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Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington, VT

QUARANTINE, SOCIAL DISTANCING AND THE ETHICS OF CONTAGION IN THE TORAH

This week's Torah portion, Tazria-Metzorah is all about contagion, epidemics, social distancing, and quarantine. It is focused on what to do about a mysterious outbreak of an illness called "Tzara'a't." It is often translated as "leprousy" but is not what we today call leprosy or Hansen's Disease. It starts on the skin, but can also infect the walls of a house, and even old stones. The portion is focused on how to prevent the disease from spreading. It is eerily familiar to us now.

That isn't usually true. Almost every time I've studied this portion in classes or Torah Study, the reaction is often one that sees the ancient law as uncaring, cold, and discriminatory against those who are suffering from illness. We often feel that the ancients were stigmatizing those who happened to get ill, and as modern people, we don't like that. It flies in the face of our desire to be empathetic and supportive of those who are ill.

But as we are learning, what might seem cruel in normal times, seems quite sensible these days. It turns out that the ethics of empathy can differ profoundly from the ethics of public health, especially during an epidemic. Our tradition focuses on support for the marginalized, the oppressed, the ostracized, but here those moves to know the 'heart of the oppressed because we were oppressed in Egypt' no longer apply. This isn't about oppression; it is about contagion, and there in order to protect the community and the greater good, individuals and homes must be cut off from the community.

As Rabbi Spock said, "the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one."

In the US, we tend to place individual freedoms as the highest good. The right to think what we think, to get together with people we like to get together with, to go where we want is sacred in American civil religion. We believe that the collective good is better served by such freedoms than by coercion and conformity.

At times like this, times of epidemic this individualism creates significant conflicts and tensions. Our usual ethics don't apply in the face of an enemy that is no human bias, but a virus. Suddenly, what is most sacred – LIFE – is threatened by the very freedoms we understand as 'inalienable.' We need to approach this sort of epidemic, says our Torah and our scientists today, with a different sort of ethics – an ethics of public health; of protecting one another *even if it means limiting our freedoms*. As Judaism teaches, nothing is more important than saving a life, so all other rules are forfeit when life is threatened by plague.

That is why the comments of our President today about injecting disinfectants to help with the virus, that still say we should open up, that encourage protesters against staying home- that is

why they are so upsetting. They threaten lives. They fundamental our most basic belief – that life is sacred and that all people are created with inherent value.

While the Bible is NOT science, and as relevant as this week's parasha is, it is also not 'science' as we understand it. Indeed, much in the Bible seems to us superstitious and even dangerous. Making sacrifices to end an epidemic is not repeatable and verifiable.

Indeed, Reform Judaism grows out of a reaction against that sort of supernatural magical thinking. Our tradition was founded in a time when science and reason was blossoming - the Enlightenment. Reform Judaism was founded on the primacy of reason, science, intellect. The movement called the Wissenschaft des Judentums, the Science of Judaism. Our tradition believed that God created us with intelligence and the ability to reason, and felt that we therefore have a sacred duty to use that God-given intelligence and reason to make our lives better. When reason and belief come into conflict, it is our beliefs that must adjust to facts because our ability to recognize facts and discover them is part of being made in the image of God.

Today, we are living through a dangerous attack on science and on knowledge, many in the name of religious beliefs, or magical thinking, or just 'my gut tells me.' Emotional thinking and the impulse to discard facts when they conflict with something we think is dangerous, particularly now. It is also a profound form of ego to think one's gut knows more than decades of disciplined science. As Jews we should remember that emotional thinking has often resulted in violence against us.

So we must, as our Torah portion displays, quarantine people who are ill with infectious diseases, and we must be vigilant and strict for the sake of the greater good.

But this doesn't mean we can't be empathetic and caring to those impacted. While we must use reason to save lives, we must use our hearts to do what we can to help those at greatest risk. That is why our congregation through our Chaverim Committee and Social Action Committee are stepping up. We have people now sewing masks for grocery store workers and others who are vulnerable. If you are interested in helping, get in touch with Deb Leopold. Our Social Action Committee is working to get food to people in need, and to get food for the local Food Shelf. If you can give money, or fill up a bag with groceries, we have volunteers who will come pick it up and take it to the Food Shelf. We will be having a blood drive coming up. So if you want to help, please let us know. We need you.

If we do these things – quarantining but also working to help those in greatest need, we'll get by "with a little help from our friends." And then, when we can get together again, we will be able to... well, get by with our friends.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon. Shabbat shalom.