



Metzora

Miserly Marner

I no longer remember the name of my ninth-grade teacher of English literature. But I do remember well one of his important lessons. He taught us that there are many great works of literature that are misunderstood. These are books which are commonly thought to be concerned with one specific theme but are really about something else entirely.

To illustrate his point, he included George Eliot's famous novel, *Silas Marner*, in our list of assigned readings. He pointed out to us that even well-educated individuals assume that this work is all about a pathological miser and is essentially a psychological study of miserly behavior. He thus demonstrated to us that one of the common clues in the highbrow New York Times crossword puzzle is "miserly Marner," for which the correct response is "Silas." The creator of the crossword puzzle is confident that he can safely assume that even his sophisticated audience will readily associate

"miserly" with the hero of Eliot's novel.

Yet, after the class had completed the assignment and read the great novel, we all knew well that miserliness was only a secondary, and quite incidental, theme in this work. On the contrary, the book was a study of several significant issues, ranging from religion to industrialization to community.

Many years later, it occurred to me that my freshman teacher of English literature was on to something that applied not only to classic English literature, but that also could be applied to the weekly Torah portions. Many, even ardent students of the weekly parsha fail to identify important themes, and very substantial lessons, in the Torah portion.

This week's parsha is a case in point. We will be reading Metzora (Leviticus 14:1-15:33). Most of us assume that the content of this Torah reading is limited to its title, Metzora, usually translated as a "leper." On the surface, this assumption is true. It is all about symptoms of a once common and fairly widespread disease, usually identified with leprosy. As such, this Torah portion heads the list of those passages in the Torah which seem irrelevant to contemporary life and which have little to teach us about human conduct.



But the rabbis thought otherwise. Famously, they saw the connection between the Hebrew word *metzora*, leper, and the Hebrew phrase *motzi ra*, "he who expresses malice." They go further and maintain that the disease is a punishment for the egregious sin of spreading malicious gossip, and countless rabbinic sermons have used this week's Torah portion as a springboard for a lecture about the evils of maligning others and of the abuse of the gift of speech.

But there is another, lesser-known, hidden theme in this week's Torah portion which the rabbis of the Talmud have identified. For *metzora*, besides being a contraction of the two words *motzi ra*, can also be decoded as a contraction of the two words *tzar ayin*, "narrow eyes," a Hebrew euphemism for miserly behavior. A stingy person is referred to in Hebrew as a *tzar ayin*, a narrow-eyed individual, one who selfishly sees only himself and does not see the needs of another.

The source of this approach is to be found in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Arachin* 16a, which includes *tzarut ayin*, stinginess, as one of the sins for which "leprosy" is a punishment. The Talmud finds a basis for this contention in the phrase to be found in chapter 14 verse 35, which describes the procedure to be followed when an

individual discovers a "leprous blemish" in "his" house. The school of Rabbi Ishmael taught that such bizarre blemishes were the consequences of the sinful attitude of one who thinks that his "house" is his and his alone, and who selfishly does not share his possessions with others.

Representatives of the nineteenth-century Mussar movement, which emphasized the central importance of ethical behavior in Jewish religious practice, used this week's Torah portion to severely criticize miserliness and undue emphasis upon the retention of one's possessions. Thus, one of the leaders of this movement, Rabbi Simcha Ziv, known as "the 'Alter (Old Man)' of Kelm" writes at length about the "shameful behavior of *kamtzanut* (stinginess)."

Rabbi Ziv, whom I'll refer to from hereon as "the Alter," delves into medieval rabbinic literature and finds a treasure trove of quotations condemning miserliness, and which find miserly behavior widespread in the communities in which they lived.

One example is this quotation from the work known as *Sefer HaYashar*, "The Book of the Upright," which is attributed to one of the outstanding leaders of French Jewry in the twelfth century, Rabbenu Tam: "An individual's miserliness is not limited to just one aspect of his overall



behavior. Rather, the stingy person will fail to perform even basic mitzvot, good deeds, because he sees no benefit to be gained from performing them. If performing such good deeds will cost him even a minute monetary loss, he will find all sorts of excuses to avoid performing those good deeds. His stinginess will make it impossible for him to be a truly pious person."

Interestingly, and almost paradoxically, the Alter finds that the character trait of miserliness is not always a negative one. It is sometimes praiseworthy, particularly when it is utilized as an antidote to a very different negative trait, namely undue extravagance. The Alter recognizes that whereas many individuals in the communities with which he was familiar were overly stingy, there were many who were given to excessive spending, often falling into irreversible debt in the process. He has no difficulty in finding earlier rabbinic authorities who condemn excessive spending as well as miserly selfishness.

In a collection of the Alter's personal correspondence, we have an example of just how careful he encouraged his students to be in order to avoid profligate spending. In a letter to three of his young students, he urges them to conserve the stationery at their disposal and join together in writing letters to him

on just one sheet of paper. He concludes his letter thus: "Remember that spending even one penny for naught is a violation of the prohibition against waste."

The Alter's insistence that one strike a balance between selfish stinginess and wasteful spending is a useful teaching for those of us who live in today's affluent society. Often, we adopt distorted priorities and practice thrift with regard to important societal causes, and spend excessively on frivolous ones.

As always, Maimonides said it best when he advocated what has come to be called the "golden mean," and advised us to carefully contemplate the downsides of extreme behaviors and adopt moderation in all of our endeavors.🕒