



Parshas Tazria - Metzora

For the week ending 1 Iyar 5759
16 - 17 April 1999

Overview

TAZRIA

The Torah commands a woman to bring a *korban* after the birth of a child. A son is to be circumcised on the eighth day of his life. The Torah introduces the phenomenon of *tzara'as* (often mistranslated as leprosy) — a miraculous affliction that attacks people, clothing and buildings to awaken a person to spiritual failures. A *kohen* must be consulted to determine whether a particular mark is *tzara'as* or not. The *kohen* isolates the sufferer for a week. If the malady remains unchanged, confinement continues for a second week, after which the *kohen* decides the person's status. The Torah describes the different forms of *tzara'as*. One whose *tzara'as* is confirmed wears torn clothing, does not cut his hair, and must alert others that he is ritually impure. He may not have normal contact with people. The phenomenon of *tzara'as* on clothing is described in detail.

METZORA

The Torah describes the procedure for a *metzora* (a person afflicted with *tzara'as*) upon conclusion of his isolation. This process extends for a week, and involves *korbanos* and immersions in the *mikveh*. Then, a *kohen* must pronounce the *metzora* pure. A *metzora* of limited financial means may substitute lesser offerings for the more expensive animals. Before a *kohen* diagnoses that a house has *tzara'as*, household possessions are removed to prevent them from also being declared ritually impure. The *tzara'as* is removed by smashing and rebuilding that section of the house; if it reappears, the entire building must be razed. The Torah details those bodily secretions that render a person spiritually impure, thereby preventing his contact with holy items, and how one regains a state of ritual purity.

Insights

BEYOND THE PALE

“And the person with *tzara'as* is to call out: ‘Contaminated! Contaminated!’” (13:45)

In the fifties, no Hollywood Biblical epic was complete without its statutory army of Central Casting lepers littering the set, intoning in their best Mid-Western drawl “Unclean! Unclean!”

This mistaken idea that *tzara'as* means leprosy, however, pre-dates Hollywood. For centuries, *tzara'as* has borne this erroneous translation.

But even a cursory glance at the commentaries on this week's Parsha will show the inaccuracy of such a translation. Leprosy was considered a highly contagious disease. Yet, if something that looked like *tzara'as* broke out on a newlywed, or if it afflicted someone during a festival, the *kohen* would delay his examination so that the *simcha* of the wedding festivities or of the holiday should proceed without impediment. If *tzara'as* really meant leprosy, then allowing someone with this disease to roam loose, rubbing shoulders with all and sundry at a wedding feast or holiday, would be criminal negligence.

Tzara'as was not a physical disease but a malaise of the spirit. It was merely the physical symptom of a chronic spiritual illness. If we do not see such a disease today, it is because our bodies have become so desensitized to our spiritual state that they can no longer act as a barometer to our spiritual well-being.

The second of this week's double parsha is *Metzora*. The word *metzora*, which refers to one afflicted with *tzara'as*, is a contraction of “*motzei ra*” — literally “to bring forth evil.” This evil was principally the evil of speaking slander. However, becoming a *metzora* was also a punishment for other forms of anti-social behavior, notably, bloodshed, false oaths, immorality, pride, robbery and selfishness.

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What do these acts have in common? They are all instances of the failure to be sensitive to the needs of others and to share their plight. The essence of society from the Jewish perspective is not that society should run smoothly for the sake of society, but that each individual should take up the yoke of his neighbor. Society exists so that man may exercise kindness and caring. When someone fails in these fundamental areas, he demonstrates that he has failed to understand the purpose of society itself. Thus he has no place in society until he can cure himself of this failing. It is for this reason that he is exiled until he comes to the realization that his actions have placed him "beyond the pale."

That is a reason why someone with *tzara'as* had to call out: "Contaminated! Contaminated!" For selfishness and insensitivity to others can be as contagious as leprosy.

RAISING AN EYEBROW

"On the seventh day, he shall shave off all his hair — his head, his beard, his eyebrows, and all his hair shall he shave off" (14:9)

If the *metzora* has to shave his entire body — "all his hair" — as part of his purification, why does the Torah specify "his head, his beard, his eyebrows?"

The head represents haughtiness. He held his head high over others, thinking himself better. Through his mouth, framed by his beard, he spoke gossip and slander. Under his eyebrows, his eyes narrowed in jealousy. It was that jealousy that engendered the wish to destroy another's reputation — which can be done with just the raising of an eyebrow.

THE PREJUDICE OF PRIDE

"Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon, saying: If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a *s'eis* " (13:1,2)

Pride comes before a fall. When we think that we are at our most indispensable, at that very moment we are at our most dispensable. G-d doesn't need us to run the world. He doesn't need us to even be in the world. At best, we are guests in this hotel called life. Any day, any second, we may be asked to vacate our room by ten o'clock.

And yet, we live our lives as though we were immortal. We know that everyone dies; but somehow this knowledge fails to impact our actions. We act as though there were two clubs in life, the "live-ers" and the "die-ers," and that we have decided that we are members only of the former.

It's difficult to live out the knowledge of our own mortality, because our perception of ourselves comes largely through our physical interaction with the world. Most of our life consists of action, of impacting on the outside world. Thus, it is very difficult for us to imagine a world without us being here. We can conceive of such a thing, but we cannot imagine it. In the mystical vocabulary, our active connection to reality is called *hispashtus* (lit. "expansion").

Consider, for example, the fact that we are much more comfortable doing the positive mitzvahs, like putting on *tefillin* or shaking a *lulav*, than observing the Torah's prohibitions. The reason is because it's *me* putting on *tefillin*. It's *me* shaking the *lulav*. I am impacting on the world. Me. "I act, therefore I am." My non-action, however, leaves no visible trace on the creation.

In every action there is a trace of pride. Even when we do a mitzvah, when we give *tzedaka*, when we study Torah, there's the feeling "it's *me* doing the mitzvah, giving the *tzedaka*, studying the Torah."

S'eis was a spiritual affliction of the skin. *S'eis* means pride, haughtiness. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, "Come and see how great are the humble of spirit before G-d. For when the Holy Temple stood, a person who would offer an elevation offering, the reward for the elevation offering would be in his hand; a flour offering, the reward for the flour offering would be in his hand. But as for someone who was humble and broken in spirit, it was considered that he had brought each and every offering." Someone who brings an offering instinctively feels that he did something, and subconsciously he cannot help but give himself the smallest pat on the back. That's what it means that the reward was "in his hand." It was his hand that did it. However, the heart of someone who is humble in spirit lies broken within. In his hand there is nothing. The Torah considers that such a person has brought every possible offering.

Sources:

Beyond The Pale - Talmud Arachin 15b, 16a; Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch

Raising An Eyebrow - Kli Yakar

The Prejudice Of Pride - Talmud Sota 5; Shem MiShmuel in the name of his father Avnei Nezer in Iturei Torah

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Haftarah: Yeshayahu 66:1-66:24

This week's *haftarah* is the special one we read when *Rosh Chodesh* falls on Shabbos. The last verses relate to both *Rosh Chodesh* and Shabbos as times when in the future, the people will visit the Sanctuary to worship G-d.

The *haftarah* begins with a prophetic chastisement to people who give importance to the physical Sanctuary worship but who disregard the conceptual values. The Prophet Yeshaya rebukes those who on one hand bring offerings, but who smite their fellow, or steal the animal for the sacrifice.

Yeshayahu proclaims that G-d, who created the whole universe, does not need the Sanctuary nor our worship. He commanded the Sanctuary worship for our benefit, as a way for us to express our gratitude and respect; but internal virtue is the main idea. When that is lacking, all the rest is meaningless.

Yeshaya narrates the future redemption which will be miraculously fast and unprecedented, after which all the nations will come to Jerusalem to the *Beis Hamikdash* to worship the one true G-d.

RIVER OF PEACE

**“Like a river do I lead peace unto her...”
(66:12)**

G-d declares that in the future, He will bring peace unto the Jewish nation like a river.

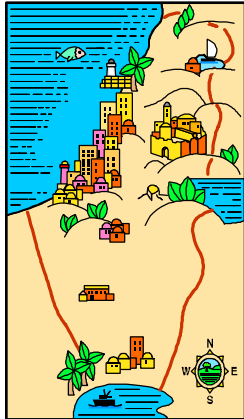
The Talmud (*Berachos 56b*) derives from the above verse that one who dreams of a river will enjoy peace. The Talmud cites two other verses by which it derives that dreaming of a bird or a pot also indicates peace. How is this to be understood?

Peace ensues when opposites live in harmony. A pot symbolizes peace, as a pot enables fire and water to coexist. A bird symbolizes the peaceful coexistence of the physical and ethereal, as a bird flies in the sky and also walks on the ground. And a river is a place where both rain from heaven and water from underground collect, and conducts the water to inhabited areas for the use of mankind.

Thus in the future redemption, both physical wealth and spiritual abundance will be present in one location, and the righteous will be also the prosperous.

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael



YAVNEH

This ancient city, known in Biblical times as Yabniel, is most famous as the seat of the Sanhedrin at the time of the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*. One of the three requests made by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai on the eve of that destruction was “spare me Yavneh and its Sages.” (*Gittin 56b*) This center of Jewish learning is referred to as “*Kerem B’Yavneh*” (Vineyard of Yavneh) because its scholars sat in rows similar to the arrangement of vines in a vineyard (*Berachos 63b – Rashi*).

“Follow Rabbi Gamliel to Yavneh” urge our Sages (*Sanhedrin 32b*), and this is where this great head of the Sanhedrin is assumed to be buried.

Modern Yavneh is a development town populated mostly by immigrants from North Africa, and nearby is Israel’s first atomic reactor which was completed in 1960.

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