

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The sidrot of Tazria and Metsora 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 G-d of redemption is also the G-d of creation. The physical world we inhabit is the one G-d made and pronounced "very good." To be a hedonist is to deny G-d. To be an ascetic is to deny the goodness of G-d'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 G-d 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 G-d are alive today" (Deut 4:4). The Torah is a tree of life. G-d is the G-d of life. As Moses put it in two memorable words: "Choose life" (Deut. 30:19).

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It follows that kedushah (holiness) -- a point in time or space where we stand in the unmediated presence of G-d -- 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. G-d'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 G-d. 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 G-d himself. That, incidentally, is why women are closer to G-d than men, because they, unlike men, know what it is to bring new life out of themselves, as G-d 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 G-d'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 G-d 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 G-d. 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. © 2013 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Then he shall sprinkle [the mixture] seven times upon the person being purified from the tzara'at; he shall purify him and set the live bird free upon the open field" (Leviticus 14:7)

One of the strangest and most primitive-sounding rituals of the Bible surrounds the purification of the individual afflicted with "tzara'at," a skin disease that apparently, at least in biblical times, struck those guilty of slanderous gossip (metzora - one who is afflicted with tzara'at - derives from motzi-ra, one who spreads evil talk). Because the root cause of the malady was spiritual rather than physiological, it was the priest - the kohen - rather than a doctor who had the responsibility of examining the white spots that appeared on the skin of the individual to determine whether quarantine was necessary, and then - if he was able to declare the person free of the disease - initiating a process of purification.

It is with this particular ritual that our portion of Metzora opens. The kohen commands two birds to be

taken; the first to be slaughtered in an earthenware vessel, its blood mingled with the living waters of a spring, and the second - kept alive - to be immersed within the mingled blood waters in the earthenware vessel. The waters are sprinkled upon the person cured of the malady, whereupon the live bird is allowed to fly away, leaving the city limits.

This ritual act of purification is fraught with symbolism. There are few biblical infractions as serious as speaking slander; three different prohibitions recorded in Scripture proscribe such speech. The first is gossip regarding another, which may in itself be harmless, but which is no one else's business and can easily lead to evil talk (the prohibition of *rechilus* - when, for example, one tells another the cost of a neighbor's new house). The second is *lashon hara* - downright slander - reporting the negative action of another which may actually be true but ought not be spread.

The third and worst of all is *motzi shem ra* - disseminating a lie about an innocent person. From such unnecessary chatter, reputations can be broken, families can be destroyed and lives can be lost ("with the negative turn of their noses, they can become responsible for the death of another").

Hence, three people incur penalty for such talk: the one who tells it, the one who listens to it and the one who spreads it further. And when the Kohen Gadol (high priest) appears once a year before G-d in the Holy of Holies with the incense sacrifice, it is for this infraction against slander that he seeks atonement on behalf of the Jewish nation.

With this in mind, let us analyze the symbolism of the purification process. In idolatry, the point of offering a sacrifice was to propitiate the gods - idolaters believed that the world was run by the warring gods and humans could only seek to bribe them. In Judaism, by contrast, humans are full partners with G-d in perfecting this world. Our sacrifices represent the one who brings them, with the sin-offering animal standing in the place of the owner, "telling" him that it is he who deserved to die but for Divine loving-kindness, and the whole burnt offering "telling" him that he ought devote "all of himself" to the service of the Almighty in the perfection of the world.

In the case of the *metzora*, the slanderous, scandalous chattering twitters are symbolized by the two birds; one is slaughtered as gossip is considered akin to taking a life, and the other is sent off to fly away.

The best way to explain this symbolism is by means of a remarkable hassidic story told of someone who asked his rebbe how he might gain Divine forgiveness for his sin of slander. The rebbe instructed him to confess his sin and beg forgiveness of those whom he had slandered; then he instructed him to take a feather pillow, bring it to the marketplace late in the afternoon when the wind was strongest, to open the covering, allow the feathers to fly, and then set about collecting all the scattered feathers.

The distraught hassid returned to the rebbe that evening, reporting that gathering the feathers was a "mission impossible." "So it is with slander," replied the rebbe; "You never know how far your evil words have spread, since each person you told may well have told his friends..."

Rav Yisrael Salanter explained why the portions *Tazria* and *Metzora* follow *Shmini*, with its laws of *kashrut*: because what comes out of your mouth is even more significant than what goes into your mouth.

Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying this: "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people." © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd the Kohain will give instructions (to the homeowner whose house might be afflicted), and they will empty the house before the Kohain comes to inspect the affliction, and everything in the house will not become ritually impure" (*Vayikra* 14:36). Rashi, based on *Nega'im* 12:5 and *Toras Kohanim*, explains which items the Torah is trying to prevent from possibly becoming ritually impure: "If it was for vessels that can be purified through immersion (in a *mikveh*), let them be immersed and purified (i.e. the Torah would not force the homeowner to avoid the possible hassle of having to immerse them later by making him go through the hassle of removing them from the house now, just in case); if it was for food and drink, let him eat/drink them when he himself is ritually impure (and his preventing them from becoming ritually impure is irrelevant); the Torah is only concerned about earthenware vessels that can not be purified in a *mikveh*."

Mishneh Acharona (*Nega'im* 12:5) asks why Rashi includes food and drink in this list. After all, *T'rumah* that becomes ritually impure can never be eaten (even by a Kohain who is ritually impure), and there is no prohibition against eating regular food that is ritually impure. Why would we think that the purpose of removing everything from the house was to prevent regular food from becoming ritually impure if it can be eaten even if it is? And why would Rashi disqualify preventing regular food from becoming ritually impure from being the reason everything must be removed based on the fact that it can be eaten by those who are ritually impure, if even those who are not ritually impure can eat it? This question is also asked by *Panim Yafos* (<http://tinyurl.com/cmqs27e>), who suggests a *pilpul*-style answer, and is included in volume #55 of "Iyun HaParasha" (<http://tinyurl.com/bq8esny>).

Mikdash Dovid (*Taharos* #41, <http://tinyurl.com/bum35qe>, referenced by *Iyun HaParasha*) discusses whether one is required to maintain ritual purity for regular food. Rashi (*Chulin* 35a,

d"h d'leka k'zayis, also referenced by Iyun HaParasha) seems to be saying that it is a requirement. If so, we can understand why Rashi had to explain the reason preventing regular food from becoming ritually impure could not be why the Torah had everything removed from the house. However, Rashi's source (a Mishnah and a major halachic Midrash) does not mention food, only items that can be purified in a mikveh. If ritually impure food couldn't normally be eaten, why didn't Rabbi Mayer (whose opinion is being stated in the Mishnah/Midrash) mention it as well? And since T'rumah that becomes ritually impure must be burned and can never be eaten, why couldn't that have been why the Torah required the house to be emptied?

Because of the seriousness of ritually impure T'rumah, care was always taken, both by the farmer before it was given to the Kohain and by the Kohain himself, to maintain its ritual integrity. (Many of the impurity laws, including washing our hands before eating bread, were designed to protect the ritual purity of T'rumah.) It is therefore likely that any T'rumah that had been in the house was removed even before the Kohain was called; accordingly, the Kohain's instructions to remove everything else would not have been meant to prevent T'rumah from becoming ritually impure, and there is no reason for Rabbi Mayer to mention it. His not mentioning regular food indicates that he did not think there was a problem consuming regular food that was ritually impure, and there was therefore no reason to prevent it from becoming so. Rashi (and others, such as Rabbeinu Bachye, who also discuss regular food in the same context) might be following the opinion that eating ritually impure food is problematic, or might have included it in their commentary on our verse because such an opinion exists. Nevertheless, there's another aspect that I think might be at work here.

The point Rabbi Mayer is making, one that Rashi quotes several times in his commentary on the Talmud (e.g. Rosh Hashanah 27a, Yuma 39a and Chulin 59b), is that G-d is concerned about our money (i.e. things that have monetary value). Earthenware vessels are not very valuable, and, in this circumstance, are owned by individuals who deserve to be punished by having an affliction in their house. Yet, G-d made sure that everything was removed so that even things that the homeowner himself might not have bothered saving, such as small earthenware vessels, could still be used, and would not have to be replaced. Even though this is a very powerful point, Rashi does not include it in his commentary on our verse. And it's not as if Rashi is averse to making this point in his commentary on Chumash, as he does so elsewhere (see Bamidbar 20:8). It therefore seems as if Rashi is using Rabbi Mayer's line of thinking, which Rabbi Mayer used to prove that G-d cares about our money, to make a different point about our verse.

Rashi is commenting on the words "and all that is in the house will not become ritually impure," explaining that if everything isn't removed before the Kohain determines whether or not there really is an affliction, it will be too late to remove anything once it's determined that there is (if there is), and everything inside will become ritually impure. By removing everything ahead of time, this is avoided. Rashi then continues by explaining what practical impact this will have, using Rabbi Mayer's line of thinking to show that the only things that this really makes a difference for are earthenware vessels. Rashi is not using the verse to teach us about G-d's kindness, but using Rabbi Mayer's thought process to explain the practical implication of removing things from the house before the Kohain looks at it.

Whether or not there is a requirement to only eat food that is ritually pure (when ritually pure), it was certainly considered preferable. And, historically, there was a significant segment of our population that were careful to do so. Therefore, when explaining what practical implications removing everything from the house had, Rashi points out that removing the food and drink did not make a major difference—even for those who avoided eating food that was ritually impure. After all, having someone in the house who was ritually impure was a regular occurrence (see Tiferes Yisrael on Nega'im 12:5), and those who were ritually impure could eat food that had become ritually impure. Just as it's not worth the hassle of having to remove items that can be purified just to avoid possibly having to purify them later, it's not worth the hassle of removing all food items just to avoid having to save it for times of impurity. If so, what was really gained by emptying the house? Saving the earthenware vessels. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

We, in our current milieu and society, find it difficult to intimately relate to the facts, descriptions and rituals outlined for us in the subject matter of the parshiyot of this week. The laws and rituals of negaaim are addressed to those of past generations that were on a far different spiritual level than ours. Even the Talmud Bavli did not assign any specific volumes in its vast compendium of Torah to explain and elucidate the sections of Mishnah that do deal with these issues.

We are left with the necessity to study and attempt to understand the written word, and to receive merit for so doing even though the issues involved have no particular practical impact on our daily lives and behavior.

The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud associated the plague of tzoraas with the speaking of slander and with evil speech generally, though we do not really know the nature of tzoraas itself. It certainly was not leprosy in our current medical understanding of

that disease. So this week's parshiyot remain obscure and mysterious to us in the extreme. However this does not mean that we are to ignore or downplay their appearance in the Torah.

The Torah does not contain extraneous or unimportant material. The word of G-d is not to be trifled with and all of the great rabbinic Torah commentators throughout the ages have grappled with deriving meaning and moral lessons from the words of these Torah parshiyot.

Part of the ritual of purification of the metzora was his isolation and quarantine - as he was sent out of the camp of Israel completely. The Netziv - Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin - in his classic commentary to Torah, associates the metzora with the Torah scholar who is found morally wanting in his behavior, speech and attitudes towards fellow human beings.

He implies that only where holiness exists - through the study and knowledge of Torah - can the physical symptoms of impurity and spiritual degradation be felt. The Torah scholar is therefore guilty of desecrating G-d's name by his untoward behavior and speech and thus his punishment is measure for measure - he himself is to be excluded from the camp of Israel.

The "ordinary" Jew, so to speak, does not feel the symptoms of tzoraas for he is not as exposed to the great holiness of Torah as is the eminent Torah scholar. The implicit warning here is the danger that faces a Torah scholar who does not rise to the level of truly moral behavior. I imagine that we can all be comforted somewhat in the fact that the plague of tzoraas is not quite relevant to us currently, as we are far removed from spiritual greatness and the levels of Torah scholarship achieved by our forbearers.

However, even we ordinary Jews are bidden not to fall into the trap of desecrating G-d's name by our speech patterns and behavior. And that is probably the most cogent and important lesson that we can derive from the parshiyot that we will read this week. © 2013 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 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. © 2013 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI YISROEL CINER

Parsha Insights

This week's parsha, Shmini, teaches the dietary laws of which animals can and can't be eaten. "These are the animals that can be eaten from amongst all of the animals of the land. All those that have split-hooves and chew their cud... [11:2-3]" These kashrus laws apply and affect us on both a physical and spiritual level. Whenever someone takes issue, claiming there's no evidence that these foods cause any physical harm, I invariably counter that I am, in fact, much older than I look. I was actually born B.C. before cholesterol... In those years, people had never heard of cholesterol. It wasn't found on a single supermarket label. It wasn't recognized as the number one cause of heart attacks. So much for what science knows as of today. We all know that twenty-five years from now we'll be looking back on the antiquated ideas, understandings and methods of the year 2003.

The same way that the physical composition of the food affects us in a physical sense, the spiritual make-up of the food affects us in a spiritual sense. Though we have some knowledge of the physical, how different things would impact upon us spiritually is clearly out of our league. Our only hope is to follow the directives of the Master Healer outlined in His Torah.

An interesting comparison is drawn between different nations and the animals that represent them. Yisroel is compared to a sheep, Esav {the modern western world} is compared to a pig and Yishmael {the Middle Eastern world} is compared to a camel.

(An interesting side point is that these animals are the staple foods of their respective nations. The Jews eat lamb but not pig or camel. The western world eats pig as one of its staples. The Moslem, Arab world doesn't eat pig but eat camel.)

Sheep have both of the necessary attributes in order to be kosher they chew their cud and have split-hooves. Pigs have split-hooves but don't chew their cud, while camels chew their cud but don't have split-hooves.

The hooves have to do with travel. That idea of always moving forward is exemplified by the western world. A father is termed "the old man." Technology renders yesterday's wonders obsolete. With the theory of evolution, there's not much of a basis to respect the earlier generations who are simply a few steps closer to having been apes. The movement is forward, forward, forward with hardly a look behind. Having split-hooves but not chewing the cud.

Chewing the cud is a regurgitation of the past. The Middle Eastern world looks back on the success and glory of their history. Developments in mathematics and science are no longer their domain. Even their present is backward, a regurgitation of the past, indicating a fairly bleak future. Chewing the cud but not having split-hooves.

The sheep and other kosher animals both chew their cud and have split-hooves. Yisroel is manifested by a deep respect and reverence for the past those that are generations closer to Adam HaRishon {the first man} and to those that stood at Sinai and a confident faith and hope in the future and glory that it holds.

"Do not become defiled with these because I am Hashem, your G-d, sanctify yourselves because I am holy... [11:43-44]" It is this commitment to the laws of kashrus that will help bring about that glorious future.
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RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Inherent Value

The "disease" of tzara'at is not really a disease. It cannot be cured by any medicine or treatment. It cannot be diagnosed by a doctor (unless that doctor is a Kohen). In fact the only means of "treatment" is separation from everyone, including medical personnel, until the "disease" runs its course. This is not "leprosy" even though most translations call it that since it is a disease that is found on the skin. But the skin is only one place that it is found. The Torah speaks of four places that may get tzara'at, namely, the skin, hair, clothing, or walls of the house. In each case, whether there is an expert in tzara'at or not, no one can determine whether the appearance is tzara'at except a Kohen. But why only a Kohen and not an expert?

The Kohen is the spiritual representative of Hashem among the people. He is a physician of the soul, not the body. Therefore, this "disease" is a disease of the soul, not of the body. People who

develop leprosy often have long-term evidence of that disease and their bodies suffer great pain. But tzara'at is not leprosy but a disease of the soul which manifests itself on the skin, hair, clothing, or walls of the house of the person whose soul is afflicted. Only a Kohen, then, can make the determination that this soul is afflicted and also determine when that affliction ends.

The Gemara lists several reasons why a soul may become afflicted. The most common reason for becoming afflicted is lashon hara, speaking "gossip" about someone else. It is not clear if this evil was the major reason of the affliction, but since the two cases in the Torah of tzara'at are brought as a punishment for lashon hara, the meforshim associate this disease more with lashon hara than any other cause. When Moshe expressed doubt to Hashem about the B'nei Yisrael believing that Moshe was sent by Hashem, Hashem gave him one of the signs of proof that Moshe's hand would be afflicted with tzara'at. When Miriam spoke to others about Moshe's married life and the strain that it put on Tziporah, she was afflicted with tzara'at for a week.

After being examined by a Kohen, a person with the appearance of tzara'at would have to leave the camp of Israel and be isolated until the disease subsided. He would regularly be reexamined until which time the Kohen deemed that he could re-enter the camp. This isolation was significant because he was even isolated from others who might be isolated at the same time. He would need to reflect on his life and his "illness" and create change or his isolation would continue. Yet what did he need to change? What caused him to speak lashon hara in the first place? Lashon hara often stems from a lack of self worth. The speaker may feel inferior to others and seeks to lower their success or the opinion of others about the person of whom the gossip is spoken. If the speaker of lashon hara is now isolated, how will his opinion of himself change? And how will he no longer feel inferior to others?

Perhaps the case of the walls of the house can help us here. When the Kohen determines that the walls of the house have tzara'at, the objects within the home are placed outside and the walls are taken down. The walls may be rebuilt but the infected bricks may not be used. According to many, even though the case of the walls is found last in the order of those things which can manifest the infection, tzara'at in the walls of the house actually precedes any of the other cases.

Rashi quotes an amazing medrash about the walls of the house. These infected walls will appear in the homes that the Jews will confiscate from the inhabitants of the land when they conquer Israel. These inhabitants will become frightened when the Jews approach the land and will hide gold and silver in the walls. When the walls are then taken down, the owner will discover gold and silver inside. There are two obvious problems with this medrash. Firstly, the

Tanach does not give us one case in which this happened, and secondly, why would a person who spoke lashon hara be given a reward? Lashon hara is so horrible and detestable that the Chofetz Chaim devoted his life to prevent it from happening. How then could Hashem reward a person for this crime against his fellowman?

From this medrash we can deduce a solution for our isolated afflicted person. As the isolated person remains in isolation with almost no hope of change, he may remember what the Torah says of his "house." He will need to "take down the walls of his house" as a first step to change. He will need to examine himself fully until he can find the "gold and silver" within himself and he will be certain to find it. Hashem does not create something of no value. There is inherent value in each person, in each soul. When the isolated person realizes his own value, he will no longer need to speak badly of others. He will be satisfied knowing that he is gold and silver.

As we deal with our fellow Jews and with others in our community, we must not forget the inherent value of each person. We must realize that every human being is a creation of Hashem and has that goodness within them. There are people who have become so evil that their goodness and their souls have been destroyed, but that is not true of most of the world. May we seek out and recognize the gold and silver in each person. © 2013 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI AVI HELLER

Weekly Dose of Torah

A strange thing happened to me after I ran my first marathon: I fell to pieces. I don't mean physically, though I was VERY sore for a few days. For a few weeks, I lost my focus at work, was irritable at home and felt a little depressed and out-of it. I could not seem to muster enthusiasm for anything, even running. In retrospect – after the huge investment of time and energy I put into the marathon – I was a little burned out. I had trained for 4+ months, put in hundreds of miles, bought special running gear, counted down the days and obsessively checked the marathon website. When all of that preparation and anticipation finally passed out of my life, I felt like I had fallen off the cliff of an amazing experience. It took me time to climb back up. I was experiencing what I call "achievement fatigue."

This happens to all of us, I think, in different ways. You spend months planning a great vacation but when you get back, instead of feeling refreshed and renewed, you feel totally blah. You gear up for a major trial or conference or bar-mitzva and, once all the fireworks are over, you need a little time to recover. It's not that you need to physically recover (get a good night's sleep, finished), it's that you need to emotionally recover from the loss of what was driving you. When we

achieve something significant, we sometimes have an "achievement fatigue" backlash.

A profound example of this is having a baby. Though I have never (and will never merit to) perform this miraculous feat, I have gone through the father's side of the experience and I trust what my wife has told me about her side. There is a known tendency among women to have the "baby blues" after giving birth¹. There are probably hormonal and physical contributing factors to this, but it seems reasonable to suggest that there are emotional reasons as well. A pregnant woman has to change her whole life around her impending baby. Her body changes in unbelievable, wonderful and sometimes scary ways. Carrying a baby to term takes nine months and then the act of birth itself is painful, traumatic and cathartic all at once. Plus, she now has a helpless infant who is entirely dependent upon her for its survival and well-being. Once the baby is born, it is only natural that a woman would experience "achievement fatigue"².

I think this may explain some of the interesting Biblical rituals associated with childbirth in the beginning of this week's Torah portion. First the Torah says "when a woman becomes pregnant" (Lev 12:2) and the word used – "tazri'a" means to flower or bloom. This is a complimentary (and unusual) language, suggesting that there is something amazing about pregnancy.

The next statement is that "she becomes t'mei'a for seven days." This has irritated and confused many, who cannot understand why a woman should become "impure" (the usual, but inaccurate translation of "tamei" or "t'mei'a"). Rather than assigning new mothers a negative status, we should celebrate them, for they have partnered with G-d to create the miracle of new life. In fact, we DO value and celebrate new

¹ Many people distinguish between this mild depressive state and the more serious, potentially harmful, "postpartum depression." It is normal for a woman to have mood swings, irritability and sadness after having a baby. It is not normal (but does happen to around 10% of new mothers) to become more seriously depressed.

² My wife added a powerful insight into this process: during pregnancy, expectant mothers become very self-centered, in a way. They take care of their bodies as they change and their husbands, friends and strangers are solicitous of their moods and needs. People often stop to comment and compliment pregnant women on their shape or their glow. Even when they become uncomfortable and unwieldy, there is something very special about a pregnant woman. Once the baby is born, the whole emphasis switches to the baby and away from the mother. She now has to suppress her own needs and moods for the sake of the baby and it is the baby that garners all the attention. One of the contributing factors to the "baby blues" has been suggested to be guilt by mothers when they resent their babies for taking all that attention and/or guilt over taking time for themselves when they feel they should focus on their baby.

mothers, which has nothing to do with whether they are “t’mei’a” or not. The state of “ritual impurity” only means that they must wait those seven days to enter the Temple or to touch holy objects, not that anything, G-d forbid, is wrong with them. Being “t’mei’a”, in my opinion, simply means that there is an obstacle between one and G-d that needs to be removed. The obstacle, in this case, is “achievement fatigue.” The Torah specifies, in fact, that these days are “like the days of menstrual sickness³.” In other words, the whole point is that she is both physically and emotionally fatigued (or weak, ill) after giving birth to a baby.

After this period of waiting, the woman enjoys thirty-three days of “purity”, or closer connection to G-d. She is specially protected from becoming “t’mei’a.” This is a unique status conferred on a new mother and is much longer (by almost five times) than her period of distance. Finally, she offers up two sacrifices that mark her transition from “birth mother” to “nursing mother”: an olah (“elevation”) and a chatat (“sin”). Many have also been offended that a new mother should have to bring a “sin” offering. After all, what could she possibly have done wrong? Of course, the act of giving birth is a complete credit and praise for her, but some authorities have suggested that – during the intense pain of delivery – she may have cursed G-d, cursed her husband and/or sworn never to have children/have sex again. Her “sin” offering repents of those statements now.

However, another interpretation is that she needs to emerge from her achievement fatigue. The elevation offering (which is completely consumed on the altar and rises up to Hashem) represents her acknowledgment that she put everything she had into having this baby. Additionally, it is a way of acknowledging that she was only able to give birth due to G-d’s gifts to her. The sin offering does not come to atone for sin at all, but rather to mark her transition from postpartum to normalcy once again. “Sin” offerings can also be used to mark a process from exile to redemption⁴ just as they can mark the process from guilt to forgiveness. It is also a way of limiting how long she can allow herself to languish in achievement fatigue-ville. Once she brings the sacrifice, it is time for her to get back into gear with her life. We find a similar example in mourning. The seven day period of shiva⁵ delimits the time for mourning. When the seven days are up, mourners “get up” from their mourning and walk around the block, signifying that they are ready at least to begin to rejoin normal society.

Our lives tend to go in cycles and most of us will experience “achievement fatigue” one time or

³ Since women often feel slightly ill during menstruation.

⁴ This is the opinion of Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, who brings additional proofs and reasons.

⁵ This also applies to a lesser degree to the thirty-day period and 12- month period of mourning as well.

another, whether in our personal, professional or religious lives. Perhaps the approach of the Torah to this is to acknowledge it and accept it, but only for a short and specific period of time. We cannot wallow and drown in our fatigue when each day brings a new opportunity to embark on new adventures and goals.
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RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Both Parshat Tazria and Metzora discuss skin ailments on one’s flesh, who to see about it (the Priest), how to treat it (isolate it), what to do if it spreads (isolate yourself), and so on. While we get caught up in the details of the treatments, we might fail to realize how strange all of this is. This is the first time the Torah discusses personal physical hygiene. Why would the Torah spend almost two entire Parshiot (multiple Parshas) on personal hygiene?

Rabbi Munk in The Call of The Torah explains that by giving these afflictions so much attention, the Torah points to them as examples of the spiritual causes at the root of many illnesses (in our case, Tzaraas -- the affliction discussed in the Parsha -- is caused by one of seven sins: Slander, murder, perjury, debauchery, pride, theft and jealousy (Talmud Arachim 16a)). As the Rambam (Maimonides) asserts, the best medication is based on ethical values, helping to re-establish harmonies between spiritual and physical forces (Guide to the Perplexed 3:27). This discussion is meant to remind us that illness is sometimes spiritual, and that it’s connected to our physical well-being. As such, we should feed our bodies, so long as we nurture our souls. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

