

Parshas Metzora

I CAST YOU OUT!

The Torah discusses an illness called Tzaraas. The Torah does not usually discuss diseases and maladies; but this is no ordinary illness which require isolation and quarantine. Consider that the man whose entire body was stricken was not quarantined at all. Chazal understand it to be a spiritual shortcoming that was biologically manifest. The diagnosis:

וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן וְהִנֵּה כְּסִתָּהּ הִצְרַעַת אֶת כָּל בְּשָׂרוֹ וְטָהַר אֶת הַנֶּגַע כִּלּוֹ הַפֶּדָּה לְבָן טָהוֹר הוּא – The kohen should check the white mark. If it has cleared from his skin, it is purified. If it has spread and infected his entire body white, he too is purified. (13: 13)

If the lesion or mark did not clear within a week, the man was sent away from the city for a week, after which he is reinspected.

The isolation is a central part of the rehabilitation and healing process, but why?

Chazal understand that the illness was strongly correlated to gossip, which the Torah is highly sensitive to. Gossip is a highly destructive force, tearing apart the fabric of society by planting harmful ideas, ruining perceptions and relationships. A mark on the arm or leg can be disguised by wearing longer clothing. This is why a metzora must leave their community – the gossip has blended into a society he is actually destabilising. Such a person is not welcome – they are a fake, and not how they appear – and since he can blend, people are not on their guard. The isolation is not just for him, but for society.

The Rema notes that this could well be why the metzora whose entire body is stricken is not sent away; their physical condition matches their spiritual condition. When people see this metzora, they know to steer well clear just by looking.

Solitary exile may seem a little extreme, but R' Yisrael Salanter explains that the punishment fits the crime; the gossip – if telling the truth – is exacting over the finer details of other peoples lives. Such an expert is forced to introspect and confront his own character flaws, by being on his own for a week.

Tzaraas also affects clothing, and the Torah details the laws. The Torah specifies how the clothing is fit for regular use: וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן ... וְהִנֵּה לֹא הַפֶּדָּה הִנְגַע אֶת עֵינוֹ – The kohen should check... if the eye of the mark had not normalised... (13: 55).

The central part in the personal recovery of tzaraas is **הִפְךָ אֶת עֵינֶיךָ** – for the eye to revert. Figuratively speaking, the character flaw that causes tzaraas is the intrusive eye. By the end of his isolation, his eyes should be fixed firmly inward.

When the State of Israel declared independence, the newly born state was overwhelmingly attacked, and Jews were fighting and dying daily. A student remarked to the Brisker Rov how, “It’s the secular people’s fault! If they kept Shabbos surely no one would die!”

The Brisker Rov dismissed such foolishness, “The prophet Yonah fled from God, rather than cause any negative outcome for the Jews. He preferred to write himself off rather than betray his brothers. When God sent a storm after him, he blamed himself and preferred to be thrown off a boat – **בשלי הסער הגדול הזה**! Even if the entire nation were idol worshippers like then, we don’t look to others for accountability, we say **בשלי הסער הגדול הזה** – this great storm is all my fault.

We do not judge our fellow’s actions, we only say, “How can I make it better?”

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