

Parashat Tazria
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BCC

Did anybody besides me get stuck in traffic today due to the Janitors' Union demonstration on Wilshire Blvd? – most of the day it went on -- from the La Brea Tar pits to Century City. The janitors are asking for a \$1 more an hour. They make less than \$7 an hour now.

I listened to the news commentators on the radio as I headed toward Wilshire. There was no way around it. I had to cross Wilshire to get home; so I knew I was heading toward a “no-go” traffic jam. That’s usually the kind of driving I hate to do – where you’re heading inexorably toward a traffic jam and there’s nothing to be done but enter it and then wait it out.

The reporters were speculating about whether such a major demonstration would be successful. Its purpose was to alert Angelenos to the plight of janitors. It comes after 5 days of striking. The assumption is that if enough people know, they will support the union in their demands. One of the reporters said that success will be determined in part by whether Angelenos today will respond as “citizens” or as “drivers.” If they respond only as drivers, and if the number of people inconvenienced by the demonstration outnumber the number of people who simply hear about it, the janitors could lose potential support. Of course, if those of us inconvenienced can still be good citizens, we may be able to keep a balanced perspective instead of just fuming over our inconvenience.

I was glad the reporters were discussing this. What might I have done had I been left to my own contemplations of no-go traffic? I remained calm (calling upon my training from the mindfulness retreat last November). I felt for the janitors. I gave a thumbs up when it finally came my turn to cross Wilshire. All in all, I realized, I was delayed about 10 minutes. But if I hadn’t been calmed by the reporters, the ten minutes might have felt like hours.

My participation in an event earlier this week also helped me sit in traffic and contemplate the janitors’ plight. On Sunday, Monday and Tuesday Fran and I, along with several other BCCers, attended a conference “devoted to a re-imagining of illness and health.” The brochure described it as “a conference designed to initiate conversations among rabbis and other clergy, Jewish communal workers, physicians, nurses, mental health professionals and congregational leaders.” It was an opportunity to talk with healers and caregivers from several professions.

The words “heal” and “health” both derive from words meaning “whole” [See Webster’s entries on “health,” “heal,” “whole,” “hale,” “cure”]. The word “cure” derives from words meaning “care,” “concern.”

This week’s Torah portion, Tazria [Leviticus 13, in particular], is a good one to host a Jewish conference on healing. In it God instructs Moses and Aaron on the role the priests are to take when people take ill. The priests play the diagnostician. They do not try to cure or heal a sick person, but they do examine people stricken with strange skin eruptions. The text – with more than enough description of skin ailments -- is a little too graphic for some people. It also often seems irrelevant, as it describes practices no longer done, by a priesthood that has long since faded from Jewish life.

But what I like about this portion is the attention given to people who are not well. In order for the priest to determine what he is supposed to determine about the ailing person, he must get near to the person, maybe even touch them. Imagine that!

The daily tasks of the priests described elsewhere in Torah consist primarily of animal sacrifice and temple caretaking, suggesting that priests are often removed from the rest of the Israelites. So it is remarkable, and instructive, I think, to imagine the priests in this capacity – attending to the ill, taking note of those in need of healing. Imagine Aaron, the High Priest, coming near to the weak ones in the midst of the Israelites. Imagine the priests taking the time to speak with the afflicted among the people.

One of the most memorable speakers at the conference this week was Dr. Rachel Remen, a professor at the medical school of UC San Francisco. She teaches a course called, “The Healer’s Art,” and is the author of a bestselling book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal*. Have any of you read it? She has a new volume out as well.

The title of her talk was “Reclaiming Service: Caring for the Soul of the Care-Giver,” and she based it on the kind of teaching she does not only with young medical students, but also the year-long course she offers to seasoned physicians disillusioned with their “calling.” The nation is in a medical crisis, she says, due to managed care among other things, and she cited a recent study done of 464 physicians that revealed that 40% of them are clinically depressed and that 67% have thought seriously of leaving their chosen profession.

Once on a trip to a local hospital to visit a BCCer who was a patient there, I came across a doctor crying in the hallway. I stopped and told her I was a rabbi – and asked if I could help. The doctor immediately began to apologize to me for her tears. It’s been a hard week, she said, I’ll be okay. She went on to say she had just presented a diagnosis of terminal cancer to a woman in her early 40s. I did feel for this doctor, and for her patient, though I also remember feeling pleased at what I saw – a doctor who cries.

I remembered that this week when Dr. Remen told the story of how, as a young intern, she had been reprimanded by her chief resident for crying with a young couple whose baby had just died. Her supervisor told her she had let them down – “they needed you to be strong,” he told her.

“You can burn out doing ‘meaningful’ work,” Dr. Remen told us, “if you lose the meaning.” When the High Priest looked at the afflicted, to determine the nature of their afflictions, I wonder, did he look only at the rash or did he also look into their eyes? Did God give all these commands to the priests to examine the stricken Israelites just to make sure contagion was removed from the camp? Perhaps God gave the priests such instruction in order to move them closer to the people, in particular, closer to the people in need of their attention.

It’s easy when you’re given a job of authority – a high priest, a physician, a CEO, a teacher, a therapist, a rabbi, you can add to the list – it’s easy to put up walls in order to get the job done or just to put on airs because you feel self-important. Similarly, when you do a difficult job that is under-appreciated, a job in which others ignore and underpay you despite the fact that you are indispensable to them – let’s say, a janitor, for example -- it’s also easy to burn out.

I imagine it was really fun today, to stop traffic on Wilshire Blvd. Is anyone planning to go to the Millennium March in Washington later this month? I can’t go this time, but I’ve been to the others. Even though they were held on Sunday, when there’s hardly any traffic to stop in Washington, DC, still there’s something inspiring about walking – as a people – down the main streets of our nation’s capitol. There’s something about being together as a people in huge numbers, asking to be counted.

I wonder if those priests looked into the eyes of the Israelites they were commanded to examine. Perhaps they did only what God specifically told them to do. Perhaps they just looked at the skin

eruptions, one rash after another, and never noticed the human being there at all, never wondered about the person who suffered the affliction. Perhaps they failed the test that God was giving them. Perhaps that is why we no longer have a priesthood, but have turned instead towards those parts of our tradition that call upon us to notice, to wonder, to appreciate.

Earlier today, before I got stuck in traffic, I stopped to thank the parking lot attendant at the Skirball Cultural Center who had helped me round up my USC students who were gathering there for a tour. We told each other our names, "Officer Blacknell," he said, so I said, "Rabbi Edwards."

"Wow," he said, "a lady rabbi. I've never met a lady rabbi."

"You work at the Skirball," I said, "there must be women rabbis walking in here every day."

"Oh," he said.

And then, I thought, well sure, I've walked in here lots of times, I spoke to him just this past Tuesday, but I never stopped to introduce myself to him before. And I worry a little, will I remember Officer Blacknell's name next time I see him?

"People who wonder do not burn out," Dr. Remen told us. I was sitting between two physicians at the time – each of us uttered a little gasp when she said that, and we each rushed to pick up our pens.

"People who wonder do not burn out," we wrote, still earnest students – all three of us. I wonder, though, will I remember her words next time I'm stuck in "no – go" traffic?

Shabbat Shalom