

Yashar koach, Sally. You've taught very beautiful Torah here this morning as you grappled with a particularly challenging double Torah portion, Tazria-Metzora. You gave us the overview of what physically happens to a person who has tzara'at, this skin affliction, and brings it to the priest. But then you zoomed out a bit and wondered: so this is what's happened to them physically - what's going on for them emotionally? How do all these rituals, and being separated from their families, exiled from community - land on their heart. What of this seemingly traumatizing experience stays with them and what are the consequences of it?

And you made this gorgeous poetic assertion: that the wilderness never leaves you. Which is to say, once you have experienced the wilderness - loneliness, fear, hurt, cruelty even - it imprints itself on you, it shapes you, and it's perhaps not something that we ever really forget. The wilderness never leaves us.

In fact, the rabbis who comment on these parshiyot prolifically are kind of counting on that. See, many ancient commentators don't understand the disease of tzara'at as something a person got from germs or from an infection. They saw it as a manifestation of a spiritual and moral flaw in a person.

In the Talmud, in masechet Arachin, Reish Lakish teaches that the *metzora* - which is what we call the person with *tzara'at* - the *metzora* is infected because he is a *motzi shem ra*, which sounds like *metzora*. That's a Talmudic pun that the rabbis made to say that the reason a person would get *tzara'at* is because they are "one who spreads a bad name," which the rabbis interpreted to mean that they used their words in cruel and thoughtless ways. The person may have gossiped, spoken badly about another person, lied about someone, or otherwise used speech in ways that hurt other people.

So, for these rabbis, the time spent in seclusion was quite intentional. It was **meant** to leave a lasting imprint. It was meant, in fact, to cause in a person a spiritual reboot. To help the *metzora* understand the magnitude of their sin and so to change their ways. You could imagine then surely the wilderness would stay with that person. Though **your** reading conflicts with the rabbis' reading because they saw this as an inherent positive - difficult at the time, but with good results. And you understandably read this text as difficult at the time and potentially quite scarring for a person.

And your reading surely bears out at times. For example, when a person faces bullying as a child, or goes through a traumatic experience, there's plenty of research that points to how if that child is not cared for and supported, they can become resentful, angry, embittered, and even revenge seeking for the pain that they suffered through; they can become bullies themselves. There is, however, also research that points to how when a child is bullied or tormented, it's possible that they will grow up to be an incredibly empathic person - someone who knows what it feels like to be so treated and therefore would NEVER treat another person that way.

The wilderness never leaves us, Sally, you could not be more right. But it also leaves us with a choice. How will we let the wildernesses of our lives shape us? What imprint will we fight for? What will be the enduring scars? Will they be for hate or for healing? For loneliness or for love? We do not often get to choose our wildernesses. In fact, the text in Tazria Metzora indicates: When a person has on their skin a swelling, a rash, or a discoloration, and it develops into a scaly affection on their skin, **וְהוּבֵא אֶל-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן** - *hoovah* - he shall be brought to Aaron the priest. Not that he shall bring himself, but in the passive tense, he shall be brought. The commentator Ibn Ezra doubles down on this, teaching that - he shall be brought by his consent or against his will.

We do not often get to choose which wildernesses will hold us in their grasp. But we do get to choose what it means for it to never leave us. In fact, this is a main premise for our entire peoplehood. In the Book of Exodus, we read:

וְגַר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יִדְעַתֶּם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Mitzrayim, of Ancient Egypt.

Having been strangers in Mitzrayim, having **been** the target of cruelty, of indifference, of dehumanization, stripped of our dignity and freedom, having lived through that wilderness - it left its mark on us. Torah COULD have said - well, you know what that's like, so take cover, turn inward, and protect your own. But it doesn't say that. It says, never let this wilderness leave you. Because it allows you to know *nefesh hager*, the soul of every person who is living through this today. Every person who wanders that same wilderness that we once did. It was terrible, but it was also formative. The wilderness didn't leave us, but it did leave us with a choice. And instead of becoming embittered, it has grown a deep empathy within our people. It's how we understand the humanity of others.

You expressed this very choice, Sally, when you talked about how being in isolation during Covid helped you feel empathy back through time toward our ancestors who experienced the rituals of tzara'at. That's where it all begins. Through a choice we make.

And sometimes our wildernesses can feel impossibly horrible, deeply traumatizing, as you imagined it may have been for the *metzora*. And even then, we still have a choice to make. Earlier this week, CBE welcomed two incredible individuals to our ballroom to speak to a packed house of our community eager to hear their Torah. Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah - two men who have experienced the wilderness. Two men who have made an extraordinary choice.

Aziz is a Muslim Palestinian man who grew up in the West Bank. When he was 9, he told us, his older brother was arrested and tortured in an Israeli prison, soon after dying from his wounds. It was devastating for him, as we could only begin to imagine. Maoz is a Jewish Israeli whose parents were killed on October 7th by Palestinians identified as members of Hamas. His pain, too, was unbearable. Both of these men lost what was most precious to them, at the hands of

the other's people. This is a wilderness that we could easily imagine would turn them into mortal enemies. That would leave each angry and vengeful. And they still do have anger, and they still mourn - because Sally, the wilderness has shaped them forever. But they've made a choice.

After October 7th, Aziz reached out to Maoz and expressed his deep sadness for his terrible loss, and he said that he doesn't stand with those who attacked Israel on October 7th, and how wrong they were. And Maoz shared that he cried and he wrote back. And he said that he didn't stand with those who killed Aziz's brother and that he grieved with him and was so sorry. They chose to let the wilderness shape them - toward love, toward empathy, toward each other.

They've gone on now to write this incredible book which they launched here at CBE just this week. It's called: *The Future is Peace*. They told us that they are positive, not hoping for, not guessing, not praying for even, but they know that within 4-6 years there will be peace in Israel and Palestine. And you might disagree, you might think that's naive. That's okay. I hope you'll read the book. They are extremely compelling.

They are peace builders and quite serious and effective ones at that. And they've used the imprint of the most painful and traumatizing wildernesses of their lives to inspire people toward joining a movement for peace, for love, for brother and sisterhood between these two peoples. To get people to reasonably agree that it is not just possible, but probable - this future of real and actual peace. The wilderness has not left them; but it has required something from them.

It's rarely easy to do what they've done, but it is available to each of us. Sometimes with the help of an excellent therapist. Or just with time and some space. Sometimes with the help of friends or prayer or God. Sometimes just because the alternative is such a black hole of gravitational pull, dragging us toward who we don't want to be.

When the *metzora* returned to the community, he also had a choice to make. He'd been dealt a tough hand. Knowing he was different now, on the other side of this wilderness, would he choose resentment or empathy? Revenge or understanding? His question is our question. As individuals, as Jews, as human beings - if our wildernesses never leave us, how will we choose for them to shape us?

Sally, as you become an adult in the eyes of the Jewish people today, teaching us with the compassionate words that you shared, it gives us all great hope that we **can** do the hard work to find our way through our wildernesses together and also to choose well on the other side. May we find our way with courage, hope, and unyielding determination. Yashar koach on your beautiful work today and mazal tov.