**S.A.L.T. – PARASHOT TAZRIA – METZORA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Tazria presents the various laws relevant to the *metzora* – a person who is determined to have been stricken with a *tzara’at* infection on his body – including the requirement to announce his status of impurity (“*ve-tamei tamei yikra*” – 13:45). The Gemara in Masekhet Mo’ed Katan (5a) explains that this requirement is intended not only to ensure that people avoid physical contact with the *metzora* so as not to become impure, but also so that people would pray for him. The *metzora* is to inform people of his misfortune in order to arouse their sympathy and move them to beseech God to cure him of his condition.

*Tzara’at* is famously understood as a punishment visited upon a person for the sin of *lashon ha-ra* – excessively gossiping and disseminating negative information about people. *Lashon ha-ra* is commonly the product of arrogance and condescension, the feeling that one is superior to others, which leads him to speak negatively about people in order to establish this sense of superiority. Sharing information about other people’s mistakes, faults and failings is a way we seek to cover for our own shortcomings and feel more comfortable about ourselves. The requirement imposed upon the *metzora* to ask others to pray on his behalf may perhaps be understood in this light. Asking people to pray for him demonstrates to the *metzora* the value and worth of all prayers, regardless of who offers it. The *metzora* is shown that God welcomes, cherishes and takes into consideration the prayers recited by any individual. The Torah requires him to announce his condition to all people because all people’s prayers are valuable – and this is precisely the lesson that the *metzora*, the gossiper, needs to learn. God cherishes every person’s prayers because, quite simply, He cherishes every person. He lovingly welcomes our prayers despite our faults and our wrongdoing, keenly aware of our innate imperfections and the frailty of the human condition. By recognizing just how much the Almighty values every person’s prayer, the *metzora* learns that he, too, can and must value and cherish every person, that he must look beyond other people’s mistakes, weaknesses and failings and see the greatness and virtue of each and every individual, so he will go around and speak of their praise, rather than continuing to spread unflattering information about them.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Metzora outlines the procedure that must be performed for a *metzora* to regain his status of purity. This procedure includes a ritual involving two birds, one of which is slaughtered, and the other dipped into the first bird’s blood and then sent away. The Torah requires taking for this procedure “*shetei tziporim chayot*” – “two live birds” (14:4), which Rashi explains as indicating that a *tereifa* – bird with a terminal illness – is disqualified for use for this ritual.

The question arises as to how the second bird’s status is to be determined in this regard. Some conditions that render an animal – or, in this case, a bird – a halakhic *tereifa* can be discerned only by way of an internal inspection after slaughtering. In the case of the birds used for the *metzora*’s purification ritual, only one of the two birds is slaughtered. The other is sent away, without ever be slaughtered. While the slaughtered bird can be inspected after its slaughtering to ensure that it had been suitable for this ritual, the live bird cannot. It must therefore be presumed suitable without any inspection. Apparently, this assumption is made on the basis of the general rule of *rov*, which allows us to rely on a statistical majority for halakhic purposes. Since most birds are not *tereifot*, we may presume that the bird taken for this ritual is likewise healthy, even though we are unable to perform a thorough inspection to verify this assumption.

However, if this is the case, then we must wonder why this *halakha* does not appear in the Gemara’s famous discussion in the first chapter of Masekhet Chulin (11) regarding the Biblical source of the halakhic concept of *rov*. The Gemara suggests several different possible sources, including a number of instances where the Torah disqualifies a *tereifa* for a certain procedure, despite there being no possibility of inspecting the animal. For example, in the case of an *egla arufa* – the calf that would be killed to atone for a murder when the culprit could not be identified – the Torah forbids dismembering the calf after it is killed, thus precluding the possibility of inspecting it to ensure it was not a *tereifa*. This is despite the fact that the Torah disqualifies the use of a *tereifa* for this ritual, thus establishing a Biblical source for the concept of *rov*. The Gemara also notes the example of the *para aduma*, the cow that would be slaughtered and then burned into ash, which was then used to produce the special water that was needed to purify people and utensils that had come in contact with a human corpse. The Torah requires burning the slaughtered cow whole, thus precluding the possibility of inspection, such that we must presume the cow to have been free of medical conditions that would render it a *tereifa*. This law, too, sets a Biblical precedent for the notion of *rov*. The question thus arises as to why the Gemara in this context does not also make mention of the live bird used for the *metzora*’s purification ritual. Seemingly, this requirement, too, reflects the *halakhic* principle of *rov*, and should thus have been invoked as a possible Biblical source for this concept.

This question was posed to Maharil Diskin, who offered several possible theories to explain why the live bird of the *metzora*’s purification ritual is not mentioned in the Gemara’s discussion of *rov* (*Maharil Diskin al Ha-Torah*). One answer he suggests is based on a possible parallel between the requirement to send away the live bird and the obligation of *shilu’ach ha-kein* – sending away the mother bird before taking her eggs or chicks. The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (141b), as explained by Rashi (*s.v. she-teitzei*), establishes that once one sends away the mother bird, he may, if he so wishes, immediately capture it. The *mitzva* of *shilu’ach ha-kein* requires sending away the mother bird, but once this is done, one may then catch the bird immediately thereafter. This *halakha* is explicitly codified in the *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 292:4). Maharil Diskin suggests that this *halakha* might likely apply as well to the *metzora*’s purification process. It stands to reason that, as in the case of *shilu’ach ha-kein*, the requirement is fulfilled the moment the live bird is set free, at which point it may be hunted if one so desires. As such, Maharil Diskin suggested, the Torah’s disqualification of a *tereifa* for this ritual does not necessarily prove the principle of *rov*. It is possible that the Torah expected the people involved to immediately capture the bird after it is set free to slaughter it and conduct an internal examination to ascertain that it was suitable for this ritual, and thereby confirm that the *metzora* has satisfactorily completed his purification process. Given this possibility – remote and far-fetched as it may seem – the requirement to use a healthy bird for this process does not necessarily prove that we may rely on the statistical majority, and for this reason, this requirement is not invoked as a possible Biblical source for the principle of *rov*.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted a question that arises concerning the *metzora*’spurification ritual, which includes two birds, one of which is slaughtered, and the other is dipped in the first bird’s blood and then set free. As we saw, Rashi (14:4) writes that a *tereifa* – a bird with a terminal medical condition – may not be used for this ritual, giving rise to the question of how the second bird’s suitability could be ascertained. As this bird is set free without ever being slaughtered, there is no possibility of an internal examination to ensure that it did not suffer any terminal condition. Presumably, this *halakha* reflects the famous concept of *rov*, which allows relying on a statistical majority for halakhic purposes, and thus allows us to presume that the live bird, like most birds, is healthy. The question, then, arises as to why the Gemara makes no mention of the birds of the *metzora*’s purification ritual in its famous discussion in Masekhet Chulin regarding the Biblical sources of the principle of *rov*. The Gemara notes several different Torah laws that seem to establish this rule, but does not point to the precedent of the *metzora*’s birds. Apparently, the Gemara felt that the disqualification of a *tereifa* for this ritual does not necessarily prove the rule of *rov*, as even if the Torah did not allow relying on a statistical majority, it would still be possible for the *metzora* to complete his requirements for purification, despite being unable to examine the live bird. The question, of course, arises as to how this is possible without the principle of *rov*.

As we noted yesterday, this question was posed to Maharil Diskin, who offered several different answers. One answer he offered is a clever observation that if there was no rule of *rov*, then the *metzora*’s status of impurity to begin with would be uncertain. The Mishna in Masekhet Nega’im (3:1) states that a person afflicted with a *tzara’at* infection does not attain the status of *metzora* until the *kohen* who inspects his skin makes a formal declaration to this effect. Thus, a *metzora*’s status is entirely dependent upon the declaration of specifically a *kohen*; if a non-*kohen* declares that a person stricken with *tzara’at* is a *metzora*, the declaration is halakhically meaningless. Now a *kohen*’s status as a *kohen* is itself dependent upon the principle of *rov*. As the identity of a person’s father cannot be definitively determined, and the status of priesthood passes from father to son, a *kohen* is presumed to be a *kohen* only by virtue of the statistical majority that most children are fathered by their mothers’ husbands. Therefore, if there was no rule allowing us to rely on a statistical majority, the status of any given *metzora* would, by definition, be uncertain, because we cannot definitively conclude that the *kohen* who declared him a *metzora* is indeed a *kohen*. Therefore, the uncertain status of the live bird used in the purification process does not necessarily prove the rule of *rov*. Without this rule, we could, conceivably, understand the Torah as saying that since the *metzora*’s status to begin with is inconclusive, the procedure for his purification can likewise involve a degree of uncertainty. For this reason, perhaps, the Gemara did not draw proof from this *halakha* that the Torah allows us to rely on a statistical majority.

Tuesday

The purification process required of a *metzora*, as we read in the beginning of Parashat Metzora, includes the slaughtering of a bird, and then dipping a second bird in the blood, after which the live bird is set free. Rashi (14:4), citing the Gemara (Arakhin 16b), comments that this process includes birds as a symbol of *lashon ha-ra* – gossip and negative speech about others, the sin for which *tzara’at* is generally seen as a punishment. The bird’s chirping symbolizes the chattering of the gossip, and thus the *metzora* must bring birds as part of his process of atonement for this offense.

We might also add another dimension to the symbolic significance of these two birds. Setting the second bird free may perhaps symbolize the *metzora* himself, who is now being “set free” after his period of isolation. The process of becoming declared a *metzora* often involves a period of *hesger*, during which the individual must remain quarantined, and once he is declared a *metzora*, he must live in isolation until his infection heals and he completes the entire purification process. Now, as he regains his status of purity, he is being “set free” from this long period of seclusion, symbolized by the live bird being released from captivity. However, the live bird is not set free until it is dipped in the blood of the slaughtered bird. The bird flies away with a bloodstain, as though reminding the bird that whereas it is given the opportunity to continue living, its partner, so-to-speak, was killed. Symbolically, perhaps, this bloodstain carried by the live bird reminds the *metzora* that although he is being “set free,” and will now be allowed to live normally, he will carry with him a “stain” of the “blood” he has shed, the pain and harm he has caused others. Just as the live bird flies away with a reminder of the death of the other bird, similarly, the *metzora* is allowed to resume ordinary life – but on condition that he remains ever mindful of the full extent of the harm he had caused.

Significantly, the Torah prescribes a weeklong waiting period following this ritual, after which – on the eighth day – the *metzora* brings special sacrifices to complete his purification. We might suggest that after seeing the image of the bird flying away with the blood of the slaughtered bird, the *metzora* must spend some time reflecting upon the long-term consequences of his misdeeds. Before he is “set free,” he is required to take the time to understand the full extent of the harm he caused, thus ensuring that once he is “released” from the “captivity” of *tzara’at*, he will live with greater awareness and sensitivity, and avoid all forms of harmful speech and conduct.

Wednesday

Commenting to the beginning of Parashat Metzora, the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* (16:2) famously tells of a peddler who traveled about through several towns announcing that he was selling “life-giving potion.” Rabbi Yannai heard the announcement from the attic where he sat and studied, and he invited the merchant to his home to show him the valuable merchandise that he was advertising. The peddler opened a Sefer Tehillim and pointed to the verses (34:13-15), “Who is the man who desires life, who loves [his] days in which to behold goodness? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit…”

Upon seeing the peddler’s “merchandise,” Rabbi Yannai exclaimed, “All my life I have read this verse, but I did not know its meaning, until this peddler came along.” Many writers and *darshanim* addressed the question of why the admonition to “guard your tongue from evil” is “life-giving potion,” and what new insight into the verse was revealed to Rabbi Yannai by this merchant.

The Klausenberger Rebbe explained that *lashon ha-ra*, indulging in the dissemination of negative information about other people, blinds a person to his own faults and shortcomings. As long as we focus our attention on the failings of others, we will pay little or no attention to our own failings. And thus the “life-giving potion,” the first, indispensable step we need to take if we seek to live our lives properly, in accordance with God’s will, is “guard your tongue from evil.” We must turn our focus and attention away from the faults of other people and direct our minds inward, towards improving ourselves. This is the deeper meaning of the verses that Rabbi Yannai learned from this merchant. He learned that avoiding negative speech about others is the cure for our blindness, our inability to see our own faults and identify the areas of our behavior that require improvement. Once we cure this ill, we are then in a position to find our other ills and treat them, so we can live the kind of noble and meaningful lives that we are meant to live.

Thursday

Parashat Tazria begins with a discussion of the laws of impurity relevant to a woman after childbirth, and in this context it reiterates the command to circumcise a male infant on his eighth day (12:3). The *mitzva* of *berit mila* was, of course, already introduced much earlier in the Torah, when God conveyed to Avraham this command (Bereishit 17). This redundancy is, presumably, what led the Gemara (Shabbat 132a-b) to explain the verse here in Parashat Tazria as establishing the *halakha* requiring circumcision on an infant’s eighth day even if its falls on Shabbat. Despite the fact that the procedure of circumcision involves the infliction of a wound in the flesh, which would normally constitute an act of Shabbat desecration, the Torah permits – and in fact requires – performing a *berit mila* even when a child’s eighth day falls on Shabbat. The Torah reiterates the *mitzva* of *berit mila* for the purpose of introducing this counterintuitive provision, as one would have otherwise concluded that a child’s *berit mila* should be delayed if his eighth day falls on Shabbat, when such procedures are forbidden.

The Gemara’s discussion gives rise to the question of why this detail was not included in the original command of *berit mila*. Why didn’t God include this provision – requiring that a *berit mila* be performed even on Shabbat – in His initial instructions to Avraham about this *mitzva*?

This question is posed by *Or Ha-chayim*, who suggests a surprisingly simple answer. There was no need, he explains, for Avraham to be told that *berit mila* on the eighth day overrides the Shabbat prohibitions, because Avraham observed Shabbat voluntarily. Avraham lived, of course, well before the Torah was given and his descendants were commanded by God to obey its laws. *Chazal* indicate that Avraham observed the Torah’s laws even before it was given, but he clearly did so voluntarily, as he had not received any commands, the only exception being *berit mila*. Therefore, God had no need to specify that Avraham should perform *berit mila* even if the eighth day falls on Shabbat. It was self-evident that a strict command received by the Almighty overrides a voluntary religious measure that Avraham nobly chose to take upon himself. Only after the Torah was given, and *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to observe Shabbat, did it then become necessary for God to instruct that the Shabbat prohibitions are suspended for the sake of performing a *berit mila* on a child’s eighth day.

This discussion perhaps reminds us of the need for careful prioritization in religious life, to ensure that we first meet our basic responsibilities before taking on additional, voluntary measures. Just as it was obvious to Avraham that the command to perform *berit mila* overrides his voluntary Shabbat observance, similarly, we should never think to allow voluntary religious enhancements and stringencies to come at the expense of our elementary obligations. Only after we satisfactorily fulfill our basic requirements are we encouraged to reach higher and commit ourselves to a more rigorous standard of religious devotion.

Friday

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* (16:2), in discussing the association between the *tzara’at* skin infection and the sin of *lashon ha-ra*, tells the famous story of a peddler who traveled through several neighborhoods announcing that he was selling “life-giving potion.” Rabbi Yannai heard the announcement from his home, and he invited the peddler in to show him his wares. The peddler came and opened up a book of Tehilim to the verses (34:13-15), “Who is the man who desires life, who loves [his] days in which to behold goodness? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit…” Rabbi Yannai then exclaimed, “All my life I have read this verse, but I did not know its meaning, until this peddler came along.” It seems that until this peddler came, Rabbi Yannai did not fully understand the concept that guarding one’s tongue, and avoiding *lashon ha-ra*, is “life-giving potion.”

How might we explain Rabbi Yannai’s excitement over his newfound understanding? What did the peddler teach him about these verses in Tehillim that he had not known before?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the dramatic analogy drawn by this peddler between physical life and spiritual success. The peddler conveyed a powerful message by arousing interest in the prospect of a “life-giving potion,” and then pointing to the ethical teachings found in Tehillim. He taught that when the verse in Tehillim speaks of one “who desires life,” referring to a life of moral and spiritual achievement, it means that we should desire spiritual wellbeing with similar intensity and rigor with which we seek to maintain our physical wellbeing. We should be as enthusiastic over the Torah’s “potion” for good health – speaking and acting appropriately, in a moral and dignified manner – as we would be over a potion that guaranteed long life. And it was perhaps this literal meaning of the phrase “*chafetz chayim*” (“desires life”) that Rabbi Yannai came to understand through his brief meeting with this traveling salesman. The interest and excitement aroused by the advertisement of “life-giving potion” provided a model for the kind of interest and excitement with which we are to approach the Torah’s formula for religious success. We are to enthusiastically embrace and welcome every new teaching and every new lesson that we learn, recognizing its value in ensuring our spiritual wellbeing, which ought to be our highest priority and primary goal throughout our lives.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)