

Parashat Tazria, 5784, 2024:

Ga'avah vs. Geut

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

The primary focus of our *parasha* is the illness known as *tzaraat*. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, the Rashbam (1080-1158) presents the unique nature of this disease:

All of the sections dealing with the *negayim* (afflictions) 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—cannot be understood by following the simple and direct meaning of the text. Neither may we rely upon standard human knowledge and expertise [that is, current medical information]. Instead, we must follow the analysis 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]. (Introduction to Parashat Tazria, translation and brackets my own)

In the Rashbam's view, *tzaraat* can be understood solely from the Torah's standpoint, rather than from a physiological or medical perspective. This is because its etiology does not follow the normative laws of biology. Instead, it is a spiritually-based ailment that manifests in a physical fashion.

The Torah presents us with three types of *tzaraat*: “If a man has a *se'et*, a *sapahat*, or a *baheret* on the skin of his flesh, and it forms a lesion of *tzaraat* on the skin of his flesh, he shall be brought to Aharon the Kohen, or to one of his sons, the Kohanim.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 13:1, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations) *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, *Tazria* 15:9, identifies each of these categories as metaphorically representing one of the ancient nations who either violently injured or sought to harm our people. Thus, “*se'et* [a rising] is Babylonia... *sapahat* [a scab] is [the kingdom of the] Medes... and *baheret* [a bright spot] is

Greece.” (This and the following translation, *Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, pages 227-228)

Our midrash notes that Haman, who attempted to eradicate our people, was the most infamous member of the ancient Medes: “[The kingdom of the] Medes raised Haman the wicked, who crawled like a snake, as it is written, ‘On your belly you shall go.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 3:4) My *rebbe* and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, builds upon our midrash and describes Haman in the following fashion:

...[he] slithered like a snake but was puffed up with arrogance. A fawning personality, he lacked dignity. His sycophantic behavior resulted in his becoming prime minister to King Ahashverosh. Yet, Haman was no leader. A weak and spineless man, he used flattery to get ahead. Thinking that it would save his life, he behaved in a servile manner toward Esther even after she exposed him. Like other haughty people, he did not realize how base he was, that *he* was actually a form of *sapahat*. (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231, underlining and italics my own)

In the Rav’s view, the haughty and arrogant Haman emerges as a base and slithering being who lacked all manner of dignity to the extent that “*he* was actually a form of *sapahat*.” What does it mean for a person to be “a form of *sapahat*,” to be a scab on the body of humanity in general, and an enemy of the Jewish people in particular? The Rav indirectly addresses this question in his analysis of those who demonstrate *ga’avah* (arrogant pretentiousness) and pursue *kavode* (false honor):

If, however, one pursues these qualities, then they are false and reprehensible. This is particularly the case if one actively deceives himself and pretends to be someone other than who he really is...The greatest falsehood takes place when a person lies to himself. (Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, *Yimei HaZikaron*, page 208, Sifriyat Elinor, editor, translation and brackets my own)

Haman is the ultimate example of an individual who “actively deceives himself and pretends to be someone other than who he really is.” He convinced himself that he had *geut*—grandeur, when in fact, he was merely “puffed up with arrogance” born of self-delusion and grandiose visions. Moreover, the Rav asserts, Haman’s *ga’avah* was nothing other than “a negative character trait, a

form of spiritual *tzaraat*...Therefore, we must avoid *ga'avah* and be careful not to behave like Haman, who thought that only *he* was worthy of honor.” (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231) As such, according to the Rav, Haman epitomized the notion that “the greatest falsehood takes place when a person lies to himself.”

The Rav continues his presentation and emphasizes that, in stark contrast to the spiritual *tzaraat* of *ga'avah* demonstrated by Haman and others of his ilk, Hashem has true *geut* and must therefore be recognized as He Who acts with grandeur. As King David and Yeshayahu the prophet taught us so long ago:

The L-rd has reigned; He has attired Himself with majesty (*geut*)... (*Sefer Tehillim* 93:1)

In the land of uprightness, he [the evil one] deals unjustly, and he does not see the majesty (*geut*) of the L-rd. (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 26:10)

Sing to the L-rd for He has performed majestic deeds (*geut*); this is known throughout the land. (*Sefer Yeshayahu*, 12:5)

As the Rav underscores many times, “The principle of *imitatio dei* [imitating Hashem’s behaviors] demands that we emulate G-d’s attributes.” (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231) Therefore, may we always reject *ga'avah* and the spiritual *tzaraat* it represents, and embrace the authentic majesty of *geut* Hashem *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)