

“Unleashing Your Indomitable Spirit”
April 25, 2009 / 3 Iyar 5769
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On March 28 CBS reported the following story. “Three years ago Lee Spivak sliced off the tip of his finger in the propeller of a hobby shop airplane. Spivak’s brother, Alan, a research scientist, sent him a special powder and told him to sprinkle it on the wound. Four weeks later the wound completely healed and the entire tip of his finger grew back.” I know it sounds like science fiction. I know it sounds bizarre and I know it is unbelievable, but there is real science behind this. Stephen F. Badylak of the University of Pittsburgh, explains that this is a field of research known as “Regenerative Medicine.” Working at the McGowen Institute for Regenerative Medicine, Dr. Badylak shows that embedded within every cell is an extra cellular matrix with the capability to regenerate.

The program then turned to Dr. Anthony Atella at Wake Forest University, where his lab is working on a regenerated heart valve. Dr. Atella points out that they are working on 18 different types of tissue, organs and muscles. He makes the point that almost all cells are ready to regenerate if researchers can prod them into action. “Cells have all the genetic information necessary to make new tissue and this is what they are programmed to do.”

Cut again, this time to Dr. Patrick Shenau at Jefferson Hospital. Dr. Shenau is in the middle of a bladder transplant with an organ built from the patient’s own cells. The cells were grown in a lab and seeded onto a bladder scaffolding which in turn produced a functioning new organ. Next, the program comes to a close with the reporter sitting with Dr. Steven Nichtberger, a member of our own congregation. Dr. Nichtberger heads up Tengion, a company that produces the scaffolding for bladders, bladders that have already been used at Wake Forest University. I am totally blown away. I sat, mouth gaping, wondering what I had just seen. It was like a science fiction movie, the only thing is, it was real and not some futuristic glance. It is real and it is now and once again, as a man of God, I am astounded by the capacity with which God has created human beings.

We have an incredible capacity for recovery, whether emotional or physical and, in fact, we are born with the ability to recuperate. Although this week’s portion focuses on disease, there is a subtle message embedded here. It is about the aptitude people have to start again. That is the story we have in front of us. Although the Haftarah focuses on miracles, we find that in recovery, it is the Torah reading which suggests it may be a regular occurrence in our lives. Even more interesting is the fact that the only one involved in this recovery is the suffering patient. Sure the priest diagnoses the illness and the Kohen announces the recovery, but it is clear from the text that the Kohen has nothing to do with it. The Kohen recognizes the change and sees the difference, but he has little to do with the recovery. That’s on the afflicted, and it’s why the commentaries make it abundantly clear that the Kohen was to go out of the camp to see the person who has been quarantined.

V’yatza hakohen el m’chutz la’machaneh V’raah hokohen v’hinei nirpah negah. “The priest went outside of the camp to see if the leper had been healed... the leper is brought back into the camp.” Like so much of the Torah, a close reading is necessary to understand the full impact of the verse. The Kohen goes out of the camp, where the afflicted person has been alone for quite some time. He goes to see the leper where he is. The Torah describes no intervention, “ and then the priest goes to see him.” We are left to wonder what the leper was doing all this time and we are left to wonder how he healed. It is clear he was suffering. It is clear that he had something wrong with him, and now he has been restored, but how did he get there? We want to know. We want to know how to bring healing into our lives. The Hebrew construct doesn’t even give us a hint. The

construct of the word *nirpah* suggests it was passive healing. Embedded within the commentaries is a stream of thought that helps. Each in their own way teaches that leprosy is brought on by misbehavior and common misuse of our words. Say the rabbis in the Metzorah, "Leprosy comes from the words *motzi shem rah*, to speak ill of someone else." That comment is so powerful. Implicit in this approach to disease is the understanding that we have and must play a role in our own lives. Implicit in the blame game is the understanding that if you brought it on yourself, then you can work toward your recovery and avoid it in the future.

In that vein, this week's portion about leprosy is not about the disease, it's about the recovery. It's easy to blame the victim and it's easy to ask the question, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?" However, that line of thinking will only get us so far. Don't get me wrong, we need to wallow in our misery a little. We need to sing the sad song for a bit, but please know that you have to come out of it. Know that a new day will dawn, know a rebirth is on the way but you have to be prepared to participate and you have to be prepared to assist. We are resilient, we are resourceful and we have to have the courage to forge ahead to healing.

At some point, we have all felt so sick that we couldn't continue on. It's possible to continue on, if we just hear the words, "You are going to be fine." The person suffering just needs to know they will be OK. When they realize this, the distress begins to subside. I imagine that's what the priest said to the leper. "You will need time to recover so I'll come back to check on you periodically. You are physically ill and you will recover. You are sick, it is real and you will be healed." Then the rabbis overlay this with the emotional battle. If the Torah is speaking and teaching about physical illness, then the rabbis are suggesting an emotional misery. We have all done things that we regret and we have all said things we wish we had not. Then, when we climb into bed at the end of the day and we replay those experiences, we often feel genuine remorse. Please know that healing is on the way. It takes imagination and creativity in the dark hours to see light, and sometimes it's just a mirage, but the potential exists.

Today the Torah asks us not to focus on the anguish in recovery, but on the peace found in recovery. Today the Torah has brought us a message of hope. Our ever-elastic tradition tells us that you will survive, *gam zeh ya'avur*, "This too shall pass." Like the seed that is planted in the dark soil. A small little speck in the vast, pressure of the earth springs forth, grows, finds the light. Saying all along, "You can't keep me down. You cannot beat me. I am breaking out." There is blessing within you that will break forth because your indomitable spirit will be unleashed, but you have to know it. You have to keep the dream alive.

On Wednesday (April 22, 2009), the San Francisco Chronicle reported, "When the world first saw Susan Boyle on the British version of "American Idol - Britain's Got Talent," she had all the trappings of a 47-year-old Scotswoman about to humiliate herself. The unemployed singer looked to be another talent-challenged dreamer with squeaky pipes to match her frumpy demeanor. The ready-to-be-underwhelmed expression on judge Simon Cowell's face said it all, when he asked, "What's your name, darling?"

Then Boyle started to sing "I Dreamed a Dream" from the Broadway hit *Les Misérables*, and she hit the high notes. Now, everyone knows the name of the small-town church volunteer with a big dream. The judges and the viewers had to acknowledge that they had wrongly written Boyle off based on her looks, only to see their diminished expectations dwarfed by her spirit.

It doesn't matter if she wins the cash prize and a chance to sing before the queen, Susan Boyle was already a star by the end of the show. Just as remarkable as her voice, are the immortal words she chose to sing. Michael Ball

put those words to paper and we were brought to life in the production of *Les Miserable*. I have asked our Hazzan to share some of those words with us this morning.

There was a time, when men were kind
When their voices were soft
And their words were inviting
There was a time, when love was blind
And the world was a song
And the song was exciting
There was a time, then it all went wrong

I dreamed a dream in time gone by
When hope was high and life worth living
I dreamed that love would never die
I dreamed that God would be forgiving

Then I was young and unafraid
And dreams were made and used and wasted
There was no ransom to be paid
No song unsung, no wine untasted

We have a regenerative capacity. Today is not about illness, but about recovery. It is not about being the victim, it is about being empowered. It is seductive to focus on the pain, the suffering, and the inability to manage, but don't be seduced.

One of the exercises we participate in at the end of Shabbat is to hold our hands up to the Havdalah candle. We hold them up in order to create a shadow so we can see the difference between light and dark. Another great explanation is we hold up our hands and cup them, then we notice our finger nails. We notice how, over the course of the week, they have either been cut or they have grown, but either way, we realize the body has an unbelievable ability to re-cooperate, regenerate and start again.

This week I ask you and today I ask you to begin again.