

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHOT TAZRIA-METZORA

The One Who Mourns For Himself

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This Shabbat we read two closely related parshiyot: Tazria and Metzora. So strong is the relationship between these two portions that one wonders why they are ever separated into two parshiyot. Parashat Tazria discusses primarily the various types of tzara'at (loosely translated as leprosy) and the laws relevant to the metzora ("leper"); in Parashat Metzora we read of the metzora's purification process and one additional form of tzara'at (that which surfaces on the walls of houses.)

In this week's shiur we will try to understand the primary laws governing the metzora as they emerge from the Biblical text. In doing so, we will hopefully arrive at a better understanding of the process the metzora must undergo and the nature of his purification.

A person who suspects he has contracted tzara'at must consult a kohen. If the kohen's diagnosis confirms his suspicion, then the individual becomes formally categorized as one stricken with this disease. (As the verses indicate, this diagnosis may require a lengthy, complex, multistage process before being issued.) Once the skin infection has been identified as tzara'at, the person must leave the camp and live in solitude until the illness has fully healed.

During his period of isolation, the metzora bears several obligations:

"As for the person with a leprous infection:

his clothes shall be rent,

his hair shall be disheveled,

and he shall cover over his upper lip

and he shall call out, 'Unclean! Unclean!'

All the days that the infection is upon him he shall be unclean; he is unclean;

he shall dwell in solitude - his dwelling shall be outside the camp." (13:45-46)

Even a cursory reading of the verses reveals two distinct groups of laws outlined in the text, highlighted by the two headers: "As for the person with a leprous infection... "; "All the days that the infection is upon him" ...

In other words, the Torah first charges the metzora with four obligations: 1. to rend his garments; 2. to leave his hair to grow; 3. to cover his mouth; 4. to declare publicly his state of ritual impurity. The Torah then proceeds to an additional command, which appears as an independent imperative, not as an integral component of the previous group of laws: 5. to live in isolation.

We must, therefore, understand wherein lies the significance of these special laws relevant to the metzora and why the Torah divides them into two distinct categories.

The first three commandments appear several other times in Tanakh, in the context of the laws regarding mourning. For example, after the death of Aharon's two sons, Moshe turns to Aharon and his remaining sons and instructs them, "Do not dishevel your hair and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the entire community. But your kinsmen, all the house of Israel, shall bewail the burning that God has wrought" (Vayikra 10:6). Moshe must specifically order Aharon and his sons not to let their hair grow and not to rend their clothes in response to their recent loss. Were it not for this special command, they would have observed these measures of mourning. Moshe emphasizes that instead of Aharon and his sons observing these practices, the rest of the nation will "bewail the burning." This contrast clearly suggests that letting one's hair grow and tearing one's garments constitute standard methods of expressing grief over the loss of a close relative.

We learn this not only from this specific episode, but also from the Torah's formulation of the general prohibition against a kohen gadol's observance of mourning for a relative: "The kohen who is exalted above his fellow, on whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair or rend his garments" (Vayikra 21:8). The kohen gadol, on whose head the anointing oil was poured, is ordered not to let his hair grow, and the one who dons the special priestly garments may not tear his clothing. Here, too, the context refers to a prohibition against observing mourning practices for a deceased family member.

We also find the metzora's third obligation - covering his mouth - in similar contexts. An explicit reference to this practice appears in Yechezkel. God forewarns the prophet of the imminent death of his wife ("the delight of your eyes") and forbids him from mourning for her. In this context, Yechezkel mentions the practices observed by mourners from which he must abstain. These practices include the covering of the mourner's mouth:

"O mortal, I am about to take away the delight of your eyes from you through pestilence;

but you shall not lament or weep or let your tears flow.

Moan softly, observe no mourning for the dead:

Put on your turban

and put your sandals on your feet;

do not cover over your upper lip,

and do not eat the bread of comforters".

)Yechezkel 24:16-17(

Chazal derived the laws of mourning from these verses. Everything from which God ordered Yechzkel to abstain, a regular mourner must observe. As stated, these observances include the covering of the mouth, implying that it, too, constitutes a practice of mourners. Indeed, Rashi (on 13:45) comments on the metzora's requirement of covering his mouth, "Like a mourner." (Compare with Ibn Ezra).

It thus emerges that a metzora must observe the practices of mourning. If so, we can readily understand the fourth obligation - to proclaim his state of impurity, as mourners, who have recently buried a relative, are ritually impure.

This then raises the obvious question: for whom does this leper mourn? Even if this skin disease generates a special form of ritual impurity, how did issues of mourning creep into the laws governing the metzora, even if no one around him has died?

It appears that Chazal themselves sought to solve this mystery for us when they formulated an equally mysterious proverb: "A metzora is considered dead" (see Rashi, Bemidbar 12:12, based on the Sifrei). Chazal apparently understood that the laws of mourning that found their way into the world of the metzora represent the metzora's mourning for himself! He himself has "died," and he must therefore observe the practices of mourners.

In order to understand this phenomenon, of one "burying" himself and "mourning" for himself, we must remind ourselves of the physiological phenomena that took place on the metzora's skin and prompted the kohen to declare him impure. The Torah presents two primary criteria:

The infection's color: it must be white in order to attain the status of tzara'at that generates impurity.

The infection's appearance: it must appear deeper than the person's skin.

)In instances of uncertainty, the kohen isolates the person for a period of time and examines him again later. In these cases, the infection's growth and expansion also indicate impurity(.

However, most Rishonim do not view these as two distinct criteria. Rather, one determines the existence of the other. Rashi, for example, writes (13:3), "Deeper than the skin of his body - every white spot is deep, just as the sunlight appears deeper than the shade." (See also Ramban there.) In other words, the white discoloration must affect the appearance of the infection, such that it appears lower than the skin.

Thus, the color white emerges as the critical color within the system of leprous infections. It alone determines whether the given discoloration signifies tzara'at, which generates ritual impurity, or a standard skin disorder unrelated to tzara'at. As we would expect, much of Masekhet Nega'im (the tractate dealing with the laws of tzara'at) deals with the various shades of white in order to clarify which shades render the individual a metzora and which do not.

Why does the Torah focus specifically on the color white? Stated otherwise, is there some particular reason why this special disease, which yields far-reaching spiritual and social ramifications, surfaces on the body specifically in this color?

It seems to me that one verse in our parasha alludes to this issue: "But if the live flesh [referring to undiscolored skin] again turns white..." (13:16). The text here contrasts "live" - or healthy - skin with "white" skin; white signifies the polar opposite of life. It stands to reason that the color white relates fundamentally to the concept developed earlier of the individual mourning for himself. In a certain sense, if only symbolically, the individual's body begins to die. He suddenly notices that "life" - the normal reddish hue, which relates to blood and life - has begun to leave his skin, replaced by a dead, white coloring. The skin of his body appears to him like the skin of a corpse. Obviously, we are dealing here with symbolic allusions, but it seems that this disease serves to hint to the individual that God's anger has been aroused against him. In this sense, the significance of this illness exists exclusively on the level of symbolism and subtle allusion.

However, this symbolism finds expression in real-life, concrete terms, upon which the final of the metzora's obligations is focused: "He shall dwell in solitude - his dwelling shall be outside the camp." The metzora must leave his place of residence and relocate outside the camp. The Midrash Halakha emphasizes that he must exit all three camps (that of the kohanim, levi'im, and the rest of the nation) and live in isolation (as opposed to a "zav," for example - see Torat Kohanim, Nega'im 14.)

It seems to me that this last requirement is more than just another law relevant to the metzora; it constitutes the very essence of his "death." It stands to reason that the significance of his death lies specifically in the sphere of social activity. The metzora must detach himself from communal life, in which the Shekhina resides, and through this very detachment he "dies." The individual's existence outside the camp, meaning, outside the general, public partnership of the community, is the functional equivalent of detachment from life, detachment from the life of the nation within which the Shekhina resides.

This commandment appears separate from the rest, for it, as mentioned, constitutes the essence of tzara'at, whereas the other requirements reflect the result of this detachment. In our shiur two years ago (Parashat Tazria, 5759), we analyzed the sins for which we find tzara'at as a punishment in Tanakh, and discovered that they all involve communal, social wrongs. We will not repeat that discussion, but we must mention Chazal's claim that tzara'at served as a punishment for lashon ha-ra (gossip). The metzora's penalty thus becomes readily understandable: one who harmed another by casting aspersions on his social standing is now banished from society, considered dead (compare with Rashi, 13:46). "Whoever publicly WHITENS the face of another is considered as having shed blood." His punishment thus directly parallels the crime.

In light of this, I would like to address the metzora's purification process and consider how the metzora makes his way back into society.

This process consists of three stages:

Return to the camp - by bringing two birds.

Return to his tent (i.e. to his wife) - after seven days of residence in the camp.

Return to the mishkan - on the eighth day, when he brings special sacrifices.

I would like to focus specifically on the first stage, by which the individual reenters communal life, when he returns to the camp. After the kohen visits the metzora outside the camp and sees that the illness has in fact healed, he must follow a series of procedures (14:1-7:(

A. The kohen shall order two clean, LIVE BIRDS, cedar wood, crimson stuff, and hyssop.

B. The kohen shall order ONE OF THE BIRDS SLAUGHTERED in an earthen vessel over LIVE [i.e. fresh] WATER.

C. He shall take the LIVE BIRD, along with the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop...

C1. ... and dip them together with the LIVE BIRD...

B1 ... in the blood of the SLAUGHTERED BIRD over the LIVE WATER.

A1. He shall then sprinkle it seven times on him who is to be cleansed of the tzara'at and cleanse him; and he shall set the LIVE BIRD free in the open field.

Notice that the verses outline this process in chiasmic structure, which can be very easily discerned through the repeated use of the term "chayim" ("live") in reference to both the water and the bird.

The outer frame of this segment (A-A1) mentions live birds, one of which the kohen ultimately, at the end of the process, sets free "in the open field." In B, the kohen slaughters a bird over "live water," and in B1 we learn what the kohen does with this blood-stained water (dip the live bird therein). The centerpiece of the process, itself doubled (C-C1), describes the dipping of the live bird (with additional elements.)

Wherein lies the significance of this ritual? As this procedure does not occur anywhere near an altar and nothing is brought as an offering, it clearly does not fit into the framework of sacrifices. Why, then, does the kohen slaughter a bird over fresh water, dip a live bird in its blood and then send it away?

It seems to me as no coincidence that "chayim" (life) emerges as the most prominent term in this unit. This ceremony marks the transition from death to life, or the rebirth of the metzora who seeks reentry into the camp. There is room to assess each of the items dipped into the water (the cedar wood, the crimson stuff, and the hyssop), but we do not have space in this context to develop this issue. I would, however, like to emphasize two important points.

First, this list also appears elsewhere, as part of the purification process of one who had come in contact with a dead body (as described in Parashat Chukat.)

Secondly, the "crimson stuff" colors the fresh water red, and the kohen later adds the bird's blood into the colored water. From this redness the bird bursts forth and flies freely. I believe that the color red assumes so prominent a role in this ceremony because it represents the antithesis of the white coloration that had surfaced on the metzora's skin. If

the white color signifies the whiteness of death, then redness relates to blood, or to life, as we know from the Scriptural association: "Blood is life".

The live bird, which flies away from the red solution, represents the individual returning to life, his rejoining society and life with the Shekhina.

Immediately following this ceremony, the verse commands the cured metzora to turn himself, as it were, into a small child:

"The one to be cleansed shall wash his clothes,

SHAVE OFF ALL HIS HAIR, and bathe in water; then he shall be clean.

After that he may enter the camp." (14:8)

We are familiar with immersion in water as a form of purification, but why must the metzora shave his hair? Apparently, this ritual expresses rebirth, symbolizing a brand new entry into the world and a desire to live. The departure from the immersion waters without a single hair on the body very much brings to mind childbirth. In the context of our shiur, the metzora must indeed be seen as reborn, in the sense of a "dead" person coming back to life.

(Translated by David Silverberg)