

Tazria - Metzora

“If the eruption spreads out over the skin so that it covers all the skin of the affected person from head to foot, wherever the priest can see—if the priest sees that the eruption has covered the whole body—he shall pronounce the affected person clean; he is clean, for he has turned all white.” (Leviticus 13:12-13)

In this week’s parsha, we learn about the laws relating to a metzora, one stricken with the malady known as tzara’as. According to our tradition, the affliction of tzara’as is not a mere illness, but a direct message from God. The stricken individual is meant to take note of his condition and use the opportunity to better himself. If he repents, the skin condition will clear up. If he does not, it worsens until he is forced to exit the camp and be shamed into repenting.

R. Yisroel Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chaim (Belarus, 1838-1933), notes an oddity. In the verses quoted above, we are told that someone who sees tzara’as all over his body must present himself to the kohen (priest) for appraisal. If the kohen confirms that he is covered in tzara’as, something very strange happens: he is declared tahor, pure. This seems counterintuitive: if a smaller eruption is observed and does not shrink, it renders the sufferer impure. It seems logical, therefore, that someone covered in tzara’as should certainly be impure! Why is the opposite true?

The Chafetz Chaim explains that most tzara’as can theoretically be concealed. In fact, to combat this, there is a specific Torah requirement for him to go to the kohen and receive instruction. He then undergoes the process of purification, which separates him from society. This ostracization is humbling and forces him to introspect. It may seem shallow, but by far the most powerful motivation for self-improvement is shame in front of others. When a person is completely covered in tzara’as, he can’t hide. Everyone can see his spiritual blemishes, manifested in the physical and out in the open. There is no need to require him to be ostracized; he already is ostracized. There is nothing else for him to do but to accept that he must change.

“A bad conscience is easier to cope with than a bad reputation.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

Shabbat Shalom

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