

Metzora

Democracy, Conflict, and *Loshan Hora*

In the *Torah* portion *Metzora* we learn about a person who was stricken by a special disease. The rabbis say that this disease, although it resembles in some respects modern leprosy, was an entirely different disease than modern day leprosy. It was a disease which struck a person because he spoke evil. He gossiped about other people. He increased the level of conflict between people. We all know that conflict is inevitable in life because people see things from different perspectives, but conflict should be minimized. It should not be enhanced.

One of the reasons why democracy has proven to be the best system of governments is because democracy has a mechanism for resolving conflict. Democracy is not perfect. It is always going to be inefficient because it has overlapping authority. The President has power, the Congress has power, the judiciary has power, and these powers overlap and it is not quite clear where one branch of government's power begins and another branch of government's power ends. Therefore, there is always going to be a certain amount of confusion. However, democracy allows people with diverse views to live together in harmony because people do not have to take up arms if they feel put upon. All they have to do is wait for the next election. It is true that democracy is not always fair because the people who win the elections always try to help the people who put them there by giving them special advantages. After all, as Texas' former Governor Ann Richards said, "You dance with those that brung you." Those people who by their campaign contributions supported certain candidates expect these candidates to deliver, and these candidates usually will. They will deliver the policies that their backers want; otherwise, their backers would not have backed them in the first place and will not back them in the future. Of course, the party that gets in will favor its own backers. However, the backers had better be careful because their candidates may not win the next election if they go too far. If they have gone too far, then the other party will win the next election. We know that democracy is not a perfect form of government, but as Winston Churchill once said, "Democracy is a very poor form of government--but it is better than any other form of government." Before democracy there was not real way to resolve social con-

flict. It was not only in the emerging nations of Asia and Africa or Latin America that there were horrendous wars because there was no way to resolve conflict. After all, World War I and World War II were fought between civilized powers: England, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and later, the United States. These were not benighted people and World War II cost more lives than any other war. Some people say as many as 40 million people were killed in World War II. For sure, there were at least 20 million killed in World War II. That is a horrific number, so we see that even between so-called civilized peoples, unless they have a way of resolving their conflicts, conflicts will end in much bloodshed. That is why democracy is such a wonderful form of government. It is a wonderful form of government because it allows us to resolve at least within one nation conflict without bloodshed. It is not perfect, and it leads to a lot of raucousness and a lot of feelings of sometimes being put upon, especially if the group which gets in power does not at all heed the problems and needs of the group which did not vote for it. There will always be a certain amount of bitterness, but people will not resort to violence because they know that in the next election, they can turn these guys out and put their guys in.

However, democracy also has another drawback, and that is that since it requires votes from many varied groups for a candidate to win, the easiest way to get these votes is not to debate the issues but to negative campaign, to run down the other candidate, to bring up all sorts of negative stereotypes which you know will cause a red flag to go up in many voters' hearts and minds and will cause them to vote for your candidate instead of the other candidate despite their disagreement with your candidate's views. Negative campaigning is, unfortunately, an effective tool. It is also very destructive.

The *Torah* teaches here about the *Metzora*, a person who contacted this ancient form of leprosy because he liked to start conflict. He liked to talk bad about other people. In Judaism it does not make any difference whether the gossip you say is true or false. In fact, it is sometimes much worse if it is true. As William Blake said, "The truth that is told with bad intent beats all the lies that you can invent." I am reminded of an incident that happened a few years ago at a youth group meeting here in our synagogue. The youth group was having a social event when all of a sudden a

15-year-old boy came up to a 15-year-old girl and said, "When did you get out of the insane asylum?" The girl, of course, broke into tears and ran out of the room, and we did not see her for the rest of the evening. I do not think she ever came back to the youth group. The truth of the matter is that the boy told the truth. He knew that that girl had just been released from a psychiatric hospital, and he blurted out this fact in front of all the girl's peers and, thus, embarrassed her terribly. That boy did a terrible sin, and I really raked him over the coals for it afterwards privately.

He said he told the truth, but the truth is no defense against *Loshan Hora*, against evil talking. Most times it is nobody's business what people have or have not done in the past, especially in inappropriate settings. If someone would have called that boy up and asked for a reference for that girl to babysit for their young child, then the boy should have told the truth that this girl is not stable, that she has had psychiatric treatment and that it would have been inappropriate for her to babysit. But to blurt out this girl's psychiatric history in front of the group was malicious and cruel.

This boy's act destroyed people's confidence, not only in the girl but also in that boy. Who was going to trust any of their secrets to that boy in the future if we knew that he is going to bandy them about in such a cruel and vicious way? What a *Metzora* does is destroy the very fabric of society and, therefore, a *Metzora*, an evil gossiper, must stay outside the camp until he learns better. That is why no cure for this disease is prescribed in the *Torah*. The priest only examines him to determine whether or not he still has leprosy but the *Torah* does not say that he prescribes any cure. The leper had to stay outside the camp in torn clothes telling every passerby, "I am ritually unclean. I am ritually unclean." He has to do some soul searching until he realizes that what he did can cause society to disintegrate. That can happen in democracy, too. If there is too much negative campaigning, people will give up on the whole process and then there will not be any way of resolving conflict in our society. A *Metzora* is a type of person who wants to start fights. In fact, some people like to start fights because they then can come in and be the peace maker. When he resolves these fights, he thereby gains great prestige. Other individuals do not know that they are being manipulated into a fight by this individual so he can come later and be the great peace maker. We know, too, that after the *Metzora* has had

a change of heart and been cured from his leprosy, he had to go through a certain procedure. The *Torah* says that he had to bring three offerings. He had to bring a guilt offering, a sin offering, and a burnt offering. In each case it says, "And the priest shall forgive him before G-d." And the *Torah* also says in each case that now he is clean. Why after each sacrifice does the *Torah* say that the *Metzora* was clean? Why did he have to be clean in three ways?

We know that gossip is bad. The rabbis say that gossip kills three people. It kills the person about whom it is told, it kills the person who told it, and it kills the person who heard it because the person who heard it can no longer look at the person about whom it was told in the same way. Nobody is ever going to trust the person who told it because if he is talking this way about a third party in your presence, what is he going to do when he talks about you in somebody else's presence? So three people are killed. Also, the rabbis teach us, we never know the results of our evil talk. That is why one of the ceremonies that a leper had to perform after he was cured was to take two birds. One of them he slaughtered with a clay pot over running water. He then was to dip the other bird into this vessel and let it fly away. The bird flew dripping with the blood of the first bird which it scattered all over the place, teaching us that when we speak *Loshan Hora*, we kill a lot of people, at least metaphorically, and we never know how many people we have harmed because blood flies all over the place. We have to be very careful not to speak maliciously of other people.

But why when the leper is cured does he bring three sacrifices? He had to bring the guilt offering because when we speak ill of another person, we are preventing that person and society from being partners with G-d in creation. We are all called upon to be G-d's partner in creation and help Him perfect the world, but when we destroy people's trust in each other, we cannot perform our tasks correctly. We bring a guilt offering because we are guilty before G-d. We bring a sin offering because we have sinned, because we have destroyed another person's reputation, and we do not even know how badly we have done this. We understand that we have to bring a guilt offering and a sin offering, but why do we have to bring a burnt offering? The rabbis say that the reason we have to bring a burnt offering is because it is not enough that we have made up with G-d and

made up with the person whom we have wronged, we also have to change the mindset which allowed us to tell *Loshan Hora* in the first place.

The rabbis say that there are basically only two reasons why a person speaks *Loshan Hora*. The first reason can be because his arguments are weak. He cannot convince anybody by his arguments so he attacks personal ties. The second reason can be because he has an inferiority complex. He does not feel that he can win on the basis of his personality or presentation so, therefore, he has to use devious means. That is a terrible thing. When a person feels inferior to other people, he usually tries to mask this feeling by adopting a superiority complex. He feels that he can knock other people because he is so superior to them. He knows that he cannot get what he wants by being positive so he tries to get what he wants by being negative. He has an inferiority complex which has become a superiority complex. And this the *Torah* tells is what has to be uprooted. A person has to bring a burnt offering so that he should realize that he does not have to use negative means to get what he wants, that he can achieve great things by being positive, that he can get all the attention and success that he needs by not stooping to these negative methods. The burnt offering teaches us that if in order to achieve our goals we have to tear down other people, then it is not important that we achieve these goals. Because in achieving these goals, we will end up by increasing conflict to eventually end in destroying society.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a man who worked for a corporation and who was called to do jury duty. The judge said the case was going to last several months. The man went up to the judge and said, "Listen, I work for a big corporation and I can't take off all that much time." The judge looked at him and said, "What, do you think that you are so indispensable that the company could not get along without you? You just stay on this jury." The man looked at the judge and said, "Listen, judge. I know that I am not indispensable and the company can get along without me, but I don't want the company to find out that I'm not indispensable." It is up to all of us to live a decent and good life. In order to live a decent and good life, we have to be positive. We cannot try to tear down other people because when we try to tear down other people, all we do is increase conflict and conflict is the worst possible thing for society, espe-

cially if by so doing, we destroy the mechanism which is meant to deal with conflict. This will eventually lead to the total breakdown of society. So let's just discuss issues. There is enough conflict stirred up in just discussing issues, without discussing personalities. Let's only discuss the issues so that we can solve them so we will be able to have a just and good society so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.