

Parashat Tazri-a – M'tzora

April 28, 2012 – Hazzan Neil Schwartz

Parashat *Tazria - M'tzora* has long been considered a difficult *Parasha* for Torah commentary. It contains detailed regulations and procedures for skin diseases and for fungal infections of items and even entire buildings. It appears as if the ancient Priests are acting as primitive doctors for the Israelite people.

Perhaps because of this subject matter, our commentators looked for something more edifying in this otherwise dry subject matter. They found it by declaring that the word “*m'tzora*” can be considered an abbreviation for three Hebrew words: “*Motzi Shem Ra*”, which translates as “to bring a bad name”, or in plain English, slander and malicious gossip.

How appropriate it is that this *Parasha* should be read when we have recently concluded our community observance of *Yom HaShoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Last week we had a Dachau survivor speaking at our Holocaust Memorial Service, and there were exhibits throughout our building that traced the course of the Holocaust. In these exhibits, prepared by our *Shlichim*, were some connections between the Holocaust and this interpretation of slander in today's *Parasha*.

We can sum up the Rabbinic reinterpretation of *m'tzora* as slander and gossip by considering the following view of our ancient Rabbis: **When we speak ill of someone, especially if we are telling untruths, it is as if we are murdering that person.** We are destroying their reputation, which leads to the very real possibility that we may be destroying their lives.

There have been stories on the Internet about teenagers who were bullied so severely that they committed suicide. When Ari Avivi was speaking to four groups of visiting students over two days, 2000 students in all, he pointed out the connection

between bullying and the Holocaust. He also challenged the students to speak up when others are being slandered.

In our Holocaust exhibits of previous years, there were some posters of modern anti-Semitic slander against the Jews of today, and it does not look much different from that of the Nazis in the 1930's. There are websites filled with such hatred of us Jews, one wonders how anyone can read them.

We were slandered as a Jewish People back then, based on centuries of European anti-Semitism which became a vicious tool in the hands of the Nazis. The relevant term is "dehumanization"; the Germans were taught to see us Jews as less than human, and therefore easy to exterminate.

However, it is still going on. We Jews are accused of staging the 9-11 attacks in New York and Washington, and the anti-Semitic "*Protocols of the Elders of Zion*" are easily obtained in bookstores throughout much of the supposedly civilized world. "*Motzi Shem Ra*" - slander and malicious gossip, in the hands of 20th century Nazis and some 21st century Arabs and Europeans, can have tragic consequences.

So what can we learn from this for our own lives? The most important lesson that our commentators want us to take from today's Torah Portion is the idea that *we should not engage in slander and gossip ourselves*. If we can set an example of avoiding these evils, then we have the right to speak up when other people engage in slander about us Jews or anyone else.

It is not easy to avoid gossip, and in fact that is one of the communal sins for which we ask forgiveness on *Yom Kippur*. However, words have the power to hurt or to heal, as this community knows very well. Let us accept the challenge of today's *Parasha*, and make sure that our words do not hurt.