

Break in the Action

Reflections from the Miyun: SARS, Tzara'at, and Shabbat

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It is April 2003. I am a Canadian emergency physician, transplanted to the Miyun at Tel Hashomer. It's one of the busiest ED's in the Middle East, and Middle Eastern temperament adds to the controlled chaos. Add to that the threat of war: American and coalition forces are advancing on Baghdad, and the threat of another Scud attack from Saddam has not been entirely eliminated.

But on Friday at noon, even under threat of chemical attack, calm settles on the ED. People become more cheerful. The staff thins out, and the residents take over the department during the evening. Nurses bring out platters of Eastern European danish, borekas, sliced cucumber, tomatoes and fruit. We attend to patients with our fingers still sticky, and the tartness of pomegranates or the sweetness of Galia melons lingering in our mouths.

An orthodox Jew doing kiruv (enhancing closeness to God) has stopped by the nursing station and deposited small cellophane envelopes, each containing a pair of candles and a summary of the week's parsha (Torah portion). I notice that this week's portion is Tazria, the chapter I had chanted at my Bar Mitzvah precisely twenty years earlier.

Tazria introduces the phenomenon of tzara'at, a mysterious affliction that attacks people, clothing and even buildings. Tzara'at was believed to be a reminder, a warning signal supposed to awaken people to spiritual failures. Some scholars suggest that this condition was in fact leprosy. The bible teaches that a kohen – the priest - must be consulted to determine whether an unusual lesion is that of tzara'at. He then must isolate the sufferer for a week. If the condition is unresolving, quarantine continues for a second week, pending further inspection by the kohen. One who is diagnosed with tzara'at is directed to wear torn clothing, refrain from cutting his hair, and to alert others that he is ritually impure.

The Torah portion was curiously a propos. My Israeli colleagues were equipped for biological attack. And my home town, Toronto, was responding to a new and poorly understood plague with the same approach as the high priests: inspection, quarantine, special clothing and notification of potential contacts were all components of SARS precautions.

War is being fought just two states over. But by the sea in Old Jaffa, a barely perceptible breeze blows from an utterly quiet beach, save for the hum of the occasional low flying patrol plane. The sky is black and strikingly clear, alive with the brilliance of constellations that inspired the desert wanderers from past millennia to believe they were under divine guidance. Walk twenty minutes south along the beach and you'll reach the Israeli and US troops manning anti-missile batteries. Look north, to the right, and the sky above Tel Aviv is ablaze with the night lights: beach front bars radiate red and blue neon, and skyscrapers with glass facades, reflect the light from offices. Shabbat is peaceful.

At 06:00 A.M. at the beginning of a new week, I wait for a cab, across from the College Des Freres seminary in Jaffa. Cabs are scarce this time of day. Over the course of thirty minutes, I watch the sky become more illuminated. Pale blue glass-colored light of the dawn slowly turns pink and then finally becomes the white-yellow glare of

day. Heavy trucks lumber by, laden with vegetables and building supplies.

I flag an oncoming cab. He passes me by ten meters, stops, and reverses. A boy, about twelve years old, is seated in the back seat. The driver asks me where I am going, I reply Tel Hashomer hospital, and he accepts. I sit beside his son, who will be dropped at school after I depart.

The front passenger window of the cab is smashed. Shards of glass are still on the floor of the cab. The driver was robbed late last night. Two thugs ran up to him, smashed his window with a rock, and took his money. He has spent the last few hours at the police station. I find this to be ironic. In a country increasingly defined by war and terror, where M16s are slung over shoulders and pistols tucked into jeans, the modus operandi of my driver's robbers seemed curiously low tech.

He asks if I'm a doctor, and I respond in the affirmative. He has multiple questions of an administrative nature. He has a requisition to have an x-ray at one facility. Can he have the study done at a different clinic, and so on. I reply that I am a visiting physician, and have no idea what the administrative details are. Eyn li Musag - I have no idea - is a typical Israeli response I have learned.

There is little discussion of the ongoing aggression outside Israel. CNN, BBC and SKY TV are running 24/7 footage of the war. Embedded journalists with digital cameras and satellite phones send voyeuristic footage of coalition forces rolling through Basra and on to Baghdad. In Rafah, uniformed schoolchildren and Palestinian police march in support of Saddam, carrying Iraqi flags and portraits of the Iraqi leader. But there is no sense of war on the streets of Tel Aviv. Israelis are preoccupied with the economy and domestic issues. United labor unions are planning the mother of all strikes, and that trumps fears of a missile strike.

On April 5 an Israeli newspaper runs the headline "Im hagav el ha' kir" - "With their backs to the wall," and on April 7 CNN runs footage of American soldiers lounging in Saddam's palaces. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz expresses his distress at Israelis' sense of calm, the poor compliance with directions to carry chemical protection kits at all times. Mofaz declares that as Saddam gets more desperate there is the greater threat of him committing desperate acts. He advises Israelis that the end of the war is near, but they must not yet let down their guard. And in the ER, it's business as usual: Old ladies with aspiration pneumonia, a drug overdose, a doctor emailing a romantic interest. Life goes on.