

METZORA: THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

- Nisson Shulman.

Nega starts small but grows. Lashon Hara is the same way. Hence the connection. The "Slippery Slope" in Medical Ethics is the same way. Terri Schiavo's murder - for that is what removing the feeding tube of a patient is, when she gets food and nutrition no other way - is an example of how far we have slid down this slope. Euthanasia has now become almost legal, considering the recent court decisions. There is an outcry to legalize it. It is part of the slippery slope. Nega and Oneg reversed letters. Great oneg from medical advances. But great responsibility to use them in a way that oneg will not turn to nega.

TAZRIA or METZORA

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

(Some of the thoughts in this sermon were inspired by statements made by Rabbi Moses David Tendler in his Medical Ethics lectures)

The portion describes nega, the plague usually associated with leprosy. And while leprosy as described in the Torah no longer exists since it has significant differences from the plague today called "leprosy", the moral teachings from the Torah reading do exist and apply today, and in fact are constantly being discussed and debated.

In the field of medicine, of course, cure is only part of the challenge faced by the medical team. Another great task that applies to those involved in health care as well as to all of society, is to exercise judicious controls to limit the spread of disease, and to prevent contagion. Society has become acutely aware of this since the threat of Mad Cow disease, Foot and Mouth Disease, and especially since the Gulf War with its terrifying threat of germ warfare.

In the realm of Medical Ethics, which deals, not only with medical halakhah, but also with the morality of medicine, the same is true. For there is moral contagion as well as physical contagion. It has been given a name, and is called "The Slippery Slope". It means that a seemingly innocuous beginning can lead to terrible consequences.

For instance: One of the main objections you hear in society today from Jews and non-Jews against surrogate motherhood, in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination, and all manner of breakthroughs in the area of conception and birth, is the fear that it might be the tip of the slippery slope. Will genetic engineering, for instance, with its vast promise of alleviation and even cure of terrible birth defects and handicaps, lead to the control of human recreation, to such manipulation as to introduce the destruction of family, the introduction of slavery, the denigration of the Tzelem Elokim into "thinghood" to be manipulated, as Huxley portrayed in his novel "The Brave New World"? A small beginning, fear some scientists can push us, as they describe it, "down the slippery slope".

Man cannot be in man's service. So, while surrogate motherhood can possibly open new doors to

solve infertility, as we have seen by a woman carrying a child for her sister who had no womb, it can also cause people to make contracts which, if deemed valid, would put one person in physical service to another, and this is would be another beginning of a slide down "the slippery slope"!

There is a great difference between our attitude towards a patient, suffering from an incurable disease, who himself refuses treatment because he is in intractable pain, and the callous disregard for life which had been reported some time ago in a scandal in one hospital in America where doctors had created a bulletin board to classify patients A,B,C,D, where C and D meant that if there was a heart attack they were not to be treated; a case that has received much notoriety because it borders on passive euthanasia. This is part of that slippery slope! And now that the courts of the land have in effect legalized euthanasia by refusing to hear arguments for reinserting the feeding tube for the late Terri Schiavo, allowing her to starve to death, we see how far down the slippery slope we have already descended.

To Jews, suicide is forbidden because the body is not our own, it belongs to God. To us, helping someone commit suicide or killing them in the name of mercy is no less than murder. So removing the feeding tube from a patient who has no other means of nourishment, thus causing her to starve to death, is far down the slippery slope, and no different from Holland's vote to legalize euthanasia.

Yet, never before had it been suggested by even the most extreme proponents of euthanasia, that suicide is an ethical requirement. But that is exactly what was once proposed by a respected governor of one of the States of the United States, Richard D. Lamm, Governor of Colorado, who said, that it is the duty of people who are old and ill to die and to make room for other people.

Governor Lamm had said that elderly people who are terminally ill have "the duty to die and get out of the way" instead of trying to prolong their lives by artificial means. People who die without having life artificially extended are similar to "leaves falling off a tree and forming humus for other plants to grow up", declared the governor. You've got a duty to die and get out of the way," said the Governor. "Let the other society, our kids, build a reasonable life." That is a long way down that slope. Like Sparta used to expose unwanted children; like Eskimos, which the Governor cited, used to expose old people to die in the ice and snow, let us get rid of our unwanted elderly.

Is this preposterous? Is this inconceivable? Consider that the slippery slope, which ultimately disregards human life, is represented most infamously by the Nazis, yimach shemam, who began by refusing treatment to incurables, then to the crippled and severely handicapped, then slid further down the slope, as we all know, to the murder of those they considered undesirable, and ultimately, to genocide, and to the kind of science practiced by such as Mengele, yimach shemo. That is the bottom of the slippery slope.

That lesson is taught by our Torah portion today. For in parshas Tazria we read about the spread of the metzora disease from its tiny, innocuous beginning.

There are a number of Biblical and rabbinic statements stressing this. In Proverbs we read *Poter mayim reshis madon* (Proverbs 17:14). We all know the aphorism *avera goreret avera* (Avot 4:2). The rabbis stressed this idea by associating leprosy with such moral failings as slander, stressing that just as leprosy has a small, insignificant beginning, but ultimately becomes all consuming, so, too, moral failings such as slander may begin very small and seem inconsequential, but ultimately, like an epidemic, may rage out of control and consume all before it.

And that is what is found so often in society today. It began with the fine sounding phrase like “dying with dignity”. Rather should they have stressed “living with dignity”, living with charity and kindness and love. If a person lives with such dignity then their lives are worthy and their death cannot be spoken of as undignified. In fact, the struggle, heroically, even for moments of life is dignified. And now we find that instead of dying with dignity, it has become a duty to die! That is what the Gemara says, *Yetzer hara, hayom omer lo ase kach, machar omer lo ase kach...ad sheomer lo avod avoda zara* (Shabbat 95b). That's what happens when you get away from the moral commitments of the Divine Law. You think that you are making a slight, small deviation, and that it is affecting no one else, and when you are through you find that everybody's life is affected.

The Torah speaks about *nega*. *Nega* is plague. If you reverse the word *nega*, you get *oneg*, a joy. *Nega* and *oneg* are reversible. We start out in life with amazing breakthroughs in medicine, laser treatments, catscans, genetic secrets applied to medicine, all of which are wonderful. That's *oneg*. But the very *oneg* is reversible and can become *nega*.

This idea is a central theme of the parsha of *nega*; Why is *tzaraas* the *mida keneged mida* of *lashon hara*? Because it starts small, almost imperceptible, but then it defies control.... *Adam ki yihiye beor besaro nega tzaraas vehuva el hakohen*. That's the point. If it is only on the surface, yet the kohen with his trained spiritual eye can see the *nolad*, recognizing that what seems to be no more significant than a skin rash, can go down to the very roots of the personality. We, as a *mamleches kohanim vegoy kadosh* have to be *roim es hanolad* in this and in every situation. For we Jews, more than anyone else, have a vested interest in life, of making all people aware of the sanctity of life. Our own safety and survival as Jews can be at stake.

Yes, our safety and our survival, for this principle is part of human nature, and it is also part of international relations.

It is part of human nature, and we understand that from the equation our sages made between the physical *tzaraat* and *lashon hara*. And *lashon hara* can affect a people too! We used to speak glibly, for instance, of JAPs. Jewish American Princesses. Later we extended it to the male, princes as well as princesses. It was not a nice term, but we felt that as long as it is in the family, it can't do much harm. Now we find that it is a term used very often by anti-Semites in ugly, smearing, loathsome ways, and that on the College campus and in society it is doing a great deal of harm, not only to our image, not only to our self-respect, but to our relations with others. And in fact the stereotype has done much to foster intermarriage, because many of our young men and women have actually been brainwashed to think there is something less desirable about a Jewish mate than a non-Jewish one!

Obviously, lashon hara about the State of Israel has done terrible things to us, and is a weapon wielded freely by our enemies. From the time they equated Zionism with racism; through the war in Lebanon when we could do no right and they could do no wrong; to the present condition where even some of our Jewish people are believing what our enemies say about us, and where reporters the world over skew their view and consequently their news; this is a manifestation of nega, a clear indication how words can hardly be halted in their flight to do pernicious harm. Small things lead to large. I suggest we must be roim es hanolad, and that we cannot allow accusations against our people to take root without protesting vehemently.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)