

Parashat Metzora 5774, 2014:

Removing Tzarat From Our Hearts and Minds

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Our *parasha* begins with the laws of the *metzora* and his purification procedures. The *metzora* is afflicted with *tzarat*. This disease is unidentifiable with any skin ailments that exist in our own time. As such, the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 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].

In sum, *tzarat* is solely understandable from the Torah's perspective, rather than from a physiological or medical viewpoint. Instead of being biologically-based in origin, it is a spiritual malady that manifests itself in a physical fashion.

The Torah's first recorded use of the term "*tzarat*" is found in the fourth chapter of *Sefer Shemot*, wherein Moshe protested to Hashem that the Jewish people will categorically reject the authenticity of his *shlichut* (status as G-d's messenger): "Moses answered and said, 'Behold they [the Jewish people] will not believe me, and they will not heed my voice, but they will say, the L-rd has not appeared to you.'" (Verse 1, this and all Bible

and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, brackets my own) Hashem then provided His chosen prophet with a variety of visual proofs to present to the nation:

And the L-rd said further to him [Moshe], “Now put your hand into your chest area,” and he put his hand therein, and he took it out, and behold, his hand was covered in *tzarat* like snow. And He [G-d] said, “Put your hand back into your chest area,” and he put his hand therein, and [when] he took it out from his chest, it had become again like [the rest of] his flesh. And it will come to pass, that if they [the Jewish people] do not believe you [Moshe], and they do not heed the voice of the first sign [the staff into serpent], they will believe the voice of the last sign [*tzarat* and its cure]. (Ibid., verses 6-8, with my emendations and brackets to enhance readability; underlining my own)

Why would the Jewish people so readily doubt that Moshe was Hashem’s *shaliach* (messenger)? There are many potential answers to such a question. Yet, I believe it is likely that the people mistrusted Moshe due to his having fled Egypt after realizing that the slaying of the would-be murderous Egyptian (Ibid. , 2:11-12) was no longer a secret. As the text states: “Moses became frightened and said, ‘Indeed, the matter has become known!’ Pharaoh heard of this incident, and he sought to slay Moses; so Moses fled from before Pharaoh. He stayed in the land of Midian, and he sat down by a well.” (Ibid. , 2:14-15)

It is quite probable that as a result of Moshe’s departure from Egypt, that the Jewish people felt abandoned and thought that he was seeking to disentangle himself from their trials and tribulations. Though Moshe had ostensibly fled to save his life, in all likelihood, it was not perceived this way by the nation. As my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993) noted, Moshe definitely had an unspoken agenda in his flight to Midian: “... he had fled to Midian in order to distance himself from them and their suffering.” (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef*:

Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, page 126)

It is little wonder, then, that our enslaved brethren did not initially accept Moshe as Hashem's messenger. This, I believe, was precisely the reason why Hashem specifically chose *tzarat* as one of the signs to prove the validity of Moshe's agency. As our *parasha* makes abundantly clear, *tzarat* demands sequestering of the affected individual from the rest of society. Moshe had done this himself, and of his own volition, when he ran away from his people! Now, he was not only going to physically return to Egypt, he was going there to rejoin his brothers and sisters and share their plight. This, I believe, was symbolized by his removing his hand from his chest a second time in a now perfectly healed *tzarat*-free condition. In sum, Moshe was truly back. Rav Soloveitchik conceptualized his return to his people in these words:

... the entire redemption of the Jewish people hinged on one immutable condition: that Moshe accept the mandate as the nation's leader and become the instrument of its redemption... Now he had to transform himself into a *shaliah*, a messenger of G-d. He had to change his opinion of the Israelites in order to become the instrument of their redemption... The Divine mandate was not only that Moshe convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave, but that he rejoin his people. Only then could he begin his task as their redeemer. (Ibid. , underlining my own)

How can we apply Moshe's narrative to our own lives? As did Moshe, the ultimate teacher and messenger of Hashem, we need to re-affirm the indissoluble link we have with **all** Jews. Stated somewhat differently, we need to remove *tzarat* (distance) from our hearts and minds, and recognize the essential truth that binds us to one another: *kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh* (all of the Jewish people are responsible for one another). May we achieve this most noble of goals soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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