

Senior Sermon

Amy Berenson

Delivered at HUC: Thursday, March 31st, 2011

The meeting began at two thirty in the afternoon. The members of the group “From Strength to Strength, Spiritual Support during the Economic Downturn” arrived early. We had been meeting bi-weekly for the past 6 weeks, some of the group members were new and others were returning. In the previous meeting we spoke about the challenges that would arise for the group members at their Seder tables. I sat down across the table from my co-leader and he signalled to me that it was time to begin.

“Today we will be studying Pirke Avot-there is a quotation that corresponds to every day of the Omer. Since we have just started counting the Omer, we thought we’d begin this afternoon by asking you, what do you count in your lives?”

“Hi, my name is Joan, I’ve been coming to this group for a couple of months now. I was optimistic the last time we met. I had just gone to an interview and I thought it went well. I still haven’t heard-I’ve counted the days since the interview. I can also tell you how many resumes I’ve sent out in the last week.”

“I’m David, I count the amount of hours I spend in front of my computer every day. I try to keep it to four or under, my computer begins to feel like a black hole if I sit in front of it for much longer.”

Distributed by JBFCS Jewish Community Services with permission of the author.

“I’m Jon, My mom likes to count the amount of resumes I send out every day-she calls and asks on her way home from work. When I go out at night with my friends they count the amount of things that I’m *not* doing to find a job. I came here today to get re-charged. I’m tired of being the son, and the friend who lost his job.”

After working with clients for over 6 months, I wondered, what if I were in their shoes? If I can’t find a job when I begin my Rabbinate next year, who will I be?

Our society defines individuals by the careers they choose or the work they do. What is the first or second question you ask when you meet someone new, What do you do for a living? When we go downstairs to the discussion today, before any of you make an announcement or ask a question, you will introduce yourself by your career path. When a person chooses to retire, decides to change careers or loses their job, a major piece of their identity is at stake. For those who want to be working and find themselves in a position where their jobs are taken away from them-their sense of self is diminished as they no longer know how to define themselves. We live in a world where our identities are intertwined with our professional lives. Our congregations have the potential to be sanctuaries of hope and strength within our judgemental society, where our work identities are recognized as only *one* piece of who we are.

Take a second to think about how you would define yourself without talking about your career.

Perhaps for a split second you began to understand the challenges for those who have experienced the trauma and identity shattering effects of job loss. In a world that wants to know what you do for a living, the richness of one's life is rarely the topic of discussion and infrequently honored. Our Torah portion this week, Tazria, sheds light for our communities today on the experience of stigmatized individuals.

Leviticus chapter 13 reads much like a diagnostic manual, the DSM BCE. When a person for the first time exhibits physical signs that differentiate him/her from those around them, and they find themselves losing control of their bodies, more than just their physical well being is at stake. They are taken to see the priest and immediately their sense of security in the role they play in their family, social life and work environment are at risk. If they are suspected of having *tzaraat*, they are placed in isolation where they remain and wait to find out what will happen next. For those who are immediately diagnosed with *tzaraat* there are no questions asked, it is clear that they need to be isolated from the community for an indefinite amount of time.

For a *metzora*, a person diagnosed with *tzaraat*, before they go into isolation they are commanded to tear their clothing, cover their mouths and walk around the community exclaiming, "tamei, tamei, impure, impure!"

Today we hear, "I am unemployed, I need help."

Like the newly diagnosed *metzora*, we notice the newly unemployed or under-employed, as our ancestors noticed the *metzora*, through their clothes. When they walk into our soup kitchen, we know who they are because they are not as dishevelled as our regulars. We've never met them before yet we know they went to work today and won't be paid until the end of the month. Others in similar situations come to our services or

adult education classes and they remain after to ask us if they can take some of the leftover food home with them. We are all stunned to find them in this situation.

If someone has a white patch on their skin but there is no white hair growing, there is a possibility that they have *tzaraat* so they are placed in isolation for seven days. These obscure dermatological details signal a significant change in an individual's life. The details that lead to one being counted among the unemployed determines how they are perceived by society. Like a person placed into isolation, there is often nothing that they have done to deserve to have lost their job. They are a sign of a larger communal problem. In biblical times the priests told them that their sacrifice was for the health of the greater community. When the priest visits them outside of the camp, if their skin clears up, as a precaution they are left in isolation for another seven days. Eventually they are allowed to re-enter the community. Their clothes must be washed because as Rachel Adler describes, *tzaraat* eats at the fibers of our universe.¹

Many of us know friends or relatives who lost their jobs two years ago. We all believed once the economy got stronger their sacrifice would be over and they would find new jobs, their lives would not change much. After living in isolation in their homes on their computers every day, many of them entered back into our community, but their shame and insecurities remained. They did not do anything to lose their jobs, it was a consequence of our economic downturn. They are under-employed today, their new jobs pay less, or they no longer have benefits. The government no longer counts them in the statistics for the unemployed, but they are constantly reminded of what they have lost.

¹ Adler, Rachel., pg. 142 in "Those Who Turn Away Their Faces: Tzaraat as Stigma," Ed. Cutter, Rabbi William, Phd. (Woodstock, Vt) 2007.

Leviticus makes distinctions between new and chronic cases of *tzaraat*. Yet, nowhere does it offer an explanation as to why someone developed *tzaraat*. Rashi and Rambam on the other hand, searched for reasons for the *metzora's* impurities. Building on midrashim, our sages asked, “What moral or spiritual failing may have caused this illness?” Playing with the linguistic similarity of the Hebrew *metzora* and the Hebrew for one who gossips, *motzi shem ra*, the sages considered *tzaraat* to be a punishment for the sins of slander and malicious gossip.² We too search for reasons to blame those in our communities for their chronic unemployment. We want to make sense of their condition and create distance between our lives and theirs. Sometimes, we realize chronic unemployment is the result of mental illness or substance abuse. When we find a reason for their condition we encourage them to access social services instead of being in relationship with our communities. We increase their sense of loss and despair.

The priests diagnostic manual taught our ancestors little about the psychological and physical pain of being classified as a *metzora*. This is where modern scholarship guides our learning today. Rachel Adler explains, “the *tzaraat* carrier loses her full humanity to the diagnostician and becomes a condition of patches and rashes of different colors. Indeed, the priestly code does not even mention that this condition is likely to be irritating or painful. Pain is just another feature of the *metzora's* overlooked subjectivity.”³ We overlook the pain of unemployment when we talk to our friends and family about their job search without recognizing their emotional loss that begs to be addressed. If we ask them about their mental health we feel as though we have crossed a boundary.

² Lev. R. 16.1

³ Adler, page. 147

In Biblical times, those diagnosed with *tzaraat* were isolated from the community. The priests would visit them, but we know little about their visit. Did they ask the *metzora* how they were coping? Did they reinforce their marginalization by only concentrating on their illness, or did they move back and forth from the community to the *metzora* relaying messages of strength and compassion, honoring the *metzora's* identity inside and outside of the camp?

Mary Douglas, an anthropologist, argues that all cultures have notions of impurity. She explains, “we want to know with certainty what the boundaries are that will keep us safe, let us know that we belong and certainty is very hard to come by. People who cross the boundaries or seem to be teetering on the edges remind us of the fragility, the vulnerability of both society and self.” We often resist reaching out to those who are struggling in our society not out of a disinterest or lack of compassion, but rather out of fear. If we recognize their pain, we also have to recognize our own insecurities, we come to realize that we could end up in the same situation. Learning how to care for those trying to hold their identities together while we contemplate our own lives is not an easy task.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that caring means recognizing our own anxiety. Truly seeing their pain will cause us pain, it will reach us in our core and shake everything that we have come to believe. When we identify with their pain and fear we often refer them to special groups that function outside of our walls, outside of the camp. Had the interactions of the *metzor'im* outside of the camp been recorded, they might have taught us how it is healthy to share our pain with each other. One goal of group therapy is to allow the group members to arrive at a state of empathic understanding of one another.

“Without a sense of the internal world of others, relationships are confusing, frustrating and repetitive.”⁴ Groups are incredibly powerful, but not everyone is willing or interested in joining one.

Our communities can mimic the social microcosm within a group if we create an atmosphere where empathic interactions take place every day. We can hear each other when pain is voiced, and let our modern day *metzor'im* know that they do not have to live outside of the camp. We can honestly share the fears that their job situation evokes in us, sharing our own uncertainty about the future. This can be done from the pulpit, in learning sessions, one on one meetings, or we can take a few minutes to call a congregant, a friend, or a family member who we know is struggling. The group that opened up this sermon took place at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services last spring. Individuals there are able to remain anonymous when they come for help. By initiating these types of conversations in our communities between the unemployed *and* the employed we break down the stigma and clearly convey to individuals that there is space for them *in* our communities. Before we are able to do any of this, we must acknowledge that there are many types of modern day *metzor'im* and they all live among us.

A recent article in the Jewish week, discussing UJA's Connect to Care initiative, explained that, “despite statistical evidence that the country is pulling out of the recession, it's largely a jobless recovery, and the people who come to Connect to Care, mostly 45 to 65 years old, are still out of work.” Our communities are filled with people who remember what it felt like to have a fulfilling career, to be able to pay their

⁴ Yalom, Irvin D., The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy 5th Edition, (Basic Books, NY, NY) 2005.

membership dues and send their children to our religious schools. Others never flinched at the cost of high holiday tickets, or inviting twenty or thirty friends over for a passover seder. They had a place in our community, today they find themselves unwilling to walk into our doors. Unsure about where they will be able to live out their spiritual lives, because our due structure does not fit into their budget, and the shame that we've reinforced does not allow them to ask for a decrease in fees.

The Jewish Outreach Institute understands the shame that one experiences in not knowing if they have a place in the Jewish community. This month they launched a campaign entitled "There's No Shame in Asking." This campaign both encourages those who are uncomfortable revealing their financial challenges to come forward, while teaching our communal institutions how to respond with compassion and understanding. It is our job to create communities where we are able to care for and be in relationship with those teetering on the margins of society.

In a few weeks from now, many of us will participate in congregational, communal and family seders. My group members will be sitting among us.

"Tonight we are going to begin our seder by asking all of you to share a way that you experience freedom in your life today."

"My name is Jon. This year my financial freedom was taken away from me. I lost my job six months ago. I felt a sense of relief and freedom when I received the letter last week about the congregation's new dues policy. I will give more when I'm employed, but

to know I can remain a member and pay only as much as I can afford now is a huge relief.”

“I can relate to how you feel. A few years ago I decided to cut back my hours at work so I could go back to school and eventually change careers. Well, my company changed my career path for me when they had cutbacks and they decided to lay off all of their part time employees. I didn’t think I’d be able to celebrate the second night with the temple tonight because of the cost. I called the office and they told me they had recently implemented a sliding scale for events, and whatever I could pay would be enough. Their response made me feel relieved, and proud to belong to this community.”

“You know, when I lost my job fifteen years ago, it was the hardest time in my life. This year when I retired I felt a sense of loss that I did not expect. It’s amazing how our jobs can define who we are. My grandchildren do not even know the way that I used to define myself, as a CEO. They know me as their challah baker, because when I visit them we always prepare shabbat dinner together.”

“I love coming here to visit my father’s congregation, but my partner didn’t want to sit among a group of strangers tonight, he is searching for a job. Our home community is not willing to talk about financial challenges on a personal level, and to be honest, it’s been tough for me as well to watch him feel so alone.”

At our seders, people like Jon will look around the room and realized they feel more freedom than they have in weeks. Stigmatized by society at large, in our

congregations they will feel the freedom to ask for support and live among others who know them as a multi faceted individual. Those who sit around our seder tables will understand that the strength and hope that they receive and offer to one another will be hard to find outside of the synagogue walls. They will feel no need to hide, no sense of shame, rather a contagious recognition that in our synagogues, our multi dimensional selves, not just our professional identities, are what allow us all to enrich our community.