

The Four Lepers - Haftara for Parashat Metzora:

Can We Accept An Imperfect Geula?

The Haftara this week tells an exciting and miraculous story. The Northern Kingdom (Yisrael) is under a crushing siege by the Aramean army. There is no food. The horrors of siege have fully set in as people have descended to cannibalism in order to relieve their hunger!

And then, suddenly God saves the people, in miraculous turn of events, by frightening the enemy camp. But no-one realises that the enemy have fled. It is a group of four lepers, societal outcasts, who actually discover that the enemy have deserted their positions. Rejected from society, they try their luck with the Arameans assuming that since they will die of hunger anyhow. - Who knows? Maybe the Arameans will spare their lives? They arrive at the enemy camp and find it deserted. Soon afterwards, they return to the city to announce the good news to the desperate people, including the king.

RACHEL

The famous modern Hebrew poet, Rachel, wrote this powerful poem based upon our Haftara. (She wrote "Hatishma Koli" and "Kinneret sheli" and she lived a very personally tragic life amidst the joy of the Second Aliya and Kibbutz Degania. She is buried at Kibbutz Kinneret and Nomi Shemer who put many of her poems into songs is buried close by.) She writes:

בשכבר הימים האויב הנורא
שומרון הביא במצור את
ארבעה מצורעים לה בשרו בשורה.

כולה כשומרון במצור - כל הארץ
וכבד הרעב מנשוא
אך אני לא אובה בשורת גאולה
תבוא אם מפי מצורע היא.

הטהור יבשר, יגאל הטהור
- אם ידו לא תמצא לגאול
לנפול ממצוקת המצור אז נבחר לי
"אור ליום בשורה הגדול".

For a long while the dreadful enemy
Brought Samaria to siege;
Four lepers to her brought tidings.
To her brought the tidings of freedom.

A Samaria under siege - the entire land,
The famine is too hard to bear.
But I will not want news of freedom,

If it comes from the mouth of a leper.

The pure will bring news and the pure will redeem,
And if his hand won't be there to redeem,
Then I will choose to die from the suffering of the siege,
On the eve of the day of the great tidings.

Now, what is she saying? Very clearly, she is relating to the connection between the means and the end. Rachel is a perfectionist. She would prefer to choose to die from the suffering of the siege rather than accept the tidings of redemption from one who is not worthy to do so.

Is this a Jewish perspective? Fascinatingly, the Gemara in one aggadic passage^[1] suggests that the Mashiach is a leper! On this basis, I would say that Judaism does not always present Geula, salvation, as perfect. There is redemption EVEN by a leper!

EXAMINING THE STORY

To my mind, however, our Haftara expresses a more complex message. Indeed, the lepers are the tools of redemption. One wonders why? Interestingly as the story progresses, they undergo a transformation. At first, they are only looking out for themselves, and they eat and drink. Suddenly they turn and begin to think about the starving masses in the city, and they realise their sin.

From one angle, this is exactly the movement that we anticipate from the leper as he is ejected from the city. Obviously, the lepers are afflicted by God, and hence rejected from the community for some anti-social sin (Lashon Hara, haughtiness, stinginess etc.) Part of their "exile" as it were is that they sit outside the town and ponder their place within, and their responsibilities to the collective.

But here is the unexpected part. Precisely their outside view allows them to see the redemption clearer than the masses! It is certainly ironic that their distance allows them to see God's salvation more clearly. Interestingly, there is another story in Massechet Berachot (54a-b) where the lepers realise God's miracle, whereas the people fail to see it. Are we saying that sometimes the problem is IN society and not outside it? Or are we simply saying that even the outsider, the sinner might be the harbinger of the Geula? Many questions are opened up here.

RAV AHRON SOLOVEICHIK

Rav Ahron Soloveitchik, the Rav's brother, referred to this chapter in an article entitled "Israel's Independence Day: Reflections in Halachah and Hashkafa." Here he reads our Perek along the same lines that we have presented:

"We thus see that the miracle of the deliverance of all the inhabitants of Samaria was carried out through the medium of four lepers: physical lepers, yes, but above all, spiritual lepers. (According to our Sages, these four outcasts were none other than Gehazi and his three sons, who were afflicted with leprosy as a penalty for their spiritual heresy. The Rambam in his Commentary to the Mishnah in the last chapter of Sanhedrin describes them as cynics and scoffers.)

The first argument, as to how any relief for the Jewish people could be realized through the medium of apikorsim (non-believers), can easily be rebutted by the precedent of the deliverance accorded the people of Samaria through the medium of the four lepers. This episode shows that no Jew can be excluded from the grace of God, that Yisrael af al pi shechata, Yisrael hu - a Jew, even though he has sinned, remains a Jew, and that there is an innate tendency towards altruism even in the heart of spiritual lepers.

It also shows that God does not exclude any Jew from salvation and He may therefore designate even spiritual outcasts as the messengers of relief and deliverance for the people of Israel. Consequently, we cannot ignore the significance of the establishment of the State of Israel simply because Jews who stand a substantial distance from any form of observance of mitzvos were at the forefront of founding the State. Perhaps the fact that nonobservant Jews are in the forefront today is a penalty for Orthodox Jewry's failure to play the most important part in the formation of the State."

THE CONTEXT IN SEFER MELACHIM

I believe that it is exactly the notion of a flawed Geula that lies at the heart of this story. It is precisely a salvation for a lepered nation. At this point in History, Israel is suffering attack and invasion (from Aram.) It would appear that this national weakness is a punishment for the sins of the generation of Achav. To this end, the entire nation is subjected to a state of prolonged suffering. Elisha's miracles are more of an inspiration than a salvation. This story fits exactly into the rhythm of these years of "hester panim" in which even our major victories, however miraculous, fail to raise us. Maybe the lesson that Am Yisrael have to learn is to turn their society around and learn the lessons of OUR affliction, allowing ourselves to act differently and change the national priorities.

A flawed Geula fits a flawed reality. Rav Amital once said that after the Holocaust we are prepared to accept even a Geula that is not a *Geula Shelema*, as long as the Galut indeed comes to an end! He is a Holocaust survivor, and to that end feels that sense of desperation that is described in this chapter.

And yet, I feel that OUR generation, born amongst comfort and hope, want to see a perfect Geula, just as the poet Rachel writes!

Shabbat Shalom!

Notes

[1] The Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) tells the following story. It relates how R. Joshua b. Levi, a scholar of second century C.E., meets the Prophet Eliyahu. He asks Eliyahu when the Messiah will come, to which he replies, "Ask him." "But where is he?" says R. Joshua. "He is at the entrance," is the reply. And how shall I recognize him?". To which Elijah responds, "He is the man who is bandaging the wounds of the lepers one by one." (As Rashi ad loc. explains, the significance of this unusual way of operating is that the Messiah must be ready at any moment to respond to a call from on high.) So R. Joshua goes over and asks that man, "When is it that the Master will come?" He replies, "Today!" R. Joshua returns to Elijah and told him, "He lies: he said 'today' but he does not come." Elijah answers him that it is indeed today "if you would indeed heed His charge this day." (Psalms 95:7).