

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Tazria-Metzora

I found an interesting story involving the late Lubavitcher Rebbe. He was speaking with a colleague Rabbi about a member of the community, and it happened that the Rebbe wished that that member would grow a beard. The colleague, seeking to honor the Rebbe offered to so instruct the individual, but the Rebbe asked him not to mention from where the request came.

The rabbi spoke to his friend about the beard, but he wasn't successful in persuading him to grow one. Finally, in desperation, he divulged his secret. "The Lubavitcher Rebbe personally asked that you grow a beard!" The man acquiesced, but during the next meeting with the Rebbe, the Rabbi admitted that the man was not going to grow it, until he learned that the Rebbe had specifically requested him to do so. "But Rebbe, what difference does it make—at least he's grown his beard!" "True," the Rebbe responded, "but I wanted it to be his beard, not my beard."

I appreciate the Rebbe's desire that the man should want to observe the ritual on his own volition. I appreciate the unspoken lesson regarding the Rebbe's humility. He did not want to interfere in the relationship that his rabbinic colleague shared with the man in question. I have to question, though, whether this message is the one we really want to teach. How many of us credit special teachers or coaches with our successes in life. Last weekend, I helped to bury one of the greatest teachers with whom I have been blessed. As his life story unfolded over the course of eulogies, there was no question in my mind that who I am as a Rabbi is the direct result of being Ellis Rivkin's disciple. My track coach from high school, Overton Curtis, taught me the rewards and failings that result from one's attitude in training and in competition. Were it not for the way in which he pushed me, so many of the blessings I have known would have passed me by. There are the teachers whose message we cherish, even while they have no memory of interacting with you. Greg Blache will not remember coaching me at Tulane on route to his own brilliant career coaching in the NFL. On the day I first injured my shoulder, he was the one to tell me to get the stars out of my eyes and get an education. Of course, there are the teachers we never meet, whose lessons we interweave with our very souls, as though they were taught us one on one. Hillel once said (recorded in Pirke Avot), "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when?" I live by this teaching, and with the help of a dear friend (Rev. Leo Woodberry), teach an abbreviated, but wonderfully poignant version of this statement: "Justice is never JUST US." I take credit for being part of the leadership of the march on Columbia, SC, to remove the Confederate Flag from on top the State Capital building. If not for Leo, I would have been uninvolved. Whatever value I have to offer as a teacher, leader, or activist, I owe to the effort, love, and prodding of some other teachers who knowingly or unknowingly, interposed their teachings on my life. Not one ever said, "Maybe I should not have engaged him. It should have been Marc's success, not mine." So, I really take issue with the Rebbe's teaching. If the man is better off wearing the beard, then it is to the Rebbe's credit that he gave the man the impetus to make that decision, but is not the Rebbe's beard, and it takes a great deal of arrogance to assume that the man learned nothing for himself, but was simply trying to obey or impress the Rebbe. It is absolutely our job to help each other grow, and it is not ours to take credit for their growth as though it could not have happened but for our efforts.

This is the problem I see with a traditional way of explaining this week's Torah portion. We read of a tzara'at, an infectious disease that afflicts an individual and separates him from his community. Most commentators will default to agree that the disease is a metaphor for some other ethical, educational, or moral lapse that taints the way in which the world sees him. The job of the priest, according to the commentator is to usher the afflicted person outside of camp, and periodically check the skin to determine whether healing is taking place, or the destruction is beyond hope. A great deal of energy is spent on determining whether the individual is healing or not, though almost no energy is spent on helping him heal. He is ostracized from the community until the Kohen passes judgment determining that he has healed. If he does not, he is never welcomed back. The text calls on us to judge the man, but says nothing about helping rehabilitate or educate him. I read the commentary of the Rebbe and thought of this text and felt angry over the way in which we miss the point. This text screams for an argument. Where we judge and keep ourselves in a place superior to those around us, what keeps them from growth is our arrogance. Even more, we never empower them to teach others. The Rebbe did not give any credit to the man who grew the beard, simply assuming it was only his own greatness that changed the man's mind. It was the man's beard, he made the choice to grow in observance. While I absolutely owe my successes to my teachers, ultimately, I had to make the choice to pay attention and act. We have responsibilities to help educate, rehabilitate people around us, and empower them to teach, as well. No one is to be simply thrown away or judged to be without hope, nor are we allowed to take all of the credit for the growth our students' experience. Both devastate the community and our future. Where we hold our student's dignity as dear as our own; where we commit to helping/teaching those around us who struggle in order to help them grow, we heal the world. Shabbat Shalom.