

## Shabbat Parashat Tazri'a-M'tzora Who Are Our Lepers?

In the ancient world, leprosy was considered to be a plague being inflicted upon an individual as a consequence for one's sins. God singled out that person for punishment, to be made an example of for the entire community to see. The physical result was temporary quarantine from the camp; the religious result was a status of ritual impurity requiring observation, cleansing, sacrifices, and return to ritual purity facilitated by a Kohen/Priest. These consequences and regulations are clearly outlined in the text of this week's double *parasha*. However, what is not included are the social consequences of coming down with a case of leprosy, or any other illness or condition that would cause an individual to be unwelcome and removed from the general population.

How many of us have ever felt like we were not welcome within a group? Back in school, it may have been because we were not "cool" enough, were not wearing the chic brand name of clothing, or were not into the latest fad. As adults, perhaps it is due to socio-economic class, profession, or style of dress. In given generations, entire groups of people become categorized as a society's lepers. In a world where closeness and a feeling of community is becoming more and more difficult to construct, we always seem to find ways to make others feel unwelcome or "quarantined" from the "camp." Sometimes it is done unintentionally, but many times it is quite deliberate indeed. All we need to do is look at the tragedies of teen suicides resulting from extreme cases of bullying (a form of "social excommunication" in the modern world) over the past year and more to know that this is true.

One of the goals of this week's *parasha* is to force us to sympathize with contemporary "lepers" and to remind us of how hard it is to be an "outsider" and of how critical it is for us to find ways to break down the barriers that exclude individuals and groups from the community. The *parasha* details the rituals necessary to bring a healed leper back into the camp. What "medications" do we have at our disposal to heal those that have been kept at arms length (or farther) from the general population or from our smaller communities? At his or her core, each and every human being is essentially the same. We are all made up of the same life-giving components and are all **made in the image and spirit of God**. It is our charge to welcome people with open arms, not wave them off with the proverbial "open hand" as a result of a subjective external characteristic that we ourselves have determined. We will truly be a "community" when "lepers" are no longer excluded from our camps.

Shabbat Shalom!