

Today ... If You Will Hear His Voice

There are many legends told about the third-century Rabbi Joshua ben Levi. He is said to have conversed with the Angel of Death and lived to tell the tale (BT Berachot 51a). He was offered a glimpse of the gates of hell, where he saw the horrific torments of the wicked (*The Book of Legends* 570:312, which cites *Beit Hamidrash* 1:147-149). And he was afforded a view of the world to come, entering the Garden of Eden without the taste of death (BT Ketubot 77b and *Derech Eretz Zuta* 1). And on more than one occasion, he is said to have met Elijah the Prophet, who – our tradition says – will announce the coming of the messiah.

Here is one such story from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked Elijah, “When will the messiah come?” Elijah replied, “Go ask him yourself.” “And where does he dwell?” asked Joshua. “At the entrance of Rome¹,” Elijah replied. “And by what sign will I recognize him?” Joshua asked. And Elijah answered, “He is sitting among the poor lepers. All of them untie their bandages at once and replace them together, but the messiah unties and replaces his bandages one by one. For he thinks, ‘If I should be wanted, I must not be delayed.’”

So, Rabbi Joshua went and greeted the messiah at the entrance of Rome. “*Shalom alechah, rabi umori*” – peace be upon you, my master and teacher – he said. “Peace be upon you, O son of Levi,” the messiah replied.

“When will you come, master?” Joshua asked. And the messiah said, “Today.”

[At this point, Joshua returns to the land of Israel—and clearly the messiah has not come.] He returned to Elijah and said, “The messiah lied to me! He said he would come ‘today,’ but he did not come.” Elijah answered him, “This is what he said to you: ‘Today ... אִם-בְּקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמָעוּ ... if you will hear his voice’ (Psalm 95:7).”

¹ Some versions include—and others omit—the word רומי, Rome. The standard Talmud text omits it, though, to take one example, the midrashic collection *Tanna d'vei Eliyahu Zuta* includes it (see [here](#)).

This midrash is no simple morality tale. It's a biting indictment of Roman society and a stirring charge to those who would heed its message. The story's lepers signify the most isolated members of society, and the messiah calls us to hear their voice.

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This is also the theme of this week's Torah portion. We read in Tazria-Metzora of the disease known as *tzaraat*, a discoloration or deformity that makes its host impure. The Greek term for *tzaraat* is λέπρα, leading to the English term "leprosy." But in fact, *tzaraat* and λέπρα refer to a wide range of diseases, not just "leprosy."²

A person with *tzaraat* was to be sent outside the camp (Lev. 13:46). And if the story ended there, the Torah would be no better than the Romans ignoring the lepers at their gate. But our text insists that the priest continue to check on such people every seven days until they're healed and ready to come home. Indeed, the 14th-century rabbi Jacob ben Asher emphasized that it was the priest himself, the most noble member of ancient Israelite society, whose sacred duty it is to "come toward him to welcome him back" (Tur HaAroch 14:2:1).³ The priests model the ultimate vision of a society in which all people – even those once rightly turned away – are welcome.

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Which brings us back to Joshua ben Levi. He saw firsthand that the messiah himself sat among the lepers. He swallows his discomfort, spending long enough with the afflicted to know who wraps their bandages all at once and who treats one bandage at a time. Only in this stance of intense vulnerability can Joshua succeed in finding the messiah. And even though he was initially distressed that the messiah didn't come right away, Joshua does learn an important lesson from Elijah.

That lesson is illustrated in a second story about Joshua ben Levi, in which the Talmud (Ketubot 77b) describes another debilitating disease, this one called *ra'atan*, a hideous malady best known for the flies that infested the infected.

Rabbi Yoḥanan would announce: Be careful of the flies found on those afflicted with *ra'atan*. Rabbi Zeira would not sit in a spot where the wind blew from their direction. Rabbi Elazar would not enter the tent of one afflicted

² See entry for λέπρα in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (ed. Frederick William Danker), p. 592.

³ "The important part of the Torah's message is that the victim of *tzaraat* who has now been cured does not have to come the priest, but the priest comes toward him to welcome him back to the fold" (Tur HaAroch). See also 17th-century Kli Yakar's comment: "He is not brought to the priest but rather the priest goes out to him." Both are comments on Lev. 14:2.

with *ra'atan*, and **Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi would not eat eggs from an alley** in which someone afflicted with *ra'atan* lived.

However, **Rabbi Joshua ben Levi would attach himself to them and study Torah** with them.⁴

Joshua, I'd like to think, learned something important from his visit to the messiah, and he used his actions to speak louder than words. When faced with people whom society maligns, even if they have a good reason, it is supremely sacred welcome them back with open arms.

In each of our communities, there are outcasts, those who have been turned away because of one perceived impurity or another. It may be perfectly correct that they have been separated; they may well have deserved it. But this separation is always to be seen as temporary, as a less-than-ideal situation that should be fixed as soon as possible. As Jews, we bear the message that each of us should regularly go out to those who are cast out, to check on them in the hopes that they are ready to return to the full community, and to be ready to receive them when they are.

This is what it means to be a "nation of priests," as God calls us before giving us the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:6). We are to follow the example of the priests in this week's Torah portion, to make it our habit to uphold the sacred duty of reaching out toward one another.

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Tradition teaches that a messiah is born every generation; but no one, not even the chosen one, knows who the messiah is.⁵ That's why we invite Elijah to the naming of every newborn so the two might become acquainted just in case. And that's why we are taught always to treat each person we meet as if we were facing the messiah – because who knows? We might be.

This can be among the most challenging expectations of our tradition, to regard as sacred those whom our peers have deemed dangerous. But Joshua ben Levi proved it was possible. None of us will be able to succeed all the time, but in reminding ourselves of this most noble ideal, perhaps, in working together and for a very long time, we might bring nearer the day when all in the world see one another not with suspicion but with longing; not with fear but with love.

⁴ Translation slightly modified from sefaria.org (see [here](#)).

⁵ According to Tuv HaAaretz (38a) of Rabbi Natan Shapira (1585–1633). See Robert Levine's *There is No Messiah and You're It* p. 77.