

***Tazria Metzora***  
**April 21, 2007**  
**Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

It has been a tough week. We have witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, the worst mass murder in US history. Images played out on our television screen – of slaughter and innocence lost –we were subjected to the rants of the murderer himself – words of anger and hatred. And not only were we subjected to all of this – but our children were subjected to it as well. How do we protect them from a world in which such terrible things can happen? How do we shield them from these images of death and hatred and anger?

And we come to shul and we are searching for some answers, some explanations, something to make sense of the senseless.

So here is what I would like to do with you. I would like to spend the next few moments and study a little torah, study a little *Gemorrah* and then see if we can make sense of the world in which we live.

First the Torah:

The Torah portion for today *Tazria-Metzora* seems to deal with a subject which would be of interest only to physicians and those occupied with the physical and medical sciences - as it spends much of its time dealing, in a very clinical way, with certain forms of skin diseases. These skin diseases go under a heading which in Hebrew is called- *Metzora*. While - the subject of skin disease and its detailed analysis may not hold the interest of too many of us for too long, what the rabbis did with it is dramatic and fascinating. By using a play on words - they see hidden in the Hebrew word- *Metzora* a totally unrelated phrase - *Motzei Shem Ra* - which means - Gossip - or slander or the use and abuse of language for nefarious purposes. Yes, it seems that the rabbis - also must have been, on some level, as uncomfortable with all this skin disease talk, as we are and they were able, with a slight word play - a verbal flick of the wrist - to elevate the whole *parasha* to a moral drama, and once they had successfully moved from skin ailments to moral dilemmas, they and we are off and running. The rabbis interpreted the entire portion as a metaphor - *motzei shem ra* - literally someone who brings forth evil, someone who is morally diseased and spiritually tainted.

What I find most fascinating by this rabbinic slight of hand – that changes *metzora* to *motzie shem ra* – that changes a skin disease into malicious gossip – is that the rabbis transform a section of the torah that deals with an external physical disease into one that deals with an internal spiritual or moral failing. Diseases are caused by stuff *out there*. Moral failings are caused by stuff *in here*. And this now becomes much more than a clever literary play on words – it becomes a very profound observation of the world, its nature and what we can do about it.

When it comes to physical disease there is little we can do to protect ourselves but to bundle up, eat right get plenty of rest and hope we don't get sick. But when it comes to moral disease -- *hakoach b'yadeinu* – we have complete power to determine the course of our lives – or so the rabbis would have us believe.

David Brooks in an editorial that appeared in the New York Times on Thursday wrote, “Over the next few days, we'll ponder the sources of Cho Seung-Hui's rage. There'll be no shortage of analysts picking apart his hatreds, his feelings of oppression and his dark war against the rich, Christianity and the world at large. Some will point to the pruning of the brain synapses that may be related to adolescent schizophrenia. Others may point to the possibility that an inability to process serotonin could have led to depression and hyperaggression. Or we could learn that he had been born with a brain injury that made him psychopathic. Or perhaps he was suffering from the ravages of isolation. Over the next weeks, we could learn these or other things about Cho Seung-Hui. And as we learn the facts of his life, we'll be able to fit them into ever more sophisticated models of human behavior. For over the past few decades neuroscientists, evolutionary psychologists and social scientists have made huge strides

in understanding why people – even murderers – do the things they do.” It is important knowledge – but, like studying today’s torah reading of *tazria-metzora* and not moving beyond the *pshat*, not moving beyond the literal meaning, -- we are left with a discussion that is about physical disease -- interesting but of limited relevance to anything beyond. In such a reading of today’s torah portion – and the events of this past week at Virginia Tech – responsibility shifts outward. We get diseases because of stuff out there. As David Brooks put it: “Responsibility shifts from the individual to wider forces. People interviewed on TV tend to direct their anger at the gun, the university administration, society and so on. If they talk about the young killer at all, the socially acceptable word seems to be “troubled.” He’s more acted upon than acting.” Like the unfortunate recipient of a skin disease in today’s torah portion – he is a victim.

The rabbi’s were clearly not comfortable with that frame, and to his credit, neither is David Brooks. Brooks challenges us by saying that our society today is renegotiating what he calls the Morality Line, the spot where background forces stop and individual choice – and individual responsibility – begins. I think the rabbis were negotiating that same Morality Line. David Brooks bemoans that these killings happen at a moment when the people who explain behavior by talking about individual character are confused and losing ground.”

I think our rabbis would agree and I believe that when they transformed *Metzora* to *Motzei Shem Ra* – they were affirming the need to see ourselves as living in a world where, to use David Brook’s words, “background forces stop and individual choice – and individual responsibility – begins.” Of course David Brooks is only the latest in a long line of those who understood this truth – wasn’t it Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar who said: “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” (Shakespeare, Julius Caesar Act 1 Scene 2)

At the outset, I promised you: “a little Torah... a little *Gemorrah* and then to see if we can make sense of the world in which we live.” So, let’s now move from the torah to a little *gemorrah*:

This is one of my favorite – and one of the most bizarre sections of the Talmud. (maybe it is one of my favorites because it is so bizarre). Because of the PG nature of our audience this morning (*der kinder*) – I am forced to present a somewhat sanitized version of this Talmudic quote. This episode is a quote from *Masechet Avodah Zorah* 17a and it goes as follows:

“They said about one Eleazar ben Durdia that there was not a prostitute in the world with whom he had not visited at least once. He heard of one particular woman who lived in a town near the sea that he had not yet met that might be worth his time, but she was very expensive. Not to be deterred, our hero takes a purse full of *dinars* and went to her, crossing over seven rivers to get there. (BTW – what do you think was the literary purpose of sharing with us the information that she was very expensive and he had to cross seven rivers to get there??) Allow me to fast forward to the morning after – and there is our protagonist in the room with said prostitute and he is clearly feeling remorse over his behavior. In fact there is reason to deduce that he was experiencing deep regret and praying to God for forgiveness for his bad behavior. This sight of her repentant customer moves the prostitute to speak – and her words are harsh. Essentially she says: “who do you think you are fooling? You repent until the next time you are tempted, and then you repent –only to continue this silly cycle of sin and repentance – it doesn’t work – and the sincerity of your repentance is undercut by the repetition of your sin – there is no way you will ever make it into the World To Come! (in the Talmud the prostitute is less eloquent and more direct – but I believe I have been true to her point...) Clearly Eleazar ben Durdia is struck to the quick by her words. He runs out and is overcome by remorse – real remorse this time. Here is where I will pick up in the *gemorrah*: “He went out and sat between two mountains and hills and he said: “Mountains and hills, request mercy for me.” But they replied: “Before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves...” (In short they reply – look you are on your own – we have our own *tzooris* to deal with...) Then he said: Heavens and earth, request mercy for me. To which they replied, before we request mercy for you we have to request mercy for ourselves...” It then goes on with Eleazar appealing to the sun and the moon, the stars and the constellations – and all reply as expected – we have our own problems to deal with. Finally, exhausted and spent, Eleazar sits now – he puts his head between his knees and in genuine, authentic moment of self-awareness he

cries out, “*Hakol talui bi!*” It all depends on ME! And he began to tremble and he continued to cry until he died. And the story ends with a voice coming from heaven, “Now, Rabbi Eleazar ben Durdia is ready to enter *Olom Haba* – The World to Come!”

Wow. There is so much to this story that we could discuss. He was a rabbi! Why do you think the story withholds that fact till the very end? Isn't it sad that he dies at the end? Wouldn't it have been nicer – if he did real *teshuvah* and then went on to live a more positive and productive life? And most importantly why does he merit entrance into the World To Come? I think this is a key question. Why was the prostitute so confident that he – at that point in his life – did not merit the World to Come? And what changes between that moment and the end of the story that enables our hero to become worthy?

Anyone want to speculate?

In my humble opinion – the key turning point in this story is when he utters those incredible words: “*Hakol talui bi!*” It all depends on ME! The prostitute dismisses him as hopeless because as she witnessed him crying in her bedroom after a night of debauchery – she saw that he saw himself as victim. Unwilling to take responsibility for his behavior –and that disgusts her. We know that he still doesn't get it when he runs from her room and appeals to the mountains and hills, the heavens and earth, the sun and the moon – in our modern telling of this ancient tale substitute the words – hyperaggression, depression, schizophrenia or isolation –for the sun, moon, heavens and earth of the Talmudic tale. We cry out in anguish as we seek some kind of explanation – and we look in all the wrong places. We listen with horror as the young murderer of 32 innocent people speaks to us from a self made video and informs us, “You made me do this! The blood of these people is on your hands...” and we feel the same sense of disgust and derision that the prostitute must have felt when Eleazar ben Durdia sought absolution for his misdeeds. It is only when he is able to accept responsibility for his actions -- “*Hakol talui bi!*” It all depends on ME! That a voice from heaven declares that the World to Come is open to those who accept fully and honestly – the responsibility for their lives.

But, I am not done just yet – I promised you three things this morning. I promised you a little torah, a little *gemorrah* and then to see if we could make sense of the world in which we live.

So let's take our torah and our *gemorrah* and see if we can provide a little clarity.

This story presents the rabbis with a lot of problems – and they discuss them in the Talmud immediately following. They are troubled by the ending – why did he have to die? But they are also troubled by the heavenly declaration that he merited a place in the World to Come. A lifetime of bad behavior is wiped out by one moment of self understanding and acceptance of personal responsibility? That doesn't seem fair, that doesn't seem right. Until Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi) upon hearing of these events was so moved that he began to cry and he said: “*yeish koneh olamo b'kama shanim – v'yeish koneh olamo b'shaah echat* – there are those who take a lifetime to merit the World to Come – and there are those who merit it in a moment –or if I might try and paraphrase: there are things that we do and things that we say that change the world forever – sometimes in one exquisite moment we can merit the world to come – and sometimes in one horrific moment we can obliterate all of our merits – and at every moment “*Hakol talui bi!*” It all depends on ME!

Who do I blame for the events of this past week? I blame Cho Sung-Hui. Not his upbringing, not his depression, not his pathology or illnesses – not the school administration nor the lack of gun control laws that might have made it harder for him to purchase those weapons – no “*Hakol talui bo!*” It all depended on HIM! He could have chosen to do otherwise. He could have chosen to be otherwise. How do I know?

Because the Bible tells me so.

Because the *Gemorrah* tells me so.,

And because Liviu Librescu tells me so.

Boys and Girls, I hope you have been listening to me this morning. I've told a lot of stories – of people with skin diseases from the torah and rabbis behaving in ways they shouldn't be behaving from the Talmud – and if you have been following me and I know it may not have been easy – but if you have been listening – you will now be able to understand my final story, a true story – of a man named Liviu Librescu. He was 76 years old and he was a professor who was recognized internationally for his research in aeronautical engineering. He was the head of the Engineering Science and Mechanics Department at Virginia Tech and he happened to be teaching his class when Cho Seung-Hui walked in and he was shot to death.

Liviu Librescu was Jewish, a survivor of the Holocaust. He was in my humble opinion the *opposite* of Cho Seung-Hui and I will tell you why. He learned the most important thing a Jew can learn. He learned the most important thing a person can learn – and because he learned it his life had beauty and meaning. What was this secret that Liviu Librescu learned: *Hakol Talui Bi* -- It all depends on me. It is the lessons the rabbis tried to teach us from today's torah portion of *Tazria Metzora* and the lesson that they tried to teach us from the life of Eleazar ben Durdia – and it is the lesson I learn from the life of Liviu Librescu. If ever there was a generation who might have seen themselves as victims – was it not the generation of those who survived the *Shoah*? But, Liviu Librescu was part of an amazing generation, an incredible group of people who refused to see themselves as Victims of the Holocaust – rather they referred to themselves as Survivors – because they understood -- *Hakol Talui Bi* -- It all depends on them. After the war they had nothing – no home, no family, no country, nothing – but they blamed no one – as they understood that blame merely leads to anger and depression and to tragedy – no, Liviu Librescu picked himself up and made a new life for himself – he married and had children – he became a professor -- the head of the Engineering Science and Mechanics Department at Virginia Tech. *Hakol Talui Bo!* And then one day a young man came into his classroom with a gun intending to kill all those who he could find – and Liviu Librescu understood, as he had always understood: *Hakol Talui Bi* – he blocked the doorway with his body and he told his students to flee. Liviu Librescu was shot and killed – he was buried this past Wednesday in *Eretz Yisrael* – but his students all survived. – *Yeish koneh olamo b'shaah echat - sometimes my dear children, sometimes in one exquisite moment we can merit the world to come.*

That is the message I want you to take home today; that is the lesson I want you to learn from the terrible events of this past week – sometimes in one horrific moment a person can do one thing that is so terrible, so reprehensible that all the rest about him is irrelevant. And yet, at the very same time it is possible, for a person to do one thing, one thing that is so exquisite – that he or she, in that one moment, in that one act redeems the world and merits a place in the world to come – and at every moment “*Hakol talui bi!*” It all depends on You!