

Reading such a story leads us to search for the hidden hints of providence



DIFFERING REACTIONS to gifts.
(Pixabay)

'Tzara'at' and divine providence

This week's Torah portion, *Tazria*, mainly deals with the laws regarding the *metzora* – a person afflicted with a unique skin disease called *tzara'at*, which appears as a result of certain sins, and the methods of examination and spiritual treatment he receives from the *kohen* for this ailment.

The *tzara'at* in question is not a regular skin disease. It is merely a minor blemish on the skin. If the Torah had not singled out the *metzora*, he could have continued his normal life routine. The only reason the Torah refers to *tzara'at* as a disease is that it is considered a punishment for sin. In the *Tosefta* (a compilation of early rabbinic teachings), it is said: "Tzara'at comes only to the arrogant." If a person behaves arrogantly, pridefully, and corruptly, he is symbolically punished with the affliction of *tzara'at*, which requires him to undergo spiritual-moral purification.

One of the cases described in the Bible regarding *tzara'at* is read in the *haftarah* – a passage from the Prophets read in synagogue on Shabbat after the Torah reading. It is the story of Gehazi, the servant of the prophet Elisha.

In the Book of Kings, we read about a man named Naaman, who was the army commander of the kingdom of Aram; in addition, he was a *metzora*. The sages in the *midrash* Numbers Rabbah ask why Naaman was afflicted with *tzara'at*, and they answer: "Because he had a haughty spirit."

Tzara'at troubled Naaman, but he had no way to deal with the problem. An Israelite girl who was cap-

tured by the Arameans was in his house and advised him to turn to the prophet in the city of Samaria, none other than Elisha.

When Naaman came to Samaria, he turned to the king of Israel asking to be healed of his *tzara'at*, but the king was at a loss. He had no cure for Naaman's *tzara'at*.

When Elisha heard this, he sent for Naaman and instructed him to do something very simple: to immerse himself seven times in the Jordan River. By doing so, Elisha promised him, he would be healed of his *tzara'at*.

Naaman initially doubted Elisha's words but decided to try the advice; and, to his great surprise, he was indeed healed of his *tzara'at*.

Naaman returned to Elisha and wanted to give him gifts, but Elisha flatly refused. His purpose was for Naaman, the foreign army commander, to recognize the God of Israel and not think that the prophet was a sorcerer acting on his own. Indeed, Naaman accepted the message and declared to Elisha that from then on, he would worship only the God of Israel and not worship idols.

However, for Gehazi, who was Elisha's servant, it was difficult to accept the renunciation of gifts. He chased after Naaman's chariot and asked him – in Elisha's name! – to give gifts, like silver and two changes of clothes, ostensibly for two young men who had just arrived at Elisha's place. Naaman gave him twice what he asked for, and Gehazi put the items in his house. But Elisha understood what had happened, and he told Gehazi that the *tzara'at* that was on Naaman would

come upon him, and indeed Gehazi immediately became afflicted with *tzara'at*.

In the midrash quoted earlier, the question is also asked why specifically Gehazi was afflicted with *tzara'at*, and this is the answer given there:

"Elisha sanctified the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, as he did not want to take anything from Naaman, whereas Gehazi pursued him and swore falsely to him that [Elisha] had sent to ask him for money. Thus [Gehazi] desecrated the name of Heaven which Elisha had sanctified."

Elisha refused to accept gifts from Naaman, thereby sanctifying the name of Heaven. He showed Naaman that he was not a sorcerer acting in exchange for payment but a prophet of God. In doing so, he caused Naaman to believe in the God of Israel and to change his attitude toward the people of Israel. But Gehazi went and spoiled that. He told Naaman that Elisha wanted to receive payment from him; therefore, he was afflicted with *tzara'at*.

When we read such a story or study the laws of *tzara'at* in the Torah, it seems very distant from our daily reality. Nowadays, we are not familiar with the *tzara'at* mentioned in the Bible, and in general we do not experience such direct divine providence. Nevertheless, reading such a story leads us to search for the hidden hints of providence. Judaism believes that God does not abandon man, and even if providence is not revealed, it exists in a hidden dimension and affects the course of a person's life. ■

The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and holy sites.

The 'Jewish question' is back

and it has a simple modern solution

The "Jewish question," aka the "Jewish problem" of the 1930s, has resurfaced in the form of the "Jewish state question." As then, some Jews are attempting to solve it using the "good Jew" vs "bad Jew" distinction.

Every few centuries, there is an attempt to eradicate Judaism: in the 15th century via the Inquisition, in the 20th century through the Holocaust, and in the 21st century with Israel-bashing and anti-Zionism.

In each of those assaults, some Jews have tried to create an artificial separation between "good Jews" and "bad Jews." In the 1490s, many Jews believed that converting to Christianity would spare them, making them "good Jews." They were wrong – it only placed them under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition.

In the late 19th century a new form of opposition to Judaism emerged, with a new term: "antisemitism." Jews were accused of dehumanizing Europeans, poisoning the wells of humanity, and were treated as pariahs. Some Jews believed that the spike in antisemitism was not against them, the "good Jews," but against the badly behaving Jewish immigrants from Russia or, as one person explained to Theodor Herzl, "against the liberals, not against the Jews as a nation." Herzl understood that the Jewish question went deeper, and he offered a solution in his 1896 book *The Jewish State – A Modern Solution to the Jewish Question*.

Some 45 years later, the Nazis presented a very different solution to the Jewish question.

'Good Jew' vs 'bad Jew'

Today, in the current assault on Judaism in the guise of an attack merely on Zionism, we once again see Jews appearing to believe that the solution lies in separating "good Jew" from "bad Jew." This was perhaps best depicted in Sen. Chuck Schumer's speech.

Schumer said it clearly: "The Jewish state is a pariah opposed by the rest of the world."

He echoed the accusations of anti-Zionists and Israel-bashers, eerily similar to the accusations heard in Europe a century ago and in Persia 2,500 years ago during the events of the Book of Esther.

But there is a footnote: Schumer did not slander all Jews – only those Jews in Israel. Per Schumer, it is not the Jewish nation that is a pariah, only the Jewish state – a charge he repeated twice in his speech.

Schumer also implied that Jews in Israel are bigots, defining bigots as "those who oppose the idea of a Palestinian state," which today are the vast majority of Israeli Jews on the Left and Right alike.

Schumer's slander followed Secretary of State Antony Blinken's charge that Jews in Israel dehumanize Palestinians – and his insinuation that Israeli Jews, once again, poison the wells: "The greatest poison in our common well is dehumanization."

Would this "bad Jews" in Israel vs "good Jews" in America distinction work? Not likely. The world does



NO DISTINCTION between Israelites and Juifs: Cleaning swastikas spraypainted in central Paris, 2020. (Stephane De Sakutin/AFP via Getty Images)

not make this intra-Jewish distinction – only Jews do. Berlin and Nazi-dominated Europe did not distinguish between Russian Jewish immigrants and proper German Jews in the 20th century, nor between "Israelites" and "Juifs" in France in the 19th century – those were only internal Jewish nuances.

Schumer made it worse by calling for the removal of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and for new elections in Israel. This only solidified the allegedly bigotry of the Jewish state, since Netanyahu's would-be challengers equally support the war effort, opposing the idea of rewarding Hamas's Oct. 7 actions with a Palestinian state – and are appalled by the incitive, anti-Jewish rhetoric voiced by Schumer and Blinken.

(Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times* is not a candidate for prime minister of Israel. But even if he were, he would likely only get a few hundred votes. Incidentally, those few hundred Israelis are the primary touch-point with Israel for much of the New York milieu, and indeed, those Israelis are more sympathetic to the idea of a Palestinian state.)

Let's be clear: Schumer and Blinken are long-standing friends of Israel who have admirably served their country, the United States, for decades. Israelis will forever be grateful for the steadfast support of President Joe Biden and Sec. Blinken at the onset of the war, as well as for their continued support in ways we know and ways we do not know.

But their rhetoric fuels our era's existential threat to Judaism.

As discussed in this column, the potent part of the threat is not the vocal pro-Palestinian demonstrators waving "From the river to the sea" banners, since they do not have the destruction mechanism.

The lethal threat comes from "Israel-bashers-lite," those in positions of power who are influenced by the Israel-bashers and act upon it (See "Understanding the depth of Israel-bashing – One night in Basel," Magazine, September 24, 2022).

Herzl pinpointed this aspect when he defended accusations that he exaggerated the threat to the Jews from their friends: "Even if we were as near to the hearts of princes as are their other subjects, they could not protect us. They would only feel popular hatred by showing us too much favor."

Indeed, for Schumer, one of America's most astute politicians, to make a legacy-changing decision from being what he called "the guardian of Israel" to being broadly viewed by Israelis on both Left and Right as someone who rose up to assault Israel in its time of need could be indicative of something much bigger and more dangerous.

Netanyahu repeatedly argues that 80% of Americans support Israel. Schumer's legacy-switch decision might be emblematic of undercurrents in the other direction. After years of incitement in the media and social media, by international organizations, and now even on the Senate floor, the Jewish nation in the 2020s is facing an existential threat that

is significantly greater than that of the 1930s.

However, Judaism has a secret weapon for fending off this unprecedented ideological assault coming from the West: antisemitism itself.

Paradigm shift

Unlike in previous rounds, in our era's assault it is taboo to say, "I hate Jews." Therefore, one needs to direct opposition to Jews through the Jewish state ("I only hate the 'bad Jews'").

Once there is a global recognition that Judaism has transformed and Zionism is now its anchor (Judaism 3.0), that false facade gets shattered. A recognition that we are in Judaism 3.0 would turn the Israel-basher into a Jew-basher, and thus he would be deterred.

Mostly, it would dispel the prevailing ludicrousness in America of showing zero tolerance for traditional antisemitism (the existential threat to Judaism in the 20th century), while shining a big green light on Israel-bashing – the existential threat to Judaism in the 21st century).

Recognition is already taking place around the world. Yet the Biden administration failed to acknowledge it when it crafted its antisemitism-combating strategy. It decided to focus on the threat that Judaism faced in the past century, while ignoring the contemporary threat. This is akin to crafting a strategy to combat antisemitism in 1930s Germany by showing zero tolerance for statements supporting the Romans' burning of the Jewish Temple, while giving the green light to accusations of German Jews dehumanizing Europeans and polluting the wells of humanity.

The "Jewish question" is back. It has a simple solution: Judaism 3.0. ■

The writer is author of Judaism's Transformation to Zionism (Judaism-Zionism.com). For his geopolitical article: EuropeAndJerusalem.com.