

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Tazria

In this week's Parsha, the Torah talks about *Tzaras*. Although often thought to be a form of leprosy, *Tzaras* is actually a purely spiritual ailment. The midrash states that one would be afflicted with *Tzaras* as a punishment for haughtiness or for slanderous speech. The Talmud (Nedarim 64b) states that a *Metzora*, a person that was afflicted with *Tzaras*, was considered like a dead person. In fact, a *Metzora* has some of the unique characteristics of *tumah*, spiritual impurity, that were generally reserved only for a human corpse.

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902-1979) points out that it would be hard to imagine that the *Metzora's* death-like status was a reference to the physical hardship of the sickness. For most people, almost any amount of pain and discomfort would still be preferable to death. As the verse states: G-d has caused me pain, but He has not delivered me to death (Psalms 118:18). With this in mind, Rabbi Shmuelevitz explains that there must be an additional reason why a *Metzora* is considered to be dead. To fully understand this concept, one must look at the other people that the Talmud compares to the dead. In addition to the *Metzora*, the Talmud lists the blind and the poor. While these three people don't immediately appear connected, a closer look can perhaps discover an underlying connection.

Rabbi Shmuelevitz notes that one of the advantages to sight is that it allows a person to interact with and relate to those around him/her. Although a blind person does have some interaction with his/her surroundings, these interactions are limited and incomplete. It is this factor that makes the blind person like he is dead. True life in this world is more than just walking and breathing. True life on this world is living with other people, interacting with other people, and most importantly giving to other people. A blind person, who is missing out on this aspect of life, is, in a way, missing out on a part of life.

This idea is true of the other two people in this category also. As a result of his financial situation, a pauper cannot bestow his/her kindness to others to



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continued ...

the same level that a wealthier person could. This also takes away from his full life experience.

With these concepts in mind, one can look at the *Metzora* with a new understanding. The Torah states us that a *Metzora* must remain outside the camp. "He must sit alone," the verse proclaims. G-d does not want the *Metzora* to be with the rest of the congregation. This exile is a partial death for the *Metzora*, as it limits his/her interactions with society, and therefore his abilities to give are limited as well. Perhaps this can help one understand how *Tzaras* was a punishment for the sins of slander and haughtiness. Both these sins are indicative of a person who lacks the ability to function as a giving member of society. A haughty person cares only about himself and does not look to give to those around him/her. A person who slanders another person clearly is not a person who cares about his fellow man, and is certainly not striving to give and to help others. It is these people that G-d chooses to punish with such severity. G-d's punishment are measure for measure. If a person chooses not to be a giving and caring, and thus is not a fully functioning member of society, G-d does not allow this person to be a member of society at all!

What a powerful lesson for all. The Torah teaches that life is only complete when fully giving to another. True life is not based on what one keeps to themselves, but rather on what is given to others. By internalizing this message, and showing G-d one's desire to give, proving they live life to the fullest, G-d will treat this person measure for measure, as well, and will bless them with fuller longer lives.

Shabbat Shalom!

