרע (evil tongue)? Is this heresy? OR, is this a man whose father did not teach him, 'tell' him the הגדה well, year after year? What did Bloom learn in his childhood or later and what could he teach his daughter, Millie? What would our history be today if we were led *into* bondage – again? Where would we be? What story would we now 'tell'?

Bloom follows his rendition of the הגדה (Haggadah) with another memory - his recollection of the שמע (Shema). It seems an errant interposition, undoubtedly entirely opaque to Christian readers and even Christian scholars of Joyce, but *actually* we read the rabbis' debate about when to say the שמע (Shema) -- right in the הגדה (Haggadah) -- after the telling of the Exodus.

What is Bloom's remembered version of the שמע (Shema)? “Alleluia. Shema Israel Adonai Elohenu. No, that's the other.” He uses church Latin to say Alleluia instead of the Hebrew Halleluyah- הללויה. Instead of 'Adonai Echad', he gives us 'the other'. This is a blatant subversion of our faith. The paradox is clear. There can be no other -- when G-d is One. In Joyce's novel, the other is Jesus. Is this a misquote? Is this לשון הרע (evil tongue)? Is this heresy? OR, is this a man whose father failed to teach him, to 'tell' him the הגדה (Haggadah) effectively, throughout his impressionable years, who failed to leave him a full Jewish legacy?

What about Bloom's Chad Gadya (One Goat)? He sees the ditty as presenting עין תחת עין (an eye for an eye), a form of eternal revenge. **We** understand it as G-d saving the Israelites. The song is a playful way to introduce the breadth of Jewish history and suffering resolving in divine salvation. How did he get it so wrong? Well, first, he omitted the final verse – the actual punchline:

וְאֵתָא הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרִיךְ הוּא, וְשַׁחַט לְמַלְאָךְ הַמָּוֶת, דְּשַׁחַט לְשׁוֹחַט
דְּשַׁחַט לְתוֹרָא, דְּשַׁתָּא לְמִיָּא, דְּכַבֵּה לְנוֹרָא, דְּשַׂרְף לְחוּטְרָא, דְּהַפֵּה
לְכַלְבָּא, דְּנִשֵּׁף לְשׁוֹנְרָא, דְּאֶכְלָה לְגַדְיָא, דְּזַבִּין אַבָּא בְּתַרֵּי זַוְיָ, חַד
גְּדִיָּא, חַד גְּדִיָּא.

(“And the Blessed One Blessed be He slaughtered the Angel of Death.....”)

Secondly, most importantly, he missed the overall lesson of the song, the historical allegory of the Jewish people, and the two zuzim (coins) – the receiving of two tablets of the law and the return to Zion after the Exodus- the ultimate salvation and the Children of Israel's unique relationship to G-d..

One commentator states that: The kid symbolizes the Jewish people, the cat, Assyria; the dog, Babylon; the stick, Persia; the fire, Macedonia; the water, Rome; the ox, the Saracens; the slaughterer, the Crusaders; the angel of death, the Turks. **And finally**, God arrives to deliver the Jews back to Israel.

So Bloom completely mis-narrates the story of the Exodus, the שמע (Shema), **and** חַד גְּדִיָּא (One Goat). First he denies Jewish history (into bondage), second he denies the oneness of G-d ('no the other'), and lastly he denies the existence of G-d and his agency in Jewish history (the omission of G-d's saving the Jewish people). A complete repudiation of Judaism. Is Bloom the רשע (Evil Son) of the הגדה (Haggadah)? Unable to identify personally with Jewish history?

Throughout the novel Bloom's major burden and grief is the loss of his son, Rudy. He moans his inability to pass on his Jewish heritage to a son, to leave his legacy. But, what did he learn from his father and what could he have taught his child? What was left of his Jewish heritage other than sentimental and nostalgic half-memories, leprous, scarred mnemonics and romantic nationalism?

In a large sense, our celebration of פסח (Passover) is an exploration and manifestation of how memory-based identity persists, exists, and gets lost. Leopold Bloom is an obvious and vital example. Participating in, learning and teaching at a סדר (seder) is an essential act of existential survival. Telling, explaining and perpetuating our pure and timeless narrative.

So my take on מצורע (The Leper Portion) is the importance and spiritual responsibility of Jewish freedom of speech, the act of “telling” and 'retelling' *inducing persistent memory and identity*. What we do in our סדרים (Seders) really does matter. The תעשה - the affirmative action of narrating for survival. The repetition of the arc of Jewish history and survival, our people's unique relationship to G-d and to Israel, and our ethos of humanism, הוא לחמא עניא. (Let all who are hungry come and eat. This is the Bread of Affliction.) So the paramount questions are: Are we imparting the germs of leprosy, scaly, necrotic, disfiguring tissue, in our סדרים (Seders)? Will our next generation become another Leopold Bloom eating pork, ostracized and half-remembering rituals or will they be able to teach their children and they theirs and so on?

There is always a joke at our table about reading and telling the entire הגדה (Haggadah) versus taking the express train. My message to you on שבת מצורע (the Sabbath of the Leper Portion reading) is that it is well worth taking the local train and stopping to 'tell', to recite and to teach our spiritual, ethical and historical narrative at every junction.

!!! שבת שלום וחג כשר ושמח !!!

Good Shabbos and a Kosher Passover!!!