

In 1982, Patriot's Day in Boston was sunny and hot. Temperatures reached the low 80s as a record number of runners – more than 6500 – gathered in Hopkinton for the start of the 89th running of the Boston Marathon. It turned out to be one of the closest Marathon races ever. Some of you may remember it. It was a race dominated by elite runners Dick Beardsley and Alberto Salazar and is referred to as the “Duel in the Sun” for what quickly became a two-man race between Dick Beardsley and Alberto Salazar. At the end of the day, Salazar beat Beardsley by just two seconds.

I had never followed the Boston Marathon before 1982. In Shaker Heights, Ohio, we did not celebrate Patriot's Day. And yet, on that Marathon Monday in 1982, I came home from school and immediately turned on the TV to see the results of the race in Boston. April is the time when college letters arrive for high school seniors throughout the country, and I had recently been accepted to Boston University. I clearly remember thinking to myself that next year, I would be standing along the crowd-lined streets of Boston or Brookline and watch the race first-hand as Freshman at college – the first year of what I had heard called “the best years of our lives” -- college.

We cannot help but think about our own college experiences – our classes, our friends and teachers, our lives on campus and off– as we follow the tragic events that occurred on Marathon Monday at Virginia Tech. Monday was a day of ironies as I found myself flipping TV channels between the Boston Marathon and the Blacksburg Massacre – trying to shield our pre-teen, pre-college aged daughters from the horrifying events that occurred on the usually tranquil campus of Virginia Tech University. The unbridled joy that I have always associated with Patriot's Day and the Marathon in Boston were dampened not only by the cold and the wind, but by the nightmare of what was occurring simultaneously in another US college town as events unraveled into a tragedy in just a matter of hours.

I thought back twenty-five years and put myself back on the Boston University campus as a Freshman in September 1982 and wondered, like many of you, what I would have done; how I might have reacted; how my parents may have felt at home in suburban Cleveland had such a tragedy occurred as part of my own repertoire of college experiences. I could not even imagine it. I came to Boston – to the big city on the east coast – prepared and ready...aware of the new landscape....yet, now that I look back on it – so young and naïve.

I arrived at college with clear marching instructions: do well in classes, book flights out of Boston for Thanksgiving early, study hard, don't walk through Kenmore Square at night, avoid the Orange Line of the T, don't try to drive a car in Cambridge, stay away from the Combat Zone, get an escort from Mugar Library back to the dorms after dark, walk on Comm. Ave. where it is light rather than on Bay State Road after sundown, watch your pocketbook on the MBTA. An innocent girl from the Midwest, I thought that if I followed that straightforward prescription I would be successful and safe. And I was. I survived. And I thrived. Except for a pickpocket on the Green Line one day who took my wallet only to find 10 dollars in it, it was a glorious four years. I was living the American dream – here in Boston, this great American collegiate city.

Every college student deserves to have the experience that we enjoyed during those “best years of our lives.” Every young person – whether in college or not -- should feel empowered and energized – even immortal. This is the fleeting prerogative that is ours as young adults our twenties and, that later on, experience and age takes away from us in exchange for insight and wisdom. The students at Virginia Tech lost more than 32 classmates, colleagues, friends, teachers, members of their community...they lost their dreams and they were forced to relinquished their youth. With no warning, one person changed the course of events for them and for all of us from good to evil; from safety to danger; from dreams to nightmares; from life to death. We saw gratuitous hatred spread like a plague – no different than the way in which the plagues of boils or

cattle disease or frogs or lice spread through Egypt at the time of Moses and Pharaoh.

The ugly events that took place this week at Virginia Tech coincide with a likewise ugly Torah and Haftarah portion this week – the portion called Tazria-Metzora. It is the dread of every spring Bar and Bat Mitzvah student that he or she be assigned to this portion on which to celebrate his or her coming of age! It is the portion that deals with what was called in the Biblical world “*Tza-ra-at*” -- some type of flesh-eating skin disease that today we call leprosy. In great detail, the Torah portion explains the ways in which our ancient forbears understood and tried to root out this cluster of diseases that attacked both the human body as well as the walls and surfaces of homes. We find in Tazria-Metzora a detailed accounting of all of the ways in which the society responded to those struck with either leprosy of the skin or leprosy of the home. There was a strict regimen to be followed that included prayers, incantations, healing rituals, medications – carried out by the priests of Ancient Israel. Yet, ultimately, after all other methods failed, the lepers were forced out of Israelite society and left to dwell – isolated – outside the gates of the city. The punishment of excommunication – called *kareit* in Hebrew – the physical removal of a Jew from the community – is the most serious form of penalty we find in the Bible, and is seen as equivalent to punishment for a capital offense.

More fascinating than the Biblical text, however, is the treatment that this subject receives in later Talmudic and legal material. More than a gory prescription for what to do with oozing sores and mysterious bodily fluids, Tazria-Metzora has been understood by later generations as a profound comment on the ways in which social evils poison and pollute our world. They point out that the leprosy stands as an outward symbol for the evils of our society: for gossip and malicious speech, for theft, for lying and cheating. It is not simply that these bodily diseases come about as a result of our sins – we completely reject that assertion. It is, rather, that our ancestors draw a graphic and credible comparison between

diseases of the body and diseases of the society that serves as a warning to those of us who wish to live *among* others and not *isolated* from them.

The more we learn of the killer of this past week in our own country, the more we understand just how much sickness can be spread by one person who was not capable of living *among* others as part of a community and who, for reasons we will never fully understand, distanced himself from other human beings. And just as the leper was feared contagious, and just as social ills have a way of spreading through and destroying the fabric of a community, so too, did this killer find himself caught in the contagion of murder. His anger, vitriol, spite, jealousy, paranoia led him to an isolation that turned to violence and, once unleashed on the campus of Virginia Tech, like any infectious disease, was impossible to contain, and swiftly reached epidemic proportion in the form of mass murder. Like the wildfires of South Florida this week. Like the oozing and spreading sores of leprosy or the creeping patches of psoriasis....like a dramatic outbreak of hives or the sudden onset chicken pox. Like the gossip that proliferates in our communities. Like the evil we speak of others that contaminate not only the ones we slander, but that also poison our families, our society, and ourselves. We need only strike the first match, or speak the first cruel word, or whisper the initial rumor – and suddenly our deeds take on a life of their own, and then go on to control and take over the life – or death – of an entire community.

So, where is the comfort this week? What cure did the ancient Israelites ultimately find for the plague of leprosy? What is our own antidote to the social ills that plague our society? How do we stop ourselves and others from entering the darker side of humanity that has the power to strip away our dreams and hopes... our very lives?

We Jews are commanded simply: to live. And for us, that means to live fully, completely, honestly, wisely. Wherever possible, to turn away from evil and try to infuse good in our lives and in the lives of others. To work – really work – to stay

within and maintain a sense of community; to avoid cynicism and isolation; to spread words of blessing; to make goodness contagious. And most of all, to realize that while we do not have control over many things during the course of our short existence on this planet, we can determine the way in which we respond to personal problems and societal challenges and life's bitter twists and turns. Even during this dark week in American history, we find examples of goodness and courage and life-affirming gestures that make life worth living. The 72 year-old Holocaust survivor who on Monday – ironically, on Holocaust Memorial Day -- placed himself between his students and the murderer in order to save young lives; the student who probably spared an entire lecture hall of people by crawling out from his hiding place under a desk so that he could move a table in front of the classroom door in order to block the gunman from entering.

While there is little optimism to be found in the Torah portion this week, and no meaning to explain the senseless deaths that occurred in Blacksburg, Virginia, we do find a modicum of hope in our Haftarah this week. In this week's Haftarah, four lepers have been excommunicated to outside the city walls of Samaria, which is under attack to such a great degree that some of its inhabitants turn to cannibalism to survive. Outside the city limits, with no access to food or medicine, the four lepers wonder if their deaths will come from hunger, illness or violence when suddenly one asks the other, "Why should we sit here, waiting to die? Why don't we go over to the besieging Aramean army who will either give us scraps of food or kill us on the spot? We have nothing to lose."

The four lepers set off, and to their surprise, find the besieging Aramean soldiers have abandoned their camp, leaving their stockpiles and supplies for anyone who might want them. The four lepers feast like kings and then, shockingly, they suppress any impulse toward vengeance against the city that left them to die, and return to inform the Samaritans that the siege is over.

In the span of a day, the lepers are transformed from the weak to the powerful. In the morning, they had nothing, not even a reason to live, and by nightfall, they had the knowledge to save the once-mighty city of Samaria. They "choose life"

not only for themselves, but for the entire Samaritan population as well. They cannot help their illness, they cannot control the Aramean siege against Samaria, but they do choose to make a decision in the direction of life that ultimately brings salvation. These are the every day people who become every day heroes. These are the people who modestly and humbly hold the world together. These are the people who find a corner of light in the darkness and whose optimism inspires us to continue believing that the world is indeed a good place even in the midst of catastrophe. These are the people – and they are in this sanctuary, all around us, in fact – that make us feel that we are not alone on our journeys.

And so, a quarter of a century later, a few college degrees later, with a lot of life experience gathered and children of our own who have their sights set on making their college years “the best years of their lives,” I have come to learn that we are never really safe; that we are never fully out of harm’s way; that our survival is less a result of skill and more a product of luck. The *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that we read on the High Holy Days during which we posit “Who shall live and who shall die” takes on more meaning as we get older and begin to look at the seemingly random ways loved ones are taken from us, and at the often devastating means by which people meet dying and death. When I was a kid, I used to look around the huge sanctuary at Fairmount Temple in Cleveland, listen to the *Unetaneh Tokef* and worry about who might die by those terrible means and not be with us the following Rosh Hashanah. I used to think it was a cruel way to begin the New Year – to posture and predict and rehearse tragedy. Now that I am an adult, I muse more about who will *live and* how rather than focus on who will die and by what means. Ultimately, we all learn that life is about how to live, and then, how to die. We choose life even despite the lurking dangers when we live our lives most fully and most completely – always in the shadow of the unknown, forever with questions, and rarely with certainty – but, God willing, never alone.