YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**PARASHAT TAZRIA**

**SICHA OF HARAV YAAKOV MEDAN**

**Tidings and Lepers**

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A central issue discussed in this week's *parasha* is the *metzora*, the leper, and a central passage about him, impossible not to mention, is found in the Rambam:

*Tzara’at* is a collective term that includes many [conditions, including] … a change in the appearance of clothing or houses…not part of the regular functioning of the world, but it is a sign and wonder in Israel, in order to caution them from *lashon hara* (evil speech). …

The Torah warns about this, stating: "Take care with regard to a *tzara'at* blemish… Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam" (*Devarim* 24:8-9). Behold, it is saying: Contemplate what happened to the prophetess Miriam, when she spoke about her younger brother… All the more so with regard to the wicked and foolish men who are profuse in speaking great and boastful things! Therefore, a person who seeks to structure his course of conduct should distance himself from their gatherings and from speaking to them so that he will not become caught up in the web of their wickedness and foolishness. This is the way of the gatherings of wicked fools: In the beginning, they speak excessively about empty matters… As a result of this, they come to speak negatively of the righteous… From this, they become accustomed to speaking against the prophets and casting aspersions on their words… And this leads them to speak against God and deny the principle…

In contrast, the speech of proper Jewish people only concerns words of Torah and wisdom. Therefore, the Holy One, blessed be He, assists them and grants them merit because of it. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Tum'at Tzara'at* 16:10)

The Rambam explains that *tzara'at* results when foolish speech leads those who engage in it to the point of actual heresy. In contrast, the proper individuals of Israel speak of lofty matters and in response, God the most High descends and grants them merit.

The message at the foundation of the Rambam's words is an important one, though it is difficult to find any single element common to all of the passages dealing with *tzara'at*.

At this point, we will set the Rambam’s important message to the side and turn to other passages that feature *metzora’im*.Both this week’s *haftara* and the next, the *haftara* of *Parashot Metzora*, tell stories that involve *tzara’at* in different ways.

**Na’aman, Elisha, and Gechazi**

The *haftara* for *Parashat Tazria* (II *Melakhim* 4:42-5:19) tells the story of Naaman, commander of the army of Aram, who suffered from *tzara'at* but was healed with Elisha’s help. The account emphasizes the Divine element in this purification throughout, as when Elisha states clearly: "He sent to the king, saying: Why have you rent your clothes? Let him come now to me, and he shall know that there is a prophet in Israel" (II *Melakhim* 5:8). At the end of the story, when Naaman is indeed cured after immersing in the Jordan at Elisha's command, Naaman asks to express his gratitude with gifts of great monetary value. Elisha opposes accepting the goods from Naaman; this is the man who was responsible for the unbearably heavy subjugation of the Israelites and their sale into slavery, the same commander of the army of Aram who made Israel like the dust in threshing (II *Melakhim* 13:7). It is impossible to know from how many members of Israel Naaman had "collected" that gift.

After Elisha’s refusal, Naaman retraces his steps towards his home in Aram, but then Gechazi, Elisha's servant, comes up from behind him and deceitfully accepts the gifts in question. As a result of this act, Gechazi was infected with “the *tzara'at* of Naaman” (II *Melakhim* 5:27) and Elisha warned that it would afflict him and his offspring forever.

This punishment is difficult to understand: Gechazi may have sinned, but were his children guilty?

Perhaps we can find an explanation in the *haftara* for *Parashat Metzora* (II *Melakhim* 6:24-7:20). This *haftara* describes four *metzora’im* sitting outside of Shomron – which was ravaged by famine – who decide that since they have no hope where they are, they will try their luck in the camp of Aram, Israel's enemy. When they get there, they discover that the entire camp has been abandoned and Aram's property is there for the taking. Instead of going immediately to inform the hungry inhabitants of the city, they tarry, eat by themselves, hide property, and only then inform the king about Aram's abandonment of their camp.

*Chazal* tell us (*Sanhedrin* 107b) that the four *metzora’im* were Gechazi and his sons – thus we see that the sons of Gechazi indeed followed in his path, setting desire for wealth as their top priority.

***Tzara’at* and Redemption**

Despite their initial misconduct, these four *metzora'im* are also harbingers of redemption, the ones who save the Israelites living there from the terrible famine. This fact, jarring as it is, was the inspiration for Rachel the Poetess's famous poem, *Yom Besora*, "Day of Tidings":

In the days of yore the terrible enemy / brought Shomron under siege; / four lepers brought her good tidings. / They told her the good tidings of liberation. // As Shomron is under siege – the whole entire land, / and the famine is unbearably heavy. / But I do not desire tidings of salvation, / if it comes from the mouth of a leper. // Let the pure bring tidings and the clean redeem, / and if he is unable to redeem – / then I prefer to fall from the distress of the siege / on the eve of the day of the great tidings.

Rachel asks that salvation should come only from what is pure; if it must come from a *metzora,* she would prefer death. We must remember that Rachel does not speak in a vacuum: she lived in the generation of the founders of the State of Israel and grew up with them; she knew the cast of characters, and she uttered her harsh words with full intent.

However, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 98a) seems to present a different perspective. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asked the prophet Eliyahu where the redeemer may be found, and he answered that he is among the *metzora’im* at the gates of Rome. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi does not reject this redeemer, as Rachel apparently would, but goes to Rome to ask him: "When is my master coming?"

A similar tension arises in the wake of a famous story by Shai Agnon, *Le-Tzorchei Shabbat*, "For the Needs of Shabbat." The story tells of a rabbi and his wife who have no money to buy groceries for Shabbat. Out of grief, his wife cries, and the husband, who cannot bear the grief, goes outside and comes upon one of the filthiest areas in the city. In that horrible place, he sees a gold coin, picks it up, and cleans it. However, instead of using it for his Shabbat needs, he says that if God had wanted to give him a coin for Shabbat, He would have done so in a pure manner, not in such a startling way. He throws the coin away, and at the end of the story, he merits to acquire what he needs for Shabbat with the help of charity.

It seems that Shai Agnon is offering a ruling here with regard to a famous Amoraic dispute between Rabbi Yochanan and Rav Yosef: Rabbi Yochanan claims he would rather die than see the Messiah, while Rav Yosef disagrees with him, famously stating: "O that he will come, and I will merit to sit in the shadow of his donkey's dung." Rav Yosef's words about the donkey's dung parallel the filth in which the rabbi in Agnon's story found the gold coin, but unlike the hero in Agnon's story, Rabbi Yosef refuses to waive a redemption that will come in trying conditions. He prefers to be present for it, even at an extremely humiliating price.

**Embracing *Metzora’im***

Sometimes redemption doesn't look exactly the way we wanted it to look, and it's certainly reasonable to assume that this isn't how we would picture it in our imaginations. But even so, many statements of *Chazal* emphasize that we must embrace and strengthen the tidings of *metzora'im*; we must not give up on such tidings out of hand, simply due to their source, but must work with what we find in order to redeem the world. After all, sometimes, *tzara'at* might stem from the sins of the nation rather than from the person's own sins, and when we embrace him – "it is all turned white."

In conclusion, *Bava Metzia* 86a records a famous dispute between God and the heavenly academy regarding a case of uncertainty in the laws of *tzara’at* – when it is uncertain whether the light spot preceded the white hair or the white hair preceded the spot. God declared it pure, while the heavenly academy declared it impure. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tum'at Tzara'at* 2:9) ruled against God, because the accepted rule is that in a case of doubt regarding a Torah law, we rule stringently. On the other hand, however, we have to ask – doesn't God know this rule? It seems that in His opinion, it should not be applied here. The rule that in a case of doubt regarding a Torah law we rule stringently applies when we are discussing things, or objects, but when it comes to human dignity, we must not be stringent and rush to cast someone out of the camp.

We must learn from God's attributes and examine the situation in a delicate and meticulous manner. If the entire lesion does not turn fully white, we can and must still try to identify the occasions on which a little good is embedded in the filth, and purify and clean it.

[This *sicha* was delivered on *Parashat Tazria-Metzora* 5771.]