

This d'var Torah borrows from, and is inspired by, my friend and teacher, Rabbi Dov Linzer, the President and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Chovovei Torah (www.yctorah.org).)

Many of us know someone like Helen*. Each month without fail, Helen calls the office, asking for money in order to pay the rent and the groceries. Each month she receives an envelope from us with funds. Lately Helen has taken to calling me after receiving her envelope. (she lives in New Jersey and so cannot get to the office in person). Many times I am not really in the mood for speaking with her, having the same conversation where I will hear the same list of challenges she faces, and the same request for food stamps that we can't accommodate.

Helen is an example of a modern-day *metzora*- someone who is outside of mainstream society.

The case of the metzora as described in this week's Torah portion challenges me-and all of us- to think about those with whom we would rather not engage with or ideally even see, because they make us uncomfortable, and maybe because we are afraid of 'catching' what they have. To be clear- the metzora is not a leper, but is much like one. He/she has a serious skin disease and is sent outside of the Israelite camp, in an area that would eventually become outside of the city walls of the Land of Israel. We are told that the metzora must announce their impure status – “‘Impure! Impure!’ He shall call out”, and must warn everyone to keep their distance, and is then sent outside of the camp – “בִּדְדֹּי יֵשֵׁב” – He must live alone. Outside of the camp is his dwelling place” ([Leviticus 13:46](#)). From the Torah's perspective, people with challenges are not to be singled out. Not only are we to see them as equal members of society, we are also given explicit mitzvot to avoid the tendency that some might have to abuse and mock them. “You shall not curse the deaf” and “Do not put a stumbling block before the blind” are core mitzvot in the Torah.

And yet, as institutions, we keep the sick and elderly outside of society, away from our homes, our synagogues and shopping centers. Many people

prefer it this way. Being around the sick or the elderly makes us feel uncomfortable. **It is so much easier to have them at a distance where they need not be seen.**

Who is the one who tends to the *metzora*? The Kohen. The Kohen figures so prominently in our *parsha* that the word “הַכֹּהֵן – The Kohen” appears over 80 times. It is the Kohen who constantly engages with the *metzora*, checking up on him during the various stages of the development of the *tzaraat* (impurity) and being the one to go out to him when he is healed in order to purify him and bring him back into the camp. Who serves as our modern day Kohen? It is usually the rabbi. Rabbis are the ones who do the pastoral care, the ones who make *bikkur cholim* calls. They are the ones who are present for the sick, and who make regular visits to the hospitals and the nursing homes. They represent us when we cannot be bothered to be there ourselves. But we have to be bothered.

We have offloaded onto the rabbi a responsibility that belongs to all of us equally. There are many communities that recognize this, particularly in the form of *bikkur cholim* groups. And yet, even in those communities, we are talking about a small number of individuals who are actively engaged. While the Torah speaks of the Kohen in the case of the *metzora*, we are reminded, again and again, of the central mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*. This mitzvah is rooted in “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” a mitzvah which tells us that we must act in the same way we would want to be treated. **Beyond that, it is a mitzvah rooted in the core principle that everyone –sick, infirm or elderly–is our neighbor. Everyone is in society among us.**

So the next time that Helen calls to speak with me, I am going to try really hard to push aside everything else that is going on during my day, to take a deep breath, and to just be present for her during the same conversation that we will have. And maybe I will try to engage her in talking about herself, and maybe I will learn things about her that will place her more “inside the camp”- where she truly belongs.

Shabbat Shalom!

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