

Parshat Tazria
"When Things Fall Apart"
April 13, 2018

About birth: A bad joke from Carol Burnett on how men don't comprehend the first thing about it.

A man goes up to Carol Burnett and asks if she can describe the pain associated with childbirth. He says, "Really, how bad can it be?" She says, "Okay, take your thumb and forefinger and pull on your upper lip." He does and says, "That's not so bad." She continues, "Now, pull it up and back over your head."

Our portion, Tazria, starts with birth and then moves on to disease. There are challenging notions about women and birthing in the Torah, written by men and, in our day, questioned by women. I, for one, having watched Barbara give birth twice, do not feel in any way capable of describing her experience as involving blood impurity, as the Torah says. Actually, the less I say about this, the better.

The disease part of our portion is equally difficult to understand in its setting, much less apply it to our own. The Torah seems to be saying that diseases of the skin and body are the result of God's displeasure and only God's representatives, the priests, are authorized to diagnose, quarantine, and, ultimately declare healthy, those who fall sick. Only the priest can administer the ritual, which involves oil and sacrificial blood. Then, and only then, can the afflicted one re-enter the community without endangering them.

I admit, some of the most inspiring Torah teachings I have heard on this portion over the years have come from 13-year-old girls and boys who struggle with this text. They have interpreted these chapters early models for dealing with AIDS and other communicable diseases. Other young people have spoken of social isolation and the power that some have over others to determine popularity.

But, at its core, this portion deals with disease, or the state we endure when things go terribly, terribly wrong. The Torah makes sense of this by finding defect in our relationship with God. Modern medicine looks at germs, viruses, and other systemic organ issues to explain the defects we suffer from.

Every one of us in this room has suffered from something in our bodies that has gone terribly, terribly wrong, when things have fallen apart and we cannot even remember being well or our loved ones healthy. Even if we have been spectacularly fortunate and avoided crippling disease, someone in our intimate circle certainly has.

I have been called to countless bedsides at Shadyside, Presby, Allegheny General, St. Margaret's, Passavant, Mercy, Children's, St. Clair, Forbes Regional, Jefferson, and UPMC East over the last three decades. Although some simply want to chat, most everyone who is horizontal in a bed looking up at me, would like me to pray for them.

They endow me with trust, hope, and the faith that my presence, my words, my taking their hand in mine, will somehow aid them as things have fallen apart for them. Many do not believe in the power of prayer, but passionately accept the power of presence, the fear of facing pain, relentless disease, and hopelessness alone. I have sung *Mi Shebeirach*, our healing prayer, hundreds of times to so many, many people.

Some have improved, others found health again. Still others declined and eventually died, despite my good wishes, thoughts, and imploring prayers. To stand and watch someone die before your eyes, knowing that your prayers can't help the ill and won't comfort the family in their moment of despair is to wonder why one ever walked into the room, much less as a pastor, someone who supposedly is on a first name basis with God.

My friend, mentor, and teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, wrote an article years ago in which he was brave enough to tackle the problem of ineffective prayer — healing thoughts that don't heal, rituals that don't bring peace because the disease is going to win, and everyone knows it.

He writes of being confronted by someone who is filled with the faith that he knows he does not have. Mind you, Dr. Hoffman is professor of liturgy at our rabbinical school and has written two of our prayerbooks. He knows more about Jewish prayer than almost anyone in the world.

Listen to him:

(My daughter Shira, who suffers from severe epilepsy) is sleeping after a particularly hard day of seizures...and I drop in on the neighboring patient's room, where we have notice a mother sitting daily on her 17-year old's bed. The boy is multiply disabled, epileptic like Shira, but with a mental age of five. He sits endlessly stuffing a sponge rubber basketball into a net that has been affixed to his bed.

Out of nowhere, the mother inquires, "How's your faith?" — then nods toward her son and answers for herself, "If I didn't know he would some day sit at Christ's right hand, I couldn't go on. But he is made in the image of God, so how bad could he really be?"

The next day, Shira undergoes what will be the first of many brain resections, and as I stand by her bedside feeling her very considerable pain (as they have limited pain-killers after brain surgery) ...a nurse hands me a note. It is from the neighboring mother who says, "I pray your faith will be up to the task." I think often it is not. Maybe I should hand in my license to teach prayer if I don't really believe in it.

He continues:

If religion cannot end suffering, it should at least make suffering sufferable, we think.

*It should at least provide meaning, we imagine, since meaning is everywhere...Sickness obviously embeds **some** meaning...In the Land of the Well, a headache implies two kids at home with ear infections. In the Land of the Sick, it means a brain tumor...Patients (themselves) must integrate sickness into their ongoing (life story), another kind of meaning. But does sickness have the kind of **moral** meaning that responds to the transcendent question, "Why?"*

The sick hope so. They approach religion as if it were the Kabbalah, the mystical source of meaning, we rabbis the esoteric meaning makers.

(But) by and large, Shira hates the chaplains, who usually just make formal rounds to recited memorized prayers in the gibberish they call Hebrew. She jokes that she should be hospital-registered as "Zoroastrian" to avoid them...I watch well-meaning visitors have non-conversations with Shira. I ferry back and forth from shore to shore, on one side hospital and sickness, on the other, my rabbinical school and the news of the day which is less and less interesting.

Larry Hoffman is telling us that people who are truly absorbed in the land of the sick don't have a lot to say to those who are in the land of the well and vice versa. They use words so differently, they invest different meaning or none at all.

And us? How do we respond as visitors, as those passionately loving those in our lives who suffer? Do we insist that the sick heal us, temper our fear and anxiety, by putting on happy faces? Do we demand that they believe in the prayers for healing that are only faint hopes for us?

The Torah portion teaches that we suffer because of a defect in our connection with God and that relationship can be repaired. This is so hard, and we reject it almost automatically.

We know medicine. Medicine teaches us that germs win. Viruses win. Cancer wins, although less than it used to.

We might learn more about faith. Faith teaches us that prayer can lower a heartbeat, calm an anxious soul, but despite claims to the contrary, it cannot stop cancer cells from dividing.

What Hoffman finally concedes in his brutally honest critique of our faith in healing prayer is that it doesn't heal the disease, but it can heal our hearts. It can strengthen them to stand up to the defeat that we must accept far too many times during our lives. It can reduce our loneliness without ever underestimating the disease itself.

When I hear of people of faith regale me with studies claiming that 50% of those who have been prayed over regain their health, I can only stand in stunned silence. What about the other 50%? Did they have the misfortune of having the wrong prayer said over them? Did they not believe enough and so suffer punishment? The studies are so flawed as to not merit scientific consideration.

But they represent our deep desire to believe that there is something beyond chemotherapy and antibiotics to support us when we suffer.

And that, I accept.

The gifted physician and therapist Rachel Naomi Remen once offered to embrace a patient who had received a terrible diagnosis. The patient scoffed, saying, "I don't believe in all of that "kiss-the-boo-boo" stuff. It doesn't help my disease!"

Dr. Remen responded with infinite care, "No, of course, you're right. It never was intended to make everything ok. Embracing, kissing, holding, doesn't help with the disease. It helps with the loneliness and fear."

Toward the end of Tazria, our Torah portion, we read these words which make us recoil:

"As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be torn, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out 'Unclean, unclean!'"

And then we learn some wisdom from our rabbis, our teachers: They teach that there are situations in the Torah that we cannot apply to our own day. There are no more functioning priests in Judaism. There are no more sacrifices. Even this disease may not exist anymore.

So, we learn that it is vital to battle disease in the laboratory. It is just as essential to fight fear and loneliness with our presence and our prayer. I hope and pray for all those who are ill this Shabbat. I pray we might not make them worse with empty faith promises. I pray that we might unite in spirit of ease and comfort, and maybe healing might come and maybe it will not, but when things fall apart, we will stand together in love. We will stand together in love, even when things fall apart for ourselves and those we cherish. Those we love and cherish.

We sing: *Mi Shebeirach Imoteinu*...Bless those in need of healing with *refuah sh'leimah*, the renewal of body, the renewal of spirit, and let us say, amen.