

Beyond Twelve Gates -- Parshas Tazria / Metzora Rabbi Ze'ev Smason -- April 12, 2013

How can a man impress a woman? The question has befuddled generations of men. Many go the traditional route and offer a few thoughtful compliments while subtly mentioning that they were all-county shot put in high school. But not many do what a Jonesboro, Ark., man did: Stage a knife attack in a parking lot.

Not surprisingly, Jeffrey Tyler Siegel's ruse didn't go quite as planned. Siegel and a woman he was out on a date with were walking after an evening out. That's when a man in black appeared and told Siegel, "You can go. But your girlfriend stays." Siegel's date screamed and ran off to get help, while Siegel claimed he stayed and fought the knife-wielding attacker. Police and canine units searched the surrounding area for the attacker but came up empty. After a few hours, the hunt was called off.

Investigators contacted the woman about the attack a few days later, and she said something interesting: Siegel had been texting a lot and acting odd in the minutes leading up to the attack. Police brought the hapless Casanova in for questioning. After they assured him that they wouldn't press charges if he came clean, he spilled the beans. He'd set up the entire thing as a way to impress his lady friend. The "attacker" was a friend, and everything had been staged. The man's date commented that the fake attack didn't have the effect Siegel had hoped it might. It "was not very heroic," she said.

What is the best way to make a positive impression? Be a *mensch*. The word *mensch* means "a person of integrity and honor." According to Leo Rosten, author of *The Joys of Yiddish*, a *mensch* is "someone to admire and emulate; someone of noble character. The key to being "a real *mensch*" is nothing less than character, rectitude, dignity, a sense of what is right, responsible, decorous." In Yiddish (from which the word has migrated into American English), *mensch* roughly means "good person." A "*mensch*" is a particularly good person, like "a stand-up guy," a person with the qualities one would hope for in a dear friend or trusted colleague. Impress your friends -- and G-d: be a *mensch*.

Parshas Tazria / Metzora Leviticus 12:1 -- 15:33

Parshas Tazria describes in great detail the varying manifestations of the disease called *tzara'as*. Although it has commonly been mistranslated as leprosy, this skin disease bears little resemblance to any bodily ailment transmitted through normal exposure. Rather, *tzara'as* is the physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise, a punishment from G-d primarily for the sin of speaking *loshon hara*. *Loshon hara*, meaning literally 'the evil tongue', is often translated as 'gossip'. However, *loshon hara* is the Hebrew term for derogatory speech that is true. *Motzei shem rah* refers to derogatory speech about others that is false and slanderous.

The *metzora* (one diagnosed with *tzara'as*) was to be sent into isolation, tear his garments, and to call out 'contaminated, contaminated!' Since he abused his power of speech, sowing strife and distancing people from one another, it was fitting that he too should suffer the effects of isolation. Parshas Metzora continues the discussion of *tzara'as*, detailing the purification process of the *metzora*. *Tzara'as* could afflict ones clothing and home, and necessitate the burning of ones clothes and demolishing of ones home if the disease spread. The various punishments recorded in the Torah are not intended to serve as revenge for the sin; they are measures that will hopefully restore the person to the correct path.

Rabbinic Ruminations

A number of recent experiments suggest that among many atheists, their atheism is only skin-deep. As part of a study in Finland, volunteers were asked to read aloud ten uncomfortable statements, such as, "I challenge G-d to make my life unbearable", "I challenge G-d to brutally murder my parents", and "I challenge G-d to let me die of cancer." Simultaneously, a skin conductance meter was used to measure the volunteer's physiological response and emotional arousal. The skin test revealed that the atheists were just as bothered as the believers.

In a different study both atheists and believers were instructed to ask both G-d and Santa Claus to do terrible things to themselves and their families. The volume of the volunteer's voices was measured as they read the various difficult statements. The results showed that both atheists and believers spoke more softly when challenging G-d to do terrible things than when they challenged Santa. Since an atheist ought to regard any statement calling on G-d to do something as meaningless, researchers sought to explain the discrepancy between the self-reporting of the atheists and their physiological responses. Theories include that atheists might believe deep down in a deity, or might once have believed and can't completely shake the notion.

In the book of Nehemiah it says, *"You are the L-rd, our G-d who chose Abram ... and changed his name to Abraham."* (9:7) What is the special character of Abraham and his descendants? *"You found his heart faithful before You."* (9:8) Abraham was the first *ma'amin* -- a true believer in the Almighty. We are *ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim* -- believers, the children of believers. While all humans can recognize G-d and have a relationship with Him, recognition of our Creator is deeply embedded in the heart and soul of every Jew.

Quote of the Week

I'm going to be meeting people today who talk too much -- people who are selfish, egotistical, ungrateful. But I won't be surprised or disturbed, for I can't imagine a world without such people. -- *Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*

Joke of the Week

Guy: I lost my job.
Friend: It could have been worse.
Guy: I broke my leg.
Friend: It could have been worse
Guy: My wife left me.
Friend: It could have been worse.
Guy: I'm about to lose my house.
Friend: It could have been worse.
Guy: Why do you keep saying, "Could have been worse?? How could things possibly be worse?!?"
Friend: All those things could have happened to me!

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