

Parashat Metzora 5771, 2011:

The Metzora and His Transformation

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

Our *parasha* begins with the laws of the *metzora* and his purification process. The *metzora* is afflicted with *tzarat*. This disease is unidentifiable with any of the many skin ailments that exist in our own time. As such, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashi's grandson who is known as the Rashbam 1080-1158), introduced our topic in the following manner:

All of the sections dealing with the afflictions (*negayim*) affecting people, garments, houses and the manner in which they appear as well as the number of days requiring sequestering, the white, black, and golden identifying hairs may not in any way be understood by following the simple and direct meaning of the text. Neither may we rely upon standard human knowledge and expertise. Instead, we must follow the analysis (*midrash*) of the Sages, their decrees, and the inherited body of knowledge that they received from the earliest Sages. This is the essence [of this matter]. (Commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 13:2, translation my own)

In sum, *tzarat* can only be understood from the Torah, rather than from a physiological or medical perspective. This is because its origin is not biologically based. Instead, it is a spiritual malady that manifests itself in a physical fashion.

Ever since Moshe's sister Miriam was punished with *tzarat* for speaking *lashon harah* (purposefully defamatory speech) against him (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:1-12:13), our Sages have connected this deplorable act to this supernatural ailment. Given its singular import, *Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) spoke about *lashon harah* throughout the Talmud. One page, however, is a mini-encyclopedia of their attitudes on this subject. *Talmud Bavli, Arakin* 15b presents numerous statements regarding this most heinous of *aveirot* (prohibitions). Allow me to share a few examples with you: "Rabbi Yochanan

said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: ‘Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is as if he has totally rejected G-d Himself (*kafar b’ikar*).’” Rav Chisda said in the name of Mar Ukba that: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is fitting to be put to death by stoning.” A second statement by Rav Chisda in the name of Mar Ukba is even more powerful: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) Himself declares: ‘He and I are unable to dwell in the same world!’” It is crucial to recognize that these are far more than sermonic statements meant to dissuade us from the grievous sin of speaking *lashon harah*. Instead, they have deep and abiding halachic significance. For example, the Rambam (1135-1204) stated:

Our Sages said: “There are three sins for which retribution is exacted from a person in this world and, [for which] he is [nonetheless,] denied a portion in the world to come: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. *Lashon harah* is equivalent to all of them.” Our Sages also said: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is like one who denies Hashem as [implied by Psalms 12:5]: “Those who said: With our tongues we will prevail; our lips are our own. Who is L-rd over us?”” In addition, they said: “*Lashon harah* kills three [people], the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who listens to it [suffers] more than the one who speaks it.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Deot 7:3*, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, emendations my own)

The *metzora*’s actions alter his very persona, and drive a potentially permanent wedge between himself and the rest of the Jewish community. Little wonder, then, that he is forced to dwell alone during the time that the *tzarat* rages unchecked upon his body. This is a classic example of *middah k’neged middah* (logical punishment in kind); just as his vicious words created horrible rifts between husbands and wives, friends and family members - and made them feel bereft of all connections - so, too, must he dwell alone and live literally outside the camp of the Jewish people:

R. Samuel b. Elnadab asked of R. Hanina, or as others say. R. Samuel b. Nadab, the son-in-law of R. Hanina, asked of R. Hanina; or, according to still others, asked of R. Joshua b. Levi: “Wherein is the *metzora* different that the Torah said: He shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his dwelling be?” (*Sefer Vayikra 13:46*) He separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor, therefore said the Torah: “He shall dwell alone.”

(*Talmud Bavli, Arakin 16b, Soncino Talmud translation with my emendations*)

In addition to his being forced to dwell alone, "... his garments shall be torn, his head shall be unshorn, he shall cover himself down to his mustache and call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'" (*Sefer Vayikra 13:45, translation, The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Rashi (1040-1105) explains in his commentary on this verse, that the *metzora* acts for all intent and purposes like an *avel* (mourner). The Rambam in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tumat Tzarat*, elaborates upon this thought-provoking theme:

It is a positive commandment for the sequestered *metzora* to completely cloak his head all the days of his enforced separation – up to and including his moustache – like a mourner. Moreover, he must disarrange his clothing and inform all that pass by that he is ritually impure... [In addition,] he is prohibited from greeting others all the days of his sequestering - like a mourner. (Translation and underlining my own)

We are now in an ideal position to ask a very fundamental question: "If according to Rashi and the Rambam, the *metzora* is an *avel* – for whom is he mourning?" Rabbi Yonasan Sacks, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University and spiritual leader of Agudas Yisroel of Passaic Park in Passaic, New Jersey, suggested the following fascinating answer:

Each member of *Knesset Yisrael* [the Congregation of Israel] possesses a twofold *kedushah* [sanctity] - as an individual and as a vital part of the collectivity of *Bnei Yisrael* [the Jewish people]. A *metzora*, through his callous slander, severs his bond with the collective *kedushah* [holiness] of *Bnei Yisrael*; it is as if part of him has died. Indeed, the Gemara states that "*arba'ah chashuvin kemeis – ani umetzora...*" (Nedarim 64B) ("four [types of people] are as if they are dead – a poor man, a *metzora*..."). Accordingly, the Torah mandates *avelut* [mourning]; the *metzora* mourns himself. (*Badad Yeisheiv: Appreciating Kedushas Yisroel, 2000, brackets and underlining my own*)

"The *metzora* mourns himself" is certainly an intriguing concept. What exactly, however, is he mourning? It seems to me that part of his mourning is for the connections that he severed between himself and others, and the attachments that he ripped apart between various members of the Jewish people. His *lashon harah* spread like millions of feathers

in a violent wind, and destroyed the happiness of untold numbers of people. In some ways, these relationships may have been irrevocably torn asunder – all because of his unthinking and malodorous actions. In addition, I believe that he is in *avelut* (mourning) for all that he has lost in himself and for the existential nadir that is now his life. He is, therefore, a lost soul adrift in a spiritual maelstrom of his own making.

The *avelut* of the *metzora*, like all forms of mourning, however, ultimately has a redemptive and life-affirming aspect. As my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1993) noted in a public address entitled “Sitting *Shivah* is Doing *Teshuvah*.”

The observance of *shivah*, *sheloshim* [30 day period], and *yud beit hodesh* [12 months] (for parents) is not only a catharsis of sorrow, but also an experience of self-judgment and penitence. *Avelut* is intrinsically an expression of *teshuvah* [repentance]. The aching heart is a contrite heart, and a contrite heart seeks atonement. (*Man of Faith in the Modern World*, page 125, edited by Rabbi Abraham Besdin, brackets my own)

The religiously sensitive person very often focuses upon the relationship of sin and death.

Rav Soloveitchik formulated this connection in the following manner:

In *avelut*, we ponder the relatedness of death to sin, and we reflect on the moral tenor of our life, noting its shortcomings and repenting of its failures. We think of our mortality and of our accountability and of the pressing need for religious reorientation. (Ibid. , p128)

Beyond a doubt, the *metzora* is in “pressing need for religious reorientation.” He needs to refocus upon “the moral tenor of his life” and recognize his failure to have lived ethically.

Therefore, his *avelut* is truly “not only a catharsis of sorrow, but also an experience of self-judgment and penitence.” Moreover, the *metzora*’s *avelut* is ultimately and “intrinsically an expression of *teshuvah*.” As a result, it is a crucial element in his purification process, and the bridge he must cross in order to become the new and better person Hashem wants him to be.

With G-d's help, may we all live lives filled with purity and love of our fellow Jews. In addition, may He help us in our daily and ongoing battle against the destructive scourge of *lashon harah*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.