

United We Stand

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Parshas Tazria/Metzora

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The Parsha's Path

Abbreviated and adapted from my (planned) derasha for this Shabbos in Plainview.

This week's Parshas are among my favorite Parshas in the Torah. The reason is simple: It gives me enormous power. As a kohen, I decide who is tamei and who is tahor, who is pure and who is impure. I determine if you have to leave the city and when you can return. I decide whether you must grow your hair and when you must cut them. I decide whether you have to destroy your house and burn your clothes. I own you.

Okay, maybe that's a slight overstatement. It's true that kohanim do make all those determinations, but not arbitrarily. Kohanim must analyze a white blemish on one's house, clothes, or body to determine if it meets the Torah's criterion for tzaraas, a seemingly supernatural affliction which, Chazal tell us, one receives for speaking lashon hara, negative speech about others. Whoever is diagnosed with tzaraas must undergo quarantine outside the city limits, removing themselves from the community for a minimum of a seven-day period and for as long as it takes until they become healed.

Even if a kohen is not an expert in tzaraas and a non-kohen is, the non-kohen may serve as a consultant but the kohen himself must make the final declaration. Why? What's so special about the kohanim that they have the final authority over tzaraas?

Let's take a step back and ask an even more fundamental question. Why do you get tzaraas for speaking lashon hara? I mean, evil speech is certainly a terrible sin, but why a skin disease? Why white blemishes? Why a quarantine outside the city, and why can't the metzora shave their hair or nails? What's tzaraas all about?

Rabbi Yonasan Sacks observes that tzaraas seems to have a lot to do with death. If you've ever seen a corpse - as a kohen, I haven't, but I've been told that the corpse's skin is white. All the blood recedes from the skin, so a corpse tends to be pale and ghostly. That's

what tzaraas looks like - pale, ghostly flesh. When somebody dies, his or her relatives remove themselves from the community for seven days, mourning their loss. Mourners must separate from society for seven days, can't get haircuts and must grow their beards - just like the metzora, somebody who gets tzaraas. The metzora thus experiences a piece of death and must undergo a kind of mourning for that death, until finally, he's brought back to life and can re-enter the community.

Rabbi Yonasan Sacks explains that when we speak badly about other Jews, we cut them off from our collective identity - effectively killing a part of ourselves. We could not possibly speak lashon hara about someone whom we feel is a part of us, the same way we would not speak lashon hara about ourselves. Speaking lashon hara about someone both demonstrates and concretizes the feeling that we are not really one, that they are not really a part of our identity. We may love them, but we don't respect or appreciate them.

Tzaraas is the natural result of the death of that piece of ourselves that was tied to the people we spoke about. Tzaraas is a demonstration of how every Jew is a part of us in a very real way, and how our lives are sorely incomplete without them. Mourning is an act of respect and appreciation of the other. Through the obligations of mourning, the metzora is forced to contemplate this loss and hopefully, work to restore it. Perhaps he also must quarantine himself beyond the city limits because someone who does not sufficiently identify with the entire community cannot be a part of it.

We don't have tzaraas nowadays, perhaps because if we did, everyone would have it all the time and we would miss the whole message. The demands of tzaraas are a very tall order - constant, complete identification with the entire nation. Which raises a critical question: How are we supposed to achieve this? In a world where the Jewish community is so fragmented, when we feel we are being torn apart by the most fundamental issues, when we feel so alienated by the words and actions of others - can we really be expected to identify with them, to consider every Jew like they're actually a part of us? Can we possibly respect them like our own flesh?

I believe the answer to this is - you guessed it, yes. And to understand that, I would like to return to the question we began with. Why me? Why are kohanim uniquely qualified to diagnose the metzora? What's so special about kohanim that only they can pronounce the metzora tamei and tahor?

Perhaps it's because the kohen, above all others, represents unity and peace. The midrash says that Aharon merited to carry the Urim ViTumim, the Divine names that gave his breastplate the power of prophecy, because when he heard that Moshe, his younger brother, was chosen to be the leader of the Jewish people, he was happy in his heart. Keep in mind that Aharon hadn't met his brother since Moshe was a baby and Aharon was about three years old. He probably knew his brother was raised in Pharaoh's palace and might have even heard how he had to flee to Midyan. Bottom line is, Aharon spent his whole life with the Jewish people, bearing their burdens and doing what he could, and all of a sudden he hears that his long-lost younger brother, who had nothing to do with the Jewish people, was chosen to be their king instead of him. I don't know about you but I think I would find that a challenging experience. Aharon, however, not only wasn't jealous, but he rejoiced - over a brother he didn't even know - because he felt that sense of oneness.

We read in Pirkei Avos: *Havei mitalmidav shel Aharon, ohev shalom virodef shalom, ohev es habriyos umikarvan laTorah*. We should strive to be disciples of Aharon, lovers of peace and pursuers of peace, lovers of creations and bringing them closer to Torah. The word "shalom", peace, comes from the word "Shalem" - wholeness. Aharon pursued a wholeness with the entire Jewish people. Unity was his passion, and he sought to foster it wherever he could. Chazal say (Avos D'Rabbi Nasan 12:3) that when he saw two Jews who were angry with each other, he'd go over to each one separately, and say, you know, the other person feels really bad about what happened, and really wants to make up, but he's too embarrassed. Maybe you should make up with him. Aharon was an 'ohev es habriyos' - lover of creations. He loved people simply because they were creations of G-d, and through that unconditional love he brought them closer to Torah. If Aharon saw someone sinning, he would befriend them. The person would think - I don't deserve to be friendly with Aharon, I'd better do teshuva. I can assure you that that would not have happened if Aharon only "befriended them" with the agenda of

getting them to do teshuva. He was successful because he sincerely loved them.

That's why kohanim have to be the ones in charge of the metzora. The metzora divided himself from his fellow Jews. The kohen, who epitomizes unity and peace, is uniquely qualified to assess his state and ultimately, welcome him back into the fold. It's no coincidence that a kohen is forbidden from coming in contact with the dead - for just as the metzora epitomizes death, the kohen epitomizes life. For there is no greater source of life than the life of the collective soul of our nation.

The kohanim (that's me) teach us how we can be one, even when our fellow seems to hurt us. Just like Aharon, our love should not be dependent on our fellow's merits, but simply the fact that they are a fellow creation of Hashem. Just like Aharon, peace must not be merely a noble aspiration, it must be our passion. We must not merely love people like babies, but as fellow creations that are worthy of our investment, consideration, and respect. We must care more about wholeness, about oneness, then ALL of the disagreements and conflicts we have with our fellow Jews, however painful they may be. Certainly, we must never allow ourselves to speak lashon hara about them. And just like we allow our love to vanquish our pain and differences, may our love be a source of merit to vanquish all our enemies, bring back our hostages, and usher in the Ultimate Redemption, *bimheira viyameinu*, amen.

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