

Parashat Naso sermon June 2018

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Parashat Naso is the longest Torah portion of the year, and there's a lot to choose from. So I'd like to concentrate on one single letter. On page 794, on the third line, in the second-to-last word, it's the letter *hay*. Remember that Sam Glaser song, "I just wanna find my letter in the Torah"? Well I found it, and there it is. *Hay*, it's a good letter, right?

Now let's put that letter in context: G-d tells Moses to instruct the Israelites, starting at the bottom of page 793, "send away from the camp everyone with an eruption or a discharge, or anyone defiled by a corpse" (Numbers 5:3). That's what *Etz Hayim* says; I rather like the archaic translation in the Hertz Chumash, which says "put out of the camp every leper, and every one that hath an issue, and whosoever is unclean by the dead." Maybe we've never seen a leper, and no one has died in our house, but we call identify with "everyone that hath an issue"—I mean we all have issues sometimes, don't we?

Maybe we actually do. Let's look at how common these 3 forms of contamination might be. First, *tzara'at*: it's not leprosy, but some common group of scaling rashes, presumably including psoriasis and eczema, so that's maybe 5 to 10% of the population, right off the top. "Issue" or "discharge" is genital discharge, which happens to half the population every 28 days, and the other half unpredictably. And in a world in which people died at home, corpse contamination would happen to anyone several times during his or her life. So at any timepoint, it seems like a large number of Israelites, a significant minority of the population, would be hanging out outside the camp—or outside the gates of the city—waiting for some defilement to wear off so they could get back in.

To see where my special letter *hay* fits in, let's see what reason is given for keeping contaminated people out. G-d asks Moses to say, on G-d's behalf: "Put those contaminated people out so that they don't defile the camp, where I dwell." Now for some grammatical details: Since Moses is being told by G-d to address the Jewish people, you'd expect it to say "Put those contaminated folks out so they don't defile *your* camp, where I dwell with you." 'Your camp' would be the word *machaneichem*, with a *chaf* as the second-to-last letter. But instead of the expected *chaf*, there's an unexpected *hay*—that's that letter we're focusing on—making the word *machaneihem*. Either it's a scribal error, or it means something.

Let's stop for a moment and imagine that we're medieval Jews, for whom the *gematria*, the numerical value of letters, was the obvious way to do a close reading of text. Seeing a *chaf*, with a value of 20, replaced by a *hay*, with a value of 5, raises a red flag because the difference is 15. 15 is *yud hay*, the two-letter name of G-d, so the distinction between the two words must be something theological. Now let's go back to our modern reading: the translation with

*machaneihem* is “Put those contaminated folks out so they don’t defile *their* camp.” That would seem to ascribe ownership of the camp to those excluded from it. Read to the end of the verse, and it sure looks like that’s the correct reading. The last word is *b’tocham*, “with them,” so the literal translation is “...so that *they* don’t defile *their* camp, where I dwell *with them*.” Even though they’re excluded, contaminated people still seem to have an ownership interest in the camp, and G-d seems to have chosen to dwell among the sometimes-defiled.

That fits with the idea that exclusions are meant to be temporary, and it supports the thesis that people with rashes, discharges, and corpse contamination were full members of the community, just temporarily excluded. Maybe constant rotation through short periods of exile was meant as a training exercise: for a people whose history would be punctuated with long exiles, perhaps it made sense for them to limber up, to flex their ‘exile muscles’ with frequent short-interval exiles, so they’d stay in shape for the longer ones, which—who knows?—might last centuries.

It also perhaps suggests a special relationship between Hashem and the contaminated person, and that points to a harrowing story we read once a year, Haftarat Metzora. It’s one of the dominant haftarot, namely when Metzora is combined with another parashah, Tazria, the haftarah for Metzora takes precedence and the other haftarah just isn’t read that year. This says that, in the view of the rabbinic Curriculum Committee, it’s an important story that teaches some core lesson. So let’s review it—if you want to follow in the *Etz Hayim*, it starts on page 676.

4 Jewish lepers are starving to death outside the gates of the walled city of Samaria, *Shomron*, which is besieged by the Aramean army. Conditions inside the besieged city are shockingly desperate, to the point of cannibalism, with mothers squabbling over the meat of their slaughtered children. The lepers, outside the city, decide to stop waiting for death where they are, so they make the desperate choice to walk towards the camp of the merciless enemy, figuring that if they are enslaved, they might survive, and if they are killed, then at least it’ll be over soon. As they approach the Aramean camp, it is eerily quiet. No spears or arrows greet them as they shuffle across the open ground, stumbling over the stumps that were once orchards of fruit trees; as they approach the Aramean perimeter, there are no hails from hostile sentries. Improbably, they enter the enemy camp unchallenged...and they find it deserted. The narrator then explains that G-d panicked the Arameans with a noise like an attacking army from one of the really big powers, the Hittites or the Egyptians, and the Arameans fled for their lives, leaving all their provisions in the camp.

The Jewish lepers go from tent to tent, filling their bellies and their purses, and then carrying away some loot and hiding it, following the natural priorities: immediate needs—eat; short-term needs—take what you can carry; and then longer-term needs—bury some treasure

for later. Once their needs are out of the way, the climax of this brief episode occurs, as moral awareness dawns. The lepers turn to each other and say *lo chen anachnu 'osim*—"we are not behaving properly." Now what could "behaving properly" possibly mean, in this nightmare time and place, where social etiquette of any kind is a distant memory? It turns out to mean responsibility to their fellow Jews, the same ones who excluded them from the besieged city of Samaria. So back they go to the city gate, and they tell the gatekeepers, who tell the king, who sends messengers, who return with confirmation, and then there's a stampede of famished Jews out of the city and the story abruptly cuts off--and we never find out what happened to our lepers. Are they somehow decontaminated in the eyes of their fellow Jews, the residents of Samaria? Clearly not, because even when they had spectacular news for the king, the lepers never presumed to, nor were allowed to, enter the city. But now that normalcy has returned, will the Samaritans care more for their impoverished, leprous brethren who brought them lifesaving news? Will there be a ceremony in which the mayor of Shomron delivers an oversize key on a green ribbon, giving the lepers the 'freedom of the city'? Is Shomron now *machaneihem*, their camp, the city that belongs to the ones recently excluded from it? Morally yes, but in practice no. Samaria is full of wicked Israelites, led by the wicked king Jehoram, and once their bellies and purses are full, they will return to their old ways.

In that sense it's a depressing story, in which the only winner is the prophet Elisha, who predicted the end of the siege, and no one believed him, and now he is proved right, and his stock as a prophet has risen 35% since Thursday's close. But think of it from the viewpoint of the lepers, who know nothing and care less about Elisha and his predictions. This dramatic reversal of fortune seems to have occurred for their sake, and not only that: they know they got a tough moral test, and they know they passed it. G-d looked down from Heaven and chose them, the outcasts, the least of men, to bring the good tidings of salvation. If this sounds vaguely familiar when put that way, it's because this theme is echoed, in a gentler and simpler form, by our Christian cousins in the Gospel of Luke, where poor shepherds shivering on the hills at night get tidings of the Messiah's birth from angels, and they rush to the city to proclaim the good news.

But back to the darker and more ambiguous world of our Jewish lepers. The rabbis of the Talmud [Sanhedrin 107b] add an additional layer to the story when they announce that these aren't just nameless lepers; they are Gehazi and his 3 sons. This is what's called a closed-canon reading: because there is only one permanent, unredeemable Jewish leper named in the Bible, the lepers of Shomron must be that man and his sons. Of course this wasn't originally a story about Gehazi; he is only brought in because someone had the compulsion to match every unnamed character in the Bible with a named character—that's the closed-canon part. But remember that since the year 500CE or so, Jews everywhere have read this story with knowledge of Talmud, and therefore with Gehazi in mind. So if the spirit of Judaism is in Jewish

practice and the oral Torah, then this story *is* about Gehazi, as surely as if his name were on the title page.

So who was Gehazi? He was the prophet Elisha's right-hand man: servant, apprentice, and prophet-in-training. If things had gone well, Gehazi would be third in the line of major prophets extending from Elijah to Elisha to Gehazi. But things didn't go well. When Elisha cured Na'aman, the Aramean general, of leprosy by having him bathe in the River Jordan, he demanded no payment from Na'aman, but just said "Go in Peace." A demonstration of Israelite 'soft power' might well keep the Aramean wolf from the door, the wolf in this case being Na'aman's boss, King Ben-Haddad. But Gehazi, greedy and short-sighted, ran after Na'aman and demanded payment, which was happily provided. Elisha found out and cursed Gehazi with permanent leprosy, the same curse he had lifted from Na'aman. The Talmud portrays Gehazi as unrepentant and unregenerate (Sanhedrin 107b), and he is listed as one of the 7 characters in the Tanach who have no part in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 90a). And by the way, his 3 sons knew he would demand a bribe and didn't stop him, so they shared his fate. Hence 4 lepers at the gates of Samaria.

Grafting the figure of Gehazi onto the nameless lepers adds even more moral force to that story. Imagine that it's Gehazi—critically flawed, unrepentant, justly cursed, broken in body and now in spirit as well, utterly devoid of hope—waiting for death outside Shomron, afflicted further by the reproaches of the sons he has failed as a parent and role model. And then G-d--the G-d whose ways are true--makes a miracle for Gehazi's sake, a miracle that includes a moral challenge, and astoundingly, Gehazi rises to the challenge. It's like the story of Job, but even more extreme because the hero, Gehazi, is unrighteous and unattractive, and because he remains cursed despite his moral reversal.

It seems like a somber, almost nihilistic message: Gehazi was chosen to witness the miracle and to announce the people's salvation; Gehazi was tested and not found wanting; Gehazi and his sons deserved the keys to their city, to *machaneihem*, but there is no reward, and no one will even remember. No one except Gehazi, now somehow improved by the demonstration that he still has a *yetzer hatov*--a good inclination--and the Source of memory itself, which is G-d. And who else will remember? Every single Jew who reads this haftarah, once a year for 1,500 years and counting. The rabbis have thus transmuted this fragmentary anecdote in the career of Elisha into a towering moral lesson that ranks alongside G-d's handling of Job and G-d's treatment of Cain, and by putting the lesson into the memory of every Jew, they have also provided a kind of happy ending, Jewish-style. The story of Gehazi at the Gate of Shomron comes to suggest that, to use the words of President Lincoln, the mystic chords of memory, stretching from every letter in the Torah to every Jewish heart in this broad world of exile, will yet swell the chorus of 'Am Yisrael, when touched, as surely they will be, by

the better angels of our nature, by the *yetzer hatov*. To put that in modern terms: however far you stray or fall, *t'shuvah* is an option. You can always repent, or turn back. G-d is looking out specifically for you, performing miracles (or at least coincidences) for your benefit, and holding open the door of *t'shuvah*. You may be defiled, degraded, disengaged, self-excommunicated; you may think you have seceded from the Jewish People. But the Torah says, and it's right there, in the second-to-last letter of the second-to-last word of the third line on page 794—the camp in which G-d chooses to dwell belongs to the people temporarily exiled from it. Hashem, Maker of the world and Lord of all, waits with infinite patience for Gehazi. *Machaneihem*, not *machaneichem*. That letter *hay* is no scribal error; it's a theological principle.

And a principle which has implications for us. This synagogue community, with its open doors, awaits the return of a number of people *to whom this synagogue belongs*, as much or more than it belongs to those of us here today. It's a long list of temporary exiles and absentee owners, and you can name them better than I: the sister who is too busy; the spouse who just can't take all that "G-d stuff" seriously; the old regular who has drifted away. I know well one of a large group of exiles, a child who has not stepped foot in synagogue since his bar mitzvah. We named him *Gil'ad*, Gilead, and true to the name he likes to stay on the other side of the Jordan. But I believe with perfect faith that a day will come when that young man will walk through those doors voluntarily and reclaim his patrimony. I was a temporary exile once, not so many years ago; many of you were too, and as today's reading points out, the idea of temporary exile was built into the fabric of Judaism from the very first. As was that other core principle, exile's return.