

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The sidrot of Tazria and Metsorah contain laws which are among the most difficult to understand.

They are about conditions of "impurity" arising from the fact that we are physical beings, embodied souls, and hence exposed to (in Hamlet's words) "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." Though we have immortal longings, mortality is the condition of human existence, as it is of all embodied life. As Rambam explains (Guide for the Perplexed, III:12)

"We have already shown that, in accordance with the divine wisdom, genesis can only take place through destruction, and without the destruction of the individual members of the species, the species themselves would not exist permanently... He who thinks that he can have flesh and bones without being subject to any external influence, or any of the accidents of matter, unconsciously wishes to reconcile two opposites, namely, to be at the same time subject and not subject to change."

Throughout history there have been two distinct and opposing ways of relating to this fact: hedonism (living for physical pleasure) and asceticism (relinquishing physical pleasure). The former worships the physical while denying the spiritual, the latter enthrones the spiritual at the cost of the physical.

The Jewish way has always been different: to sanctify the physical -- eating, drinking, sex and rest -- making the life of the body a vehicle for the divine presence. The reason is simple. We believe with perfect faith that the God of redemption is also the God of creation. The physical world we inhabit is the one God made and pronounced "very good." To be a hedonist is to deny God. To be an ascetic is to deny the goodness of God's world. To be a Jew is to celebrate both creation and Creator. That is the principle that explains many otherwise incomprehensible features of Jewish life.

The laws with which the sedra begins are striking examples of this: "When a woman conceives and gives birth to a boy, she shall be teme'ah for seven days, just as she is during the time of separation when she has her period... Then, for thirty-three additional days she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean. Until this purification period is

complete, she shall not touch anything holy and shall not enter the sanctuary.

"If she gives birth to a girl, she shall have for two weeks the same teme'ah status as during her menstrual period. Then, for sixty-six days after that, she shall have a waiting period during which her blood is ritually clean."

She then brings a burnt-offering and a sin-offering, after which she is restored to "ritual purity." What is the meaning of these laws? Why does childbirth render the mother teme'ah (usually translated as "ritually impure", better understood as "a condition which impedes or exempts from a direct encounter with holiness")? And why is the period after giving birth to a girl twice that for a boy? There is a temptation to see these laws as inherently beyond the reach of human understanding. Several rabbinic statements seem to say just this. In fact, it is not so, as Maimonides explains at length in the Guide. To be sure, we can never know -- specifically with respect to laws that have to do with kedushah (holiness) and teharah (purity) -- whether our understanding is correct. But we are not thereby forced to abandon our search for understanding, even though any explanation will be at best speculative and tentative.

The first principle essential to understanding the laws of ritual purity and impurity is that God is life. Judaism is a profound rejection of cults, ancient and modern, that glorify death. The great pyramids of Egypt were grandiose tombs. Arthur Koestler noted that without death "the cathedrals collapse, the pyramids vanish into the sand, the great organs become silent." The English metaphysical poets turned to it constantly as a theme. As T. S. Eliot wrote:

"Webster was much possessed by death /
And saw the skull beneath the skin... /
Donne, I suppose, was such another... /
He knew the anguish of the marrow /
The ague of the skeleton..."

Freud coined the word thanatos to describe the death-directed character of human life.

Judaism is a protest against death-centred cultures. "It is not the dead who praise the Lord, nor those who go down into silence" (Psalm 114) "What profit is there in my death, if I go down into the pit? Can the dust acknowledge You? Can it proclaim your truth?" (Psalm 30). As we open a sefer Torah we say: "All of you who hold fast to the Lord your God are alive today"

(Deut 4:4). The Torah is a tree of life. God is the God of life. As Moses put it in two memorable words: "Choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

It follows that kedushah (holiness) -- a point in time or space where we stand in the unmediated presence of God -- involves a supreme consciousness of life. That is why the paradigm case of tumah is contact with a corpse. Other cases of tumah include diseases or bodily emissions that remind us of our mortality. God's domain is life. Therefore it may not be associated in any way with intimations of death. This is how Judah Halevi explains the purity laws in his work *The Kuzari*:

"A dead body represents the highest degree of loss of life, and a leprous limb is as if it were dead. It is the same with the loss of seed, because it had been endowed with living power, capable of engendering a human being. Its loss therefore forms a contrast to the living and breathing." (*Kuzari*, II:60)

The laws of purity apply exclusively to Israel, argues Halevi, precisely because Judaism is the supreme religion of life, and its adherents are therefore hyper-sensitive to even the most subtle distinctions between life and death.

A second principle, equally striking, is the acute sensitivity Judaism shows to the birth of a child. Nothing is more "natural" than procreation. Every living thing engages in it. Sociobiologists go so far as to argue that a human being is a gene's way of creating another gene. By contrast, the Torah goes to great lengths to describe how many of the heroines of the Bible -- among them Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah and the Shunamite woman -- were infertile and had children only through a miracle.

Clearly the Torah intends a message here, and it is unmistakable. To be a Jew is to know that survival is not a matter of biology alone. What other cultures may take as natural is for us a miracle. Every Jewish child is a gift of God. No faith has taken children more seriously or devoted more of its efforts to raising the next generation. Childbirth is wondrous. To be a parent is the closest any of us come to God himself. That, incidentally, is why women are closer to God than men, because they, unlike men, know what it is to bring new life out of themselves, as God brings life out of himself. The idea is beautifully captured in the verse in which, leaving Eden, Adam turns to his wife and calls her Chavah "for she is the mother of all life."

We can now speculate about the laws relating to childbirth. When a mother gives birth, not only does she undergo great risk (until recently, childbirth was a life-threatening danger to mother and baby alike). She is also separated from what until now had been part of her own body (a foetus, said the rabbis, "is like a limb of the mother") and which has now become an independent person. If that is so in the case of a boy, it is doubly so in the case of a girl -- who, with God's help,

will not merely live but may herself in later years become a source of new life. At one level, therefore, the laws signal the detachment of life from life.

At another level, they surely suggest something more profound. There is a halakhic principle: "One who is engaged in a mitzvah is exempt from other mitzvot." It is as if God were saying to the mother: for forty days in the case of a boy, and doubly so in the case of a girl (the mother-daughter bond is ontologically stronger than that between mother and son), I exempt you from coming before Me in the place of holiness because you are fully engaged in one of the holiest acts of all, nurturing and caring for your child. Unlike others you do not need to visit the Temple to be attached to life in all its sacred splendour. You are experiencing it yourself, directly and with every fibre of your being. Days, weeks, from now you will come and give thanks before Me (together with offerings for having come through a moment of danger). But for now, look upon your child with wonder. For you have been given a glimpse of the great secret, otherwise known only to God. Childbirth exempts the new mother from attendance at the Temple because her bedside replicates the experience of the Temple. She now knows what it is for love to beget life and in the midst of mortality to be touched by an intimation of immortality. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l* © 2025 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“If a woman has conceived seed and born a male child, then she shall be unclean for seven days; as in the days of her menstrual sickness shall she be unclean. On the eighth day [the child's] foreskin shall be circumcised. For thirty-three additional days, she shall sit on blood of purity....” (Leviticus 12:2–4) The Torah reading of Tazria is difficult because of its subject matter: the ritual status of a woman after she gives birth in terms of the times when she is ritually impure and when she is ritually pure, as well as the ritual impurity which devolves upon both men and women when semen or blood emerges from their bodies. The reading is further complicated by the very strange order of the verses and the chapters.

The first question arises from a verse which seemingly has no connection with what precedes or follows it: after the Bible has informed us that when a woman bears a male child she will be ritually impure for seven days (Lev. 12:1, 2), the following verse does not deal with the subsequent thirty-three days of ritual purity which she is allowed to enjoy no matter what her physical state may be – that comes two verses later (Lev. 12:4) – but rather the Bible informs us “That on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised” (Lev. 12:3). Why have the law of

circumcision in the very midst of the laws of a woman's status of purity upon her giving birth? It hardly seems to belong!

The second question deals with the order of the chapters. Chapter twelve deals with ritual purity and impurity as a result of childbirth, as we have seen. Chapter fifteen deals with the different kinds of seminal emissions which emerge from a male and the different kinds of blood emissions which emerge from a female; emissions which are also connected to reproduction as a result of a sexual act between the couple. In the midst of these two biblical discussions, which certainly involve ritual impurity and impurity surrounding reproduction, come two chapters – chapters thirteen and fourteen – which deal with tzara'at, usually translated as leprosy but which certainly refers to a discoloration and degeneration of the skin, which causes the individual to look like a walking corpse. Why bring tzara'at in the midst of a discussion on reproduction?

In Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's important work entitled *Family Redeemed*, my revered teacher interprets the opening chapters of Genesis as a crucial lesson to humanity concerning the spiritual potential as well as the destructive danger of the sexual act. Indeed, the classical commentator Rashi understands the fruit of knowledge of good and evil as having injected within human nature libido, eroticism and lust, rather than the expression of love and the reproductive powers which were initially embedded in human nature. Sigmund Freud sees the serpent as a phallic symbol, and eating is often found in the Bible as a metaphor for engaging in sex. From this perspective, the sin of having partaken of the forbidden fruit is the sin of sexual lust, which can often separate sex from the sacred institution of matrimony, a natural expression of affection between two individuals who are committed to a shared life and to the establishment of a family.

It is fascinating that the punishments for having eaten the fruit are related to reproduction: "And to the woman He said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain and travail in pregnancy and with pain shall you bring forth children....'" (Genesis 3:16).

Even more to the point, the most fundamental penalty for having tasted of the forbidden fruit is death, which plagues men and woman alike: "But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat; for on the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

The sexual act was meant to give not only unity and joy to the couple but also to bestow continued life through the gift of reproduction. Tragically the misuse of sex and its disengagement from love, marriage and family can lead to death-inducing diseases.

I would argue that this is precisely why tzara'at, or the living death which it symbolizes, appears in the Bible in the midst of its discussion of reproduction and the normative processes of seminal emissions and

menstrual blood, which are necessary by-products of the glory of reproduction. Tragically the life-force which is granted by God through the sexual organs can often degenerate into decay and death when those very sexual organs are misused.

I will also submit that this is precisely why the commandment of circumcision comes right before the biblical establishment of a large number of days of purity (thirty-three after the birth of a male and sixty-six after the birth of a female), no matter what blood may emerge from the woman's body. The much larger number of days of purity attest to the great miracle of childbirth – which is always a heartbeat away from death for every anxious parent until the healthy baby emerges and emits its first cry (and this accounts for the initial days of ritual impurity), but which results in new life and the continuation of the family line, giving the greatest degree of satisfaction that a human being can ever experience. Such glories of reproduction are only possible if the male will learn to limit his sexual activity to within the institution of marriage and will recognize the sanctity of sex as well as its pleasures. Placing the divine mark upon the male sexual organ with the performance of the commandment of circumcision establishes this ideal of sanctity. The sacredness of the woman's body is similarly expressed when she immerses herself in a mikveh prior to resuming sexual relations with her husband each month and even makes a blessing to God while still unclothed within the ritual waters, which symbolize life and birth and future.

Hence, the most meaningful blessing which I know is intoned during the marriage ceremony: "Blessed are You O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sanctifies his nation Israel by means of the nuptial canopy and the sanctity of marriage." ©2025 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's double parsha presents to us a difficult set of rituals regarding a type of physical disease that evinced physical manifestations. The rabbis associated this disease with the sin of improper speech and personal slander. We no longer have any true knowledge of the disease, its true appearances and effects, its quarantine period and the healing process that restored the person to one's community and society. The ritual laws of purity and impurity are no longer applicable in our post-Temple society and since there are no comments on these laws in a specific manner in the Babylonian Talmud these ritual laws are not subject to the usual intensive scholarship and study that pertain, for instance, to the laws of money and torts in the Talmud.

In the nineteenth century a great Chasidic rebbe and scholar composed a "Talmud" regarding the

laws of purity and impurity. This feat of scholarship met with criticism from other scholars and has remained controversial and relatively ignored in the modern yeshiva and scholarly world. In effect the entire topic of this week's double parsha remains mysterious and unclear to us. After all the attempted explanations and reasons for these ritual laws of purity and impurity, they remain mysterious and relatively inexplicable to us. Especially when these two parshiyot occur together, as they do this year, and in most years, the question of their relevance becomes even more acute and perplexing. The Torah which always challenges us to understand it retains its inscrutability.

Perhaps this is the message of the Torah itself to us. There is a world that is beyond our earthly eyes and rational vision. Modern man always dreams about space aliens and different universes than the one we inhabit. There is an almost innate sense in us that there is more to creation than what we sense and feel. It fuels our individual drive to immortality, our dreams and imaginations, and it allows us to imagine and invent. There is a popular belief that necessity is the mother of invention. But in reality, I do not feel that this is accurate.

Imagination is the mother of invention. There was no real necessity for the unbelievable advances in technology that our past century has witnessed. But people lived in a world beyond our present real world and imagined the computer, the wireless phone and the internet. This capacity of human imagination and being able to deal with an unseen world that truly exists is one of the great traits of the human mind. The Torah indicates to us the existence of such a world, a world of purity and impurity, a special world of holiness and of the human quest for attachment to the Creator of all worlds.

Even though we do not quite relate to that world with our finite mentality, the Torah wishes us to realize that such a world does exist beyond our limited human vision. And that is a very important and essential lesson in life. ©2025 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

Nega'im, "plagues" that consist of certain types of spots of discoloration that appeared on the walls of a house after Klal Yisrael entered their land, signaled tzarus ayin, literally "cramped-eyedness," what we would call stinginess. (See Arachin 16a and Maharsha there.)

Thus, the house's owner is commanded (Vayikra, 14:36) to remove utensils from the house before it is pronounced tamei, spiritually unclean -

letting others see things he has that he may have been asked to lend but claimed he didn't have (and, by Hashem "saving" the vessels from tum'ah, demonstrating the very opposite of tzarus ayin).

The Kli Yakar explains that the words that translate as "[the house] that is his" (Vayikra 14:35), reflect the miser's mindset, that what he has is really his. What he misses is the truth that what we "own" is really only temporarily in our control, on loan, so to speak, from Hashem.

Puzzling, though, is that Chazal also describe nig'ei batim, the "plagues of houses," as a blessing, because the Emorim concealed treasures in the walls of their houses during the 40 years the Jews were in the desert, and when a Jew whose home was afflicted would remove the diseased wall stones, he would discover the riches. (Rashi, ibid 14:34, quoting Vayikra Rabbah 17:6).

A reward? For having been stingy?

No, but perhaps a lesson in the form of a reward.

Being stingy bespeaks a worldview, as noted above, that misunderstands that what we have is "self-gotten," not on loan from Above. And that mistaken worldview yields an assumption: that we need to hoard what we have, lest anyone deprive us of it.

The once-tzar-ayin-afflicted homeowner, having had to remove a stone from his wall and belongings from his house, is presumably chastened by the experience. But now he is shown something to fortify his new outlook: a demonstration that wealth can come (and, conversely, go) unexpectedly and suddenly, and that we waste our energy and squander our good will by "cramped-eyedness." We get what is best for us to have. And it comes from Above, not below. ©2025 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

“The Kohain shall look, and behold, if the tzaraas covered all his flesh... he is pure. And on the day live flesh is visible, he shall be impure.” (Vayikra 13:13-14) The various types of skin eruptions and sores can be confusing, and the Kohain had to be an expert in them (or have expert advice.) To the average reader, we may have questions. The case of this posuk, for example, lends itself to querying.

If a person has a white spot on his flesh, it is impure. Yet, if his entire body is white, from head to toe, then he is pure! Surely it should have said that such a person is even more so impure. But that's not the halacha.

However, once the healing starts, and fresh skin is visible, NOW we make the man impure. How does this make sense? In truth, it reveals Hashem's wisdom, as expressed to us through the Torah.

When a person sinned, the tzaraas was

intended to wake him up and indicate that he had done wrong. However, this fellow was so engrossed in his sins that his entire body turned white. At that stage, there was no point in making him impure. He wasn't in a place where it could effect change in him. He was too far gone. Hashem would not punish him by making him unclean simply out of spite.

However, when the fresh flesh begins to reassert itself, says the Netziv, this proves that the man has begun to do Teshuva and repent his ways. At this point, he is made impure. It is not a punishment, but an opportunity to correct his ways. Now the Kohain tells him what he needs to do to continue his return to Hashem and become pure once again. He has a problem for which there is a solution, so now it makes sense to consider him impure.

Not only is one completely immersed in sin in a state where he can't be helped, but one who feels that he is too far gone or beyond hope is also unable to be helped. When we despair of being able to return, we become spiritually paralyzed. We feel there's no way for us to move forward and that Hashem has likely given up on us. Symbolized by the entire body being covered with white tzaraas, the hopelessness of one so afflicted stymies their opportunity to change.

However, if we can find even the smallest opening to show people the good in themselves, like the one healthy spot of flesh, then we have a chance to guide and direct them closer to being the person they have the potential to be. In relationships, as well, the way to get our children, students, spouses, or friends to change their ways is not by berating them and pointing out their flaws, but by highlighting the good in them, and gently encouraging them to let that goodness spread and take over their entire being.

A young woman from Canada abandoned her Jewish roots and traditions, married a non-Jew, and moved to Switzerland. Eventually her marriage soured and the couple split. This happened at the beginning of Elul. Immediately after Yom Kippur, the woman died. The Rabbis in Switzerland refused to bury her in the Jewish cemetery as she had lived for many years as a non-Jew in all respects. Distraught, her father called Rebbetzin Elyashiv, and asked that she ask her husband for advice.

R' Elyashiv asked what she did on that final Yom Kippur. The father made inquiries in the community and found out that she had attended a shul for half an hour.

R' Elyashiv then ruled that she could be buried in a Jewish cemetery. The fact that she was in shul on Yom Kippur proved that her neshama was connected to the Jewish



nation, and identified with the yearning for teshuva which Yom Kippur represents. ©2025 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

One of the recurring themes in the original Star Trek was the conflict between logic and emotion. Mr. Spock's Vulcan half was constantly trying to suppress any emotions coming from his Human half, while Captain Kirk would show his first officer how human emotion ultimately triumphs over pure logic. This "battle" between the brain and the heart is very similar to many of the battles between the "yeitzer ha-tov," our good side, and the "yeitzer ha-rah," our evil inclination. We may want something that the Torah prohibits, but our brain tries to prevent us from "following our hearts" (Bamidbar 15:39).



I was always disappointed that the Star Trek version of this battle left out one very important detail (which I felt prevented the right "side" from winning). Instead of limiting the "logical" side of the argument to "pure logic," real "logic" would always take emotions into account before making a decision-not disregard them as irrelevant. (A mistake, by the way, that was corrected in the persona of Captain Picard, who was able to push aside his emotions during the decision making process, while considering those very same emotions, and those of others, as factors in his decision.)

This idea can be used to explain a difficulty raised by some of the commentators on our Parsha.

When the Torah tells us that after childbirth the mother is "ta-may" (ritually unclean) for a week (after a son) or two (after a daughter), it says (12:2) that she has the same status as when she is a "nidah" (the "tumah" resulting from her monthly cycle). However, as the laws of "nidah" are first given a few chapters later (15:19-24), how can they be used as a reference point for a new mother? Moshe has not yet told the nation that the "nidah" is "ta-may," or what that "tumah" means. Why not just give the law details here, and use the new mother as the reference point for the yet-to-be-described "nidah?"

The Ramban (Beraishis 31:35 and Vayikra 12:4) says that even from the early generations, people knew to leave a "nidah" alone. This is why, he explains, Lavan didn't challenge Rachel when he was searching for his idols. Once she told him her status, he knew to keep away. Under this background, where everyone understood that the different emotions caused by the monthly cycle meant that it was best to give her her space, the Torah was simply comparing the situation after childbirth to the necessary separation from a "nidah." Not (just) that the laws are the same, but that

the same underlying reasoning applies. Even though the emotions of having a new baby bring the parents feelings of wanting to celebrate together, the Torah is telling us that just as its best to separate at other times (even if logic would dictate that this is precisely the time to try to help her more), its best to keep some distance after childbirth as well.

In last week's Parsha (Vayikra 10:16-18), even though Nadav and Avihu (Aharon's sons and Elazar and Isamar's brothers) had died just moments earlier (10:2), Moshe came down very hard on Aharon (through Elazar and Isamar) when he thought an halachic error had been made. This might lead one to think that the Torah expects emotions to be completely pushed aside. In reality, though, while emotions need to be held in check, our Creator-who gave us emotions in the first place-wants us to not only consider them before deciding on a plan of action, but to use them as a motivational vehicle in our pursuit of spiritual growth. Moshe had to correct his nephews because everything must always be done within the framework of Jewish law.

By giving the logic of the intellect the final say, but allowing it to take the effects of emotions into account, we can be assured that G-d will help us live long and prosper.

Now make it so. ©2003 Rabbi

D. Kramer



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Infected Clothing

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Not only can *tzara'at* (a skin disease often translated as leprosy) make a person impure, it can make clothing impure as well. However, there is something unusual about an impure item of clothing. Once it becomes impure, no benefit may be derived from it. The source for this is *Vayikra* 13:52, which refers to "*tzara'at mam'eret*" ("a leprous malignancy") which must be burned. Our Sages expound: "*Ten bo me'erah* (destroy it) – do not derive benefit from it." The prohibition applies not only to an item of clothing that has been definitely identified as infected, but even to one that has been put aside as suspicious and is awaiting the *Kohen's* pronouncement. Whether or not it is prohibited to derive benefit depends on whether or not the clothing is considered to be leprous. An item which has been put aside is already defined as infected, even though it does not yet have to be burned.

In light of what we have written, the opinion of the Rambam in his Commentary on the Mishnah (*Nega'im* 11:12) is surprising.

The Rambam states that it is forbidden to derive benefit from an infected item of clothing because one must burn it. However, as we have seen, even during the time the garment is merely set aside, it is

forbidden to derive benefit from it, even though it is not liable to destruction by fire! Furthermore, in order for a piece of clothing to be declared impure, it has to be at least the size of an olive. Yet one is forbidden to derive pleasure from an infected item of clothing even if it is smaller than an olive. Thus, one can have an infected item which is not technically impure. Nevertheless, it is forbidden to derive benefit from it! It would seem then that despite the Rambam, it is not the obligation to burn the clothing which is responsible for the prohibition of deriving benefit from it.

There is an additional difficulty with the Rambam. For it is not prohibited to derive benefit from every item which must be burned. For example, *terumah* which has become impure must be burned, but in the meantime one may derive benefit from it. We are left with a question. It's not a big deal, but it is a challenge. Maybe you can come up with an explanation. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Leprosy, the subject of one of our parshiot this week, is traditionally associated with the sin of slander. Thus, there is a similarity between the Hebrew word for leprosy - *metzora* - and the Hebrew words for speaking evil about another - *motzei shem ra*. The Torah reminds us of the danger of bad speech.

The ability to speak has the capacity to raise a human being above the lower animal world. Hence, Rabbi Yehudah Halevi labels the human being as *medaber*, one who speaks. Speech is what sets the human being apart.

But, the greater the potential to do good, the greater the possibility for that potential to turn into evil. Speech can raise one to the highest level, but if abused, it can sink us to the lowest depth.

Indeed, injurious speech has enormous ramifications. Although when we were kids, we would say "sticks and bones can break my bones, but names can never harm me," it is actually not true. Words and name-calling can actually hurt deeply. It also should be remembered that while a word is a word and a deed is a deed, words lead to deeds. Once a word has been said, it is almost impossible to take back, for a spoken word spreads to others in ways that can never be undone.

A rabbinic tale: A rabbi was once asked, what is the most expensive meat. He responded, "tongue." And the next day the rabbi was asked what is the least expensive meat. Here too he responded, "tongue." Such is the challenge of speech. One that the Torah reminds us about this week, and that we should all take to heart. ©2017 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and

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YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
Virtual Beit Medrash

 STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA
 SICHA OF HARAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN

Translated by David Strauss
Edited by Sarah Rudolph

The central theme of Parashot Tazria and Metzora is the laws of impurity in general, and of a metzora and tzara'at in particular. Why does the Torah devote such a major section to the laws of impurity specifically here, in the middle of the book of Vayikra? Sefer Vayikra is largely concerned with matters of kedusha (sanctity): from the sanctity of the sacrifices and the Mishkan, through the sanctity of Israel in Parashat Kedoshim and the sanctity of the priesthood in Parashat Emor, and ending with the sanctity of the land and society in Parashot Behar and Bechukotai. Why does the Torah stop, in the midst of its various discussions of sanctity, and expand on matters of impurity?

It would seem that the key to resolving this question lies in the difference between tzara'at and the other impurities detailed in the two parashot. The other impurities -- a woman after childbirth, zav, nidda, and a man who experienced a seminal emission -- all share a common feature, namely, their connection to the natural world. In dealing with these issues, the Torah in effect recognizes the impermanence and transience of the natural world, and copes with it by way of the concept of impurity, which indicates a missing out on or a lacking of life.

In contrast, tzara'at has nothing to do with the natural world. The Ramban goes on at great length to explain how tzara'at is a supernatural phenomenon, coming from heaven by way of individual providence. Proof for this can be brought from the fact that tzara'at can affect the whole body, but also a garment or a house. A person with tzara'at does not turn to a physician, but to a kohen, who decides each time what the next step will be -- initial confinement, further quarantine, declaration of impurity, or declaration of purity.

In this way, tzara'at teaches not only about itself but about the whole: that all diseases come from God and are under His control -- just like everything that happens in the world.

This teaches us to seek the presence of the Shekhina, the sanctity, in every aspect of life. The Land of Israel is more holy than the rest of the world, and Shabbat is more holy than other days, but there is a certain degree of sanctity in all aspects of our lives, and we must seek it constantly.

This point explains an interesting connection that exists in the books of the Prophets between tzara'at and war. In the haftara of Tazria, we read of the

tzara'at of Na'aman, who was the commander-in-chief of the army of Aram, and in the haftara of Metzora, we read of the siege of Shomron and the four metzora'im who brought the news that they were saved.

What is common to tzara'at and war is the strong sense regarding each that it is something mundane and human, regarding which there is no Divine intervention. We know that "if the Lord does not watch over a city, the watchman wakes/watches in vain" (Tehillim 127:1), but often it is easy to forget the presence of God. This motif appears repeatedly in the haftara for Parashat Metzora. It begins with the captain who was unwilling to accept the prophecy regarding a decline in prices (II Melakhim 7:2) and continues in the camp of Aram, which hears noises but is unable to attribute them to anything other than natural causes -- which drives them to a far-fetched explanation that Israel may have hired the Egyptian army or the Chittites to help them fight against Aram (ibid. v. 6). Anyone who reads the preceding chapters, about the appalling economic and social situation in which the people of Israel was mired, will find it hard to believe that the people of Aram were willing to accept this flimsy explanation and flee on its account, and yet flee they did (v. 7). Finally, the king of Israel is not prepared to accept the story of the escape and is convinced that it is actually a particularly sophisticated military trap (v. 12).

By juxtaposing these issues, the prophet teaches us that both with respect to a person's private medical matters and in matters of war and national events, it is God who is really in charge. The persistence of this providence attests to the presence of the Shekhina, the holiness that pertains not only to specific times and places but to the entire world. By virtue of that constant presence of the Shekhina, the world becomes a holy place, and so we must relate to it.

Another matter that can be learned from the parashot dealing with a metzora relates to the nature of the metzora. Chazal enumerate the sins for which tzara'at comes as a punishment:

"Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Because of seven things the plague of tzara'at is incurred: slander, the shedding of blood, vain oath, incest, arrogance, robbery, and envy." (Arakhin 16a)

What characterizes all these reasons is egocentrism: a person sees himself as the center of all things, both at the expense of other people and in relation to God. This trait can find expression in slander, in murder, in arrogance, etc.

We also see this trait in the haftara of Parashat Tazria. Na'aman feels that he is the center of the universe -- a great warrior and commander of a regional superpower, with many underlings and subordinates to do his bidding. This leads to

egocentrism and selfishness, and so he is stricken with tzara'at. The tzara'at does not alter these features in his personality, and when he comes to Elisha, he does not understand his suggestion to bathe in the Jordan -- for there are many more impressive rivers in Damascus:

"Are not Amana and Farpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned, and went away in a rage." (II Melakhim 5:12)

However, his process of purification also includes repentance, and an understanding that the focus is not on himself. This process eventually succeeds, and indeed Chazal ascribed to him (Gittin 57b) the respectability of being a ger toshav (resident alien).

In contrast, Gehazi tried to enhance his own status, taking a monetary fee from Na'aman without considering the implications of his actions for others. It is therefore understandable that Elisha cursed him: "And may the tzara'at of Na'aman cleave to you and your descendants forever" (II Melakhim 5:27).

The Mishna in Sanhedrin (10:2) lists Gehazi as one of the people who have no share in the World to Come precisely because of this point. Chazal say that Gehazi was a great Torah scholar, and this is also reasonable, for he was a disciple of Elisha. Nevertheless, since he placed himself at the center and failed to see his surroundings, he has no share in the World to Come.

Another figure appearing on the Mishna's ignoble list is Yarovam. He too is a figure of great power and ambition, chosen by prophecy to lead Israel. Yet when he is offered the opportunity of his dreams by God Himself, "I, you, and the son of Yishai will stroll in the Garden of Eden," all he is interested in is "who is at the head?" When he was told that David would be at the head, he replied, "If so, I do not want it" (Sanhedrin 102a).

In other words, "all this has no value in his eyes" (Esther 5:13) because he is not at the head, because it is not his name in the headlines, because he is not in the limelight.

This message has always been important, but it is all the more so in our modern era. Today, it is much easier for a person to think he is responsible for his own destiny, that he is running the world, and that God does not intervene. In the past, the sense of dependence, which for us is reserved for places like a hospital, was pervasive in all areas of life. Diseases killed children right and left, medical complications were unresolvable, and people felt themselves to be much more dependent on God. Thus, we are burdened with a more difficult task; precisely in a more comfortable and peaceful world, we must separate ourselves from our immediate experience and see the presence of God in reality.

In this context, the message of the parasha is

even more complex. Parashat Tazria opens with "If a woman conceives and bears a male child," and the well-known question is raised: Why must the mother bring a sin-offering? Even today, every woman who gives birth sacrifices of herself for the continuity of the people of Israel, and this was all the more true of women in ancient times! Every pregnancy was fraught with complications; every birth involved significant mortal danger. Why, after all that self-sacrifice, should the mother have to bring a sin-offering?

In addition, one may ask why this parasha is juxtaposed to the parasha of the metzora, rather than to the laws of a zava and nidda, to which it is more naturally connected.

It would seem that the answer to these questions is that the Torah is trying to emphasize the fact that even in birth, in a process that is not only natural but also very desirable, there may be a problematic imbalance created, which must be addressed. Often after birth the mother feels that she and her child are at the center, and ignores whatever else is going on around her. The sin-offering is a response to this imbalance.

We must learn to see the world as a place where the Shekhina is constantly present, and from that perspective, each of us must realize that we do not stand at the center of the universe. *[This sicha was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5777.]*

