



Freedom and Constraints: Thoughts for Tazria-Metsora

“Tazria” is from the root “zera,” seed. It represents fertility, growth, development. On a broader level, it represents those forces in our lives that help us to be free and strong, that allow us to draw on our talents to be as creative and productive as we possibly can be.

“Metsora” includes the word “tsar,” narrowness. It represents constriction and limitation. On a broader level, it represents those forces in our lives that stultify our freedom and strength, that restrict our movements and our thoughts.

We read two parashiyot this Shabbat, Tazria and Metsora. Perhaps the underlying message is that these two elements go together. Life is composed of ups and downs, growth spurts and plateaus, creativity and suppression. How wonderful it is to live in a free society that respects us for who we are. How excellent it is to be able to speak freely and honestly without fear of oppression. When we feel the power of “Tazria” we feel we can achieve much and give much to the world.

How very bitter it is to live under tyrannies where freedom of religion, speech and movement are curtailed, where one has to be afraid of being condemned and harmed. When we feel the power of “Metsora” we curl up into frightened silence.

But don't we, who are fortunate to live in free societies, also well understand the forces of “Metsora?” We can't board an airplane without going through security; we can't enter an office building without showing our i.d.s. When we buy food products, they generally have safety labels to prove they have not been subjected to tampering. We learn, almost as a matter of fact, that we cannot trust human beings. There are people who want to murder us, blow up our airplanes, poison our food. Our lives are constricted by the fear of terror and violence.

The problem goes beyond worrying about our physical safety. The problem of “Metsora” is also an element in our religious lives. So many kosher products have multiple rabbinic endorsements, as though one endorsement is not enough.

Why? Because one group does not trust the other group to do things properly. We have pronouncements by this rabbinic “authority” or that rabbinic “organization” that undermine the credibility of others who disagree with them. We have a “thought police” that attempts to impose its views—often very obscurantist and authoritarian views—on the rest of us. Those who stand up against extremism and authoritarianism risk being censured by the “authorities.” Our thoughts, choices and actions are constricted by individuals who seek to control and manipulate us.

When Theodore Roosevelt was serving in the New York State Assembly in the early 1880s, he worked energetically to root out corruption in politics and in the judiciary. He urged his fellow assemblymen to censure and remove a certain judge who was notoriously corrupt: “He stands condemned by his own acts in the eyes of all honest people. All you can do is to shame yourselves and give him a brief extension of his dishonored career. You cannot cleanse the leper. Beware lest you taint yourselves with his leprosy” (“The Bully Pulpit,” by Doris Kearns Goodwin, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2013, p. 75). Roosevelt’s point was that those who do not resist corruption are themselves tainted by the corruption. Those who do not stand up against physical and spiritual Metsora become victimized and tainted by Metsora.

Tazria reminds us of the power to renew and to increase the forces of good. Although Metsora is a fact of life, so is Tazria. Although there are those who promote the impurity of Metsora, there are also many who promote freedom and creativity, beauty and harmony. Life is an ongoing struggle between Tazria and Metsora. Let us be sure that we ourselves are identified with freedom, and hope, and purity.

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