

Tazria / Shabbat HaChodesh – 5782

For more than a year, I have been partaking of a series of Zoomed Torah study sessions emanating from the collective arms of the Conservative movement of American Judaism. It is amazing how every week, for an hour, sometimes as many as 300 screens are connected by the miracle of modern technology to a lecture given by any one of countless rabbinic experts on a multitude of topics germane to us as Jews. This past Tuesday night was the beginning of the sixth series of four weekly presentations. I've recently listened to a review of the Book of Amos and how his prophecies resonate with us today, to a presentation concerning the Halachic underpinnings of the Jewishness of babies conceived through surrogacy, to the ways in which the Conservative movement deals with the questions of change in practice in synagogue and communities around the world, and a new look at the Book of Jonah and what it really tells us about faith or lack thereof. Sometimes they are quite engrossing, other times not so much, but each of the presenters has amazed me with their pedagogical styles and approaches to the world we live in right now.

At the end of every week's presentation, the session facilitator who has been with the so-called Scholar Stream since the beginning, remarks how good it is when the Jewish people can study together. When you think about it, you have to, at some level, wonder how we can, as a people, continue to study the same Five Books of Moses and its supporting theology, even after some 2500 years. What can we find so fascinating after all this time and what nuance can we explore that hasn't been explored before? The sages themselves answered that question repeatedly by pointing out that each time we look at the same text, we approach it from a completely new perspective because we have lived more time, experienced more, or acquired new supporting information that we didn't have before.

My studying of this week's Parsha Tazria and the fact that it is not just Rosh Chodesh today but also THE Rosh Chodesh, HaChodesh which is the beginning of the month of Nisan, the month of Pesach, was carried out after having seen images from Ukraine and listened to the voices of those who are left without food or water and are being cast adrift by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune by a madman who thinks

this is the way to reclaim lands which he believes are the divine right of the Russian people and state. Being someone who has always had to have a daily agenda of things I want to accomplish and lived my life not in the moment as some do but with a roadmap of where I want to be constantly, I can't but wonder what my response would be to wake up without a shower of water, a cupboard full of clean clothes, kitchen filled to overflowing with foods to eat and a personal car to get me to where I want to go. But I have to put myself into those shoes if I am to understand not just the words of Parshat Tazria, but the logic behind needing to read not one but two Maftirot, from two separate parts of the Torah, no less all in one morning.

Let's start with Tazria, in which we continue to read about what it means to be not just pure but impure and how to move from one state to another. The ancients lived in a world where illness and death were attributed to the powerful and vengeful forces in the world unleashed because one had to have done something wrong or insulting. Our Torah replaced the capriciousness of fate by steps to be taken to eliminate the sources of impurity and to become clean again thereby being able to rejoin the community. There were no imponderables really but rather a set of rules to follow that made life more predictable. Imagine driving on the 401 without any markings on the road, any signposts along the way, no speed limits to be followed. The sages spent generations prognosticating on when something was pure and when something was impure but that was how Halacha developed and how we came to adjust to the questions confronting us in our daily lives. We sing EVERY SINGLE TIME we return the Torah to the Aron HaKodesh, Eitz Chaim Hi, LeMachazikim Ba.....it is a tree of life which we can grab hold of to help us find our way. In an illiterate world, that was a huge advantage towards mental health.

From Tazria, we moved to Scroll Number 2 and the section from Pinchas reminding us how to mark the transition from one month to the next. The ancients watched the night skies without understanding but eventually observed that there was a cycle that was repeated month after month. That cycle helped to give form and structure to our daily lives. The moon was used because it had its phases and so we could additionally turn to it like we moderns looked at a clock and a calendar. Remember what I said about those poor Ukrainians now no longer having electricity, so they lose track of

time, one day is the same as the next. But the moon phases help us count time between the seasons and so they helped us ready ourselves for the seasons to come.

That brings us to the third Torah scroll and reading from Parshat Bo when the Jewish people are told about preparing for the Pesach, preparing for the sacrifice of the Pascal Lamb, and ridding the house of all leavening. We are facing Pesach just around the corner and, as most of us know, it doesn't happen all by itself. WE need time to prepare, both physically and mentally, so that we can truly celebrate our freedom and what that means for us, never more so than now, in this post-modern world of ours. In Fiddler on the Roof, when Tevye tells the audience what tradition really is, he says so that everyone knows who he is and what God expects us to do. Our study of Torah is that tradition because it reminds us of who we are and our place in the cosmos. Each time we look at Tazria, Rosh Chodesh, and Shabbat HaChodesh, we come at it differently but in each and every case, we know that we are meant to be a holy people and reminding ourselves of that mission gives shape to our every day and purpose to our lives. Without that purpose we become no better than the animals we share the planet with. Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai Tzvaot, Melochol Haaretz Kevodo.