

***Projection: We All Do It, But Some Dangerously More than Others***

Shabbat Tazria-Metzorah, Rosh Chodesh Iyar

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Have you ever been told to “stop projecting”? Typically this request happens in the midst of a tense discussion of one sort or another...when one person claims that the other is not acknowledging their own shameful, hurtful, even dangerous feelings and instead attributing those feelings to someone else.

An example might be, “He’s really jealous of me.” When in truth I’m the jealous one, but I’m too uncomfortable with that feeling to acknowledge it.

Or...

“She’s angry with me,” when in truth I’m the one who is angry, but I can’t or won’t take ownership of that emotion.

Psychology understands projection to be one of our most instinctive defense mechanisms. We project feelings that are uncomfortable and hurtful in order to protect ourselves from the pain of confronting them in our own lives. It’s easier to blame you for being angry, or jealous, or hateful, or mean than to accept that I actually feel that way. Our parasha this morning suggests a profound understanding of this human psychological defense mechanism long before Freud or his daughter Anna wrote about it in psychoanalytic literature.

In the bizarre case of the leper, which is described in jarring detail in the parasha, the Torah states that a person afflicted with this contagious disease to announce to others—who are not lepers—that he or she is approaching, in order to warn them not to become contaminated. *Tamei, tamei yikra...*The leper shall call out: Coming through...Unclean! Unclean! Watch out! While the Torah depicts the leper to be something of a pariah, the Talmud suggests that the leper make this announcement not just as a warning to others,

but to elicit their prayers, and their support...and the leper's own community is indeed obligated not to shun the afflicted person, but to offer their care and comfort.

Another commentary, which has deep psychological insight, is offered by the 16<sup>th</sup> century rabbi and mystic Isaiah Horowitz, who understands that when the leper announces: "Unclean! Unclean!" He is proclaiming *everyone else to be unclean*. The infirmity and disfigurement is so difficult for the leper to accept, he instead goes around telling others that they're the ones who are afflicted. To this the Talmud adds that "a person who insults others generally projects his own defects onto them." The Ba'al Shem Tov, the great founder of Chassidism taught that the world is a mirror, in whose reflection one sees one's own image. A person with good character traits will see the good in everyone, and a person with many character defects will find fault in everyone.<sup>1</sup>

I consulted with our very own resident Beth Torah psychiatrist Dr. Alan Koenigsberg, who gave me a quick education about projection. As he related the patterns of this behavior I felt one of those proverbial pits developing in my stomach...I've done that, I thought! I recognize that pattern of behavior! I have infected my speech with accusations that are really my own un-dealt-with *mishegas*. Alan told me that defense mechanisms like projection can really be benign and are naturally a part of all of us. But they can also become paralyzing and can create serious dysfunction when people excessively rely on them. They can wreak havoc on relationships, they can diminish the capacity for intimacy, and they can make us uncaring and unsympathetic of others.

I couldn't help but think about this as I witnessed the circus of the UN sponsored World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Geneva. In a cruel and despicable irony, the conference opened on Tuesday, which was also Yom Hashoa...the date that the Jewish community memorializes the destruction of the Holocaust. The keynote speaker at this allegedly anti-racism conference on the morning of Yom Hashoa was none other than the world's most notorious Holocaust

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<sup>1</sup> Twersky, Rabbi Dr. Abraham. Living Each Week. Mesorah Publications, New York 1992. Pages 228-229

denier, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinajad. Some countries, like the United States, Canada, and the Netherlands refused to send any delegates to participate in this charade. Other representatives walked out in protest when Ahmadinajad took the dais and began his now familiar rant against Israel and the West. With countries like Zimbabwe, Myanmar, Libya, Syria, China, and Iran sitting as the arbiters of human rights in the world, the true victims are those who actually suffer the brutality and dehumanization of these tyrannical regimes: the poor, women, children, minority populations of all kinds.

But as I listened to Ahmadinajad, who seems remarkably unrepentant and even flattered to be as reviled as he is, I couldn't help thinking about the leper in our parasha who goes around calling everyone else unclean. As he stood at that podium excoriating Israel for being a "cruel and racist regime" or throughout his reprimands of the "colonial powers" of the west, it was none other than an Egyptian Arab writing in the Wall Street Journal, a man who spent 3 years in an Egyptian dungeon for the crime of "tarnishing Egypt's reputation," a man, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, who is now on the faculty at Harvard who said that the bloc of Arab, African, and Islamic nations that made it possible for Ahmadinajad to be the keynote speaker "sought to guard against exposing their own regimes' human rights records."<sup>2</sup> There it is again, I thought: Projection. These regimes are the lepers calling the other nations of the world unclean while they themselves are soiled by an extreme defilement of their own. Ahmadinajad, who has wreaked havoc on the Iranian Baha'i community; who insisted that there is not a single homosexual in Iran even as his regime vigorously persecutes them; who serves as the biggest underwriter for arming terrorist regimes across the Middle East; who deprives women and religious minorities and the press of basic liberties and human rights; who is pursuing nuclear capabilities in order to intimidate and threaten the entire region if not the world. As he declares *tamei*, *tamei*, unclean, unclean about the rest of the world, let the world understand that it is he who is unclean. That it is his fanatical regime that is the pariah; That his bellicose hate mongering is the real contagion that must be quarantined and aggressively treated. The

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<sup>2</sup> Saad Eddin Ibrahim, "Tyrants Get Another U.N. Platform." *Wall Street Journal*, Friday, April 24, 2009. Page A15

story is told of a German soldier who paid a visit to Picasso's art studio as he was completing his massive 11 X 26 foot mural called *Guernica*, a panoramic, frightening interpretation of a German aerial assault on Spain in 1937. Surveying the mural, the German soldier said to Picasso, "Did you do that?" To which Picasso responded, "No, you did." The world needs a lot more mirrors, and a lot less projection.

On this Shabbat, a day which has been referred to as Shabbat Tekumah, the Sabbath of Restoration, between Yom Hashoa and Yom Ha'atzmaut, I pray that the world engages in some deep, serious psychotherapy. I pray that world leaders, media outlets, and chroniclers of history have the courage to hold up the mirror to those who would prefer to shirk responsibility; those who would rather project their blemishes and sins on others. Just as a tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica* hangs in the entry way of the UN Security Council chamber, I hope the artist's words of searing truth are heard by all who pass his work. The world needs more mirrors and less projection...as the old saying goes, *a mirror never lies.*

Shabbat Shalom.