

Lepers at the Gate
Metzora – 12 April 2008
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More on leprosy. This week it is the rules and rituals for restoring the leper to a position back in the community, the enigmatic phenomenon of a leprous growth spreading on the walls of the house, and then the ritual defilement following from discharge from the male or female sexual organs.

The traditional Jewish belief is that God revealed every word of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. The claim of modern critical scholarship is that the Torah was stitched together from documents produced by various authors who lived at different times and had significantly different theological outlooks and literary styles. As an alternative to both of these models, I sometimes think of various groups all lobbying an editorial board to get their material incorporated into the document. The priests, in charge of the sacrificial cult, and the lawyers and judges obviously had their own very powerful lobbies. So did the architects and artists, whose input is revealed at such length in the building specifications that fill one-third of the book of Exodus. The genealogists succeeded back in Genesis. The historians took over much of Numbers. Last week it was the dermatologists; this week (at least in the final chapter of the *parashah*), the urologists and gynaecologists. Is it sinful to think that the one group under-represented in this process was the copy-editors?

You will forgive me therefore if I choose to focus my comments today not on the Torah *parashah* but on the Haftarah, which I confess I find far more intriguing from a literary, historical, and moral point of view. Let me set the stage. The context is the career of the prophet Elisha, who—like his mentor, Elijah, sometimes got into serious trouble with the political rulers of the northern kingdom of Israel. At this time (the middle of the 8th century BCE), the king is Jehoram, son of Elijah's king Ahab. Ben-Hadad of the neighbouring kingdom of Aram had mustered his army and besieged the capital city of Samaria. The biblical description of the famine resulting from the siege is presented starkly. First it is in *economic* terms that we would need to translate into different categories to be very meaningful for us, though the impact is clear: “a quarter of a kab of doves' dung sold for five shekels” (2 Kings 6:25).

Then the famine is dramatized in *human* terms that could compete with the most macabre and horrifying scenes of Greek tragedy. A woman of Samaria encounters King Jehoram and asks for his help. Here I must read the translation of the text, because no paraphrase can do justice to the understated restraint of the biblical narrative style that expresses what is certainly a candidate for the most appalling passage in the Bible. The woman says, “*That* woman said to me, ‘Give up your son and we will eat him today; tomorrow we’ll eat my son.’ So we cooked my son and we ate him. The next day I said to her, ‘Give up your son so that we can eat him.’ But she *hid* her son” (2 Kings 6:28–29). The woman therefore demands justice from the king.

Perhaps Solomon might have been up to rendering a decision in this case, which strikes me as far more anguishing than the one he encountered. But King Jehoram does not even try; the narrative continues, “When the king heard what the

woman said, he rent his clothes, and as he walked along the wall, the people could see that he was wearing sackcloth [the dress of the mourner] underneath” (2 Kings 6:30).

I suppose that one might discuss this episode as a harrowing exercise in legal and moral reasoning. I cite it simply to provide the background for our Haftarah, which begins at this point of excruciating famine within the walls of the city by changing the focus to four lepers encamped *petah ha-sha'ar*, at the entrance to the gate of the city wall. Presumably they have been placed just outside the wall either because of the Torah laws about ritual impurity, or simply because of a fear of contagion. They are temporarily safe because the besieging soldiers cannot get close enough to harm them without exposing themselves to the arrows of the sentries on the walls. Their reasoning is quite pragmatic: There is no point trying to get permission to re-enter the city, because there is no food to eat there. Yet if we remain where we are, we will die as well. The only chance for survival is to try to gain access to the camp of the Arameans, where at least there is some food.

When they approach the camp of the besiegers, they find to their astonishment that no one is there. In one of those enigmatic episodes for which the biblical author has no explanation and therefore attributes it to God's intervention, the Arameans had abandoned the siege and returned rather hurriedly to their own territory. Yet the Israelites in Samara, suffering the ravages of famine, did not know this; their MI6 and CIA were responsible for a potentially disastrous failure to provide this crucial information, and they apparently believed that there were still weapons of mass destruction outside the gate.

In the enemy camp, the lepers find not only plenty to eat, but also silver and gold and clothing. This they take and bury, as all sensible people in their situation would have done. Then the lepers have another decision to make. They could simply have taken the food they could carry and made their way to another destination, leaving the people in the city that had abandoned them to their own fate. Instead, they decide that this would not be *right*. To remain silent, to conceal the good news from the starving people, would be a *sin*. And so they return to the gate to inform the guards. The king is wary that it may be a trick to gain access to the city—apparently he had read Homer's *Iliad* about the Greeks only *pretending* to leave the siege of Troy. But his reconnaissance units confirm that the enemy has indeed retreated, and is nowhere to be found. Good is once more plentiful, the prices of flour and barley plummet, presumably leaving the hoarders and speculators in deep dismay..

And that is the last we hear of the four lepers. We have no indication that anyone said, “Thank you for saving our lives.” No indication that anyone even allowed them back within the city walls. The biblical author has no interest in whether they were ever able to dig up the gold and silver and create a new life for themselves in Mesopotamia or in South America. They simply vanish from the narrative.

Let me suggest some applications of this narrative. The terms “liminality” and “marginality” are standard fixtures of contemporary academic discourse in psychology, sociology, anthropology, literature, religion. I know of no better exemplification of these terms—being situated in a crucial position, on the threshold of something new but not quite capable of attaining it, and being consigned to the periphery of an entity that is too important to abandon but will not permit proper

participation—than these four lepers at the gate of the besieged city. They obviously feel connected with their native society despite its mistreatment of them. Their access to the camp of the Other is what enables them to save their own people. Yet once their contribution has been made, they are forgotten, no longer on the agenda, a footnote of history.

As a historian focusing primarily on the Jews in the medieval and early modern periods, it has occurred to me that this image of the lepers in the gateway outside the walls is not a bad representation for some aspects of Jewish historical experience. As the medieval historian R.I. Moore has argued in his book, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Jews, lepers, and heretics were all subjected to dramatically intensified segregation, humiliation, and persecution in the High Middle Ages. Indeed, Moore writes that “For all imaginative purposes, heretics, Jews and lepers were interchangeable. They had the same qualities, from the same source, and they presented the same threat: through them the Devil was at work to subvert the Christian order and bring the world to chaos” (p. 65).

But the link between the historical Jewish experience and the lepers at the gates in our Haftarah is not entirely negative, as victims of intolerance and persecution. Never fully accepted into the medieval societies, our ancestors were kept on the threshold—no matter how deeply the Spanish Jews identified themselves with Iberia, or the Persian Jews with Iran. Their contributions to the economies and to the cultures of the countries in which they lived were accepted, but these contributions rarely changed their fundamental status, and in times of increasing fanaticism, paranoia, and intolerance, the Jewish contributions were quickly forgotten.

Yet it was precisely this marginality—being part of an environment yet not fully part, having roots in a society yet also roots elsewhere, sharing in the ethos and values of a culture, yet retaining loyalty to a different, competing set of values—that has enriched both Jewish life and the lives of the nations where Jews have lived.

My recent book on American and British Jewish preaching in times of war during the 19th and 20th centuries often poignantly exemplifies the dynamics of this interaction. It is only in the modern period, since the late 18th century, that Jewish soldiers have been conscripted into European armies, and have fought other Jewish soldiers in the armed forces of the enemy. Within the scope of Jewish history, it is relatively recently that Jewish populations as a whole felt a deep and shared connection with the decisions of their governments to go to war.

The evidence suggests that before a war began, Jewish religious leaders often spoke out strongly in favour of avoiding war through negotiation and arbitration, or keeping their country out of the hostilities being fought by others. Yet once the decision to go to war was made, virtually all Jewish religious leaders (like most but not all of their Christian colleagues), decided to suppress their misgivings, support the government’s war effort, demonstrate their loyalty through powerful rhetorical support for the war and even outright condemnation of proposals for what they considered to be a premature peace short of total victory. One senses that these leaders were so grateful that they and their people had been allowed inside the gate of

the body politic that they felt compelled to demonstrate their loyalty in such critical circumstances.

Before Vietnam, it was the rare exception of the Jewish pacifist who felt secure enough to speak out in criticism of the government policy. In the past generation, by contrast, many Jews have played a leading role in publicly subjecting government decisions about war and peace to the scrutiny of our distinctive value system. Perhaps this arose from a conviction in the benefits of liminality, in retaining an alternative set of values from which to judge the decisions of governments and national leaders.

On this Shabbat, we stand on the threshold of Pesach. All of us at our seders will be encountering the number four: four questions, four children, four cups of wine. In this spirit, let us remember also the first four words of our Haftarah, *arba'ah anashim hayu metsora'im*—not the “four lepers”, totally defined by their disease, but the “four human beings who were lepers”—and the contribution they once made to the history of Israel by being on the threshold, and exploring the camp of the Other—a contribution probably soon forgotten in our original context, but eternalized in its selection for this Haftarah.