

TIMELESS TORAH

TAZRIA-METZORA: THE POWER OF SELF-INTROSPECTION

Spiritual Diagnostics

The parshiyot of Tazria and Metzora are among the most difficult in the Torah to comprehend. The intricate details of the laws of *tzaraat* are challenging to relate to our lives, as we no longer seem to suffer from this particular malady. The symptoms specified in the parshah do not match any known affliction, including leprosy, which is the common, yet inaccurate, translation of *tzaraat*. This is one reason why the Sages understood *tzaraat* as a physical manifestation of a spiritual sickness, brought upon a person to warn them against evil speech. The Tosefta (an authoritative halachic compilation from the Mishnaic era) elaborates on this, teaching that the progression of the *tzaraat* affliction follows the trajectory of a person's behaviour. The *tzaraat* is first brought upon a person's house, and the halachah requires that the plaster on the walls must be peeled off. If the person does not repent, the *tzaraat* persists, and the walls of the house must be broken down. After this, the *tzaraat* might spread to a person's clothes, and finally, to their skin. In essence, then, *tzaraat* was a wake-up call, encouraging a person to engage in introspection and to mend their ways; the sooner they do so, the quicker the *tzaraat* is cured.

According to Rabbi Chaim Shmuelewitz (d.1979) the implications of this order of affliction is significant. Its central message is to prevent allowing oneself to become desensitised to spiritual growth. The initial manifestation of *tzaraat* is almost openly miraculous. The discolouration of the walls of a person's house should be a clear sign to them that they have been sent a Divine message.

If, however, the homeowner ignores this sign, the *tzaraat* progresses to their clothes, where it might be mistaken for mould or some other naturally occurring problem. Finally, if the person persists in explaining away the symptoms that they are experiencing, the *tzaraat* will affect their actual body, appearing as a skin-disease. This, writes, Rabbi Shmuelewitz, is the greatest negative consequence of not seeking to discover personal areas for self-improvement; a person can become ensconced in spiritual stagnancy and they are then left to wander through the natural order of the world. Viewing our experiences through the lens of the Torah and the mitzvot, on the other hand, gives us the freedom to elevate ourselves and to engage in genuine spiritual growth.

Layers of Meaning

A similar approach to this parshah is offered by the Kli Yakar (d.1619), who relies upon a profound insight into human psychology. Human beings seem built to operate under many layers of self-justification. This is because we try our best to avoid what renowned American social psychologist Leon Festinger called 'cognitive dissonance' - offering any kind of excuse to justify even extremely reprehensive behaviour. With *tzaraat*, these layers are peeled away one-by-one. First, the *tzaraat* affects a person's house, requiring them to 'break down' their external walls. Then, a deeper layer is impacted, represented by the person's clothes. Finally, the *tzaraat* affects the person's innermost layer, and they are left with no choice but to admit that the fault lies with them.

The verses themselves, however, describe this process operating in the opposite direction, indicating that *tzaraat* first affects the



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

Wednesdays - 8.00-8.45pm | In-person at Kinloss

person's body and only afterwards moves towards their clothes and their home. The reason for this, explains the Kli Yakar, is that although Hashem, in His mercy, affects a person's property before their person, the Torah teaches that the ultimate purpose of *tzaraat* is to inspire a person to recognise the need to be truthful with themselves. When *tzaraat* appears on the wall of the house, it is time to focus on the soul.

A moving anecdote is told of the Bluzhever Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Spira (d.1989), who, after surviving the concentration camps, established a shul in New York. Every Yamim Noraim, the Rebbe himself would lead the service, and although he would in general follow the normal tunes and intonations of the prayers, when he would reach the word '*emet* – truth', he would shout it out loud. One listener reminisced that as the Rebbe grew older, it became difficult to hear anything at all, except for that one word – *emet* – which would fill the entire room. This, teaches the Kli Yakar, is the message of the long process of *tzaraat*; the introspection needed for true growth should cut straight to the core.

Mirror of Reflection

There is a crucial corollary to these lessons. The Mishnah (*Negaim* 2:5) teaches that although the diagnosis of a *tzaraat* affliction is the exclusive domain of the kohanim, it is crucial that a kohen does not self-assess his own *tzaraat*. If a kohen is himself afflicted with *tzaraat*, he must show it to another kohen who will proclaim him to be pure or impure. In the words of the Mishnah, 'all *negaim* (afflictions) [a kohen] may see, aside from his own'.

Apart from the halachic lesson of this Mishnah, the Pele Yoetz (Rabbi Eliezer Papo, Constantinople, pub.1824) interprets it from a homiletical perspective. There is nothing easier than seeing someone else's deficiencies, but a person tends to be blind to their own faults. The key to gaining a sense of respect for others is to live with forethought, constantly thinking how one's actions will affect the other person.

The Ohev Yisrael, (Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, d.1825), a Chassidic rebbe who excelled in the trait of loving every Jewish person, offers a somewhat surprising piece of advice as to how to achieve this. Being that it is so difficult to find fault with oneself, we must harness this shortcoming to our own advantage. If we perceive a negative habit or behaviour pattern in another person, we should ask ourselves why Hashem has arranged for us to see this. The reason may be that we are being shown an important lesson about our own actions. Rather than thinking negatively about the other person, we can harness our tendency to criticise others to initiate our own ethical growth.

Timeless Torah Resumes Next Week In-Person.

**NEXT WEEK: ACHAREI-KEDOSHIM - Sacred
Boundaries: The Pathway to Respect**