

Tazria-Metzorah
April 20, 2012
Fifth Grade Service
Bullying

Shabbat Shalom! We heard a very fun Torah portion this evening, every rabbi's favorite! Well, not so much. The Torah portion talks about leprosy, or probably really mold, in your house, as Rabbi Biatch read. It also talks about people getting leprosy, and having to be sent outside the community until they were back to normal. Not the most fun things in the world to talk about. But apparently they were very big things in the ancient Near East, and very important to talk about. Not just because they were signs of disease and you didn't want disease to spread through your community, but even more so because in the Ancient Near East, people thought such things were a punishment from God and a sign that you had done something very wrong. And they didn't want your sin and your punishment to rub off on them. That's why the urgency of having the house purified, and if a person got leprosy or some skin disease, they had to be separated from the rest of the community until they were cured.

What is this thing we call leprosy? In ancient times it was a kind of plague that afflicted a community. Our communities today have other kinds of plagues, not always as evident and visible as leprosy, but sometimes just as deadly. One of the plagues we face today is the plague of bullying.

I know you fifth graders know about this particular plague. Maybe you've heard of people who have been bullied. Maybe you have seen people being bullied. Next year, you will all be going into middle school. Bullying has become an increasing problem particularly in middle schools around the country. Surveys indicate that as many as half of all children are bullied at some point in their school years and as much as 10% are bullied on a regular basis.

Bullying can take many forms. It can include physical violence and verbal abuse. It can include teasing and name-calling. It can happen in person, face-to-face, or on-line, on Facebook, in chat groups, in text messages. Saying mean things about someone behind their back is also a form of bullying, as such things inevitably get repeated until the person who was talked about it hears it.

The Torah tells us such an incident, in Numbers 12. Miriam, Moses' sister, is struck with leprosy and has to go out of the Israelite camp for seven days. Why was she struck with leprosy? Because she had been gossiping with Aaron and saying not nice things about Moses behind his back. Slander, saying bad things about someone, was seen as a terrible sin, because of the great harm it can cause to a person's reputation, which can make other people think badly of the person and from there, it's not such a stretch to start treating that person badly. All because of something mean someone said behind that person's back.

Too often we ignore or dismiss the seriousness of bullying. We shrug and say, 'kids will be kids', 'kids can be mean, that's just the way it is', 'it happens, it's no big deal'. But it is a very big deal. As I said earlier, bullying can be deadly, because of the devastating effects bullying can have on the victims. The third leading cause of death among young people is suicide.

Studies by Yale University show that victims of bullying are two to seven times more likely to consider suicide than non-victims.

What can we do about it? First, we can talk openly to our kids about it, ask them what they see and experience in school. Kids who are bullied often feel shame and are afraid to talk about. Kids who bully are embarrassed to admit it. We need to talk to our kids and teach them what it means to bully or be bullied. We need to tell them if they see bullying going on, they need to tell an adult, walk away, refuse to participate or in any way be involved. If they are being bullied, they need to know they can confide in you, be believed, and be supported. And we need to work with the schools to implement anti-bullying programs. Too often teachers and administrators are reluctant to admit bullying goes on in their schools. They need to be held accountable and held responsible to take active steps to prevent bullying, and to implement zero tolerance policies in the schools.

I'm sure you've heard about the movie Bully. It is playing right now at the Point Cinema. I'd encourage all of us to go see it with our kids. And then go to your child's school principal and ask to have the film shown in school. It is something we all need to see.

In our Torah portion, people and things infected with the plague of leprosy could be treated with cleansing and rituals, sacrifices and prayer. It will take a little more work than that to rid of us our present-day plagues, but let us all resolve to do our part to end the plague of bullying, for the sake of our children.

Shabbat shalom!