**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TAZRIA-METZORA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Tazria discusses the laws regarding bodily *tzara’at* – skin discolorations which render a person *tamei* (ritually impure). Introducing this section, the Torah writes, “*Adam ki yihyeh be-or besaro…*” – “If a person has on his skin” a white discoloration (13:2).

The Gemara in Masekhet Arakhin (3a) notes that the word “*adam*” in this verse establishes that even minors are susceptible to *tum’at tzara’at* – the status of impurity resulting from a *tzara’at* skin infection. If the Torah had not used the all-inclusive term “*adam*,” we might have concluded that a discoloration on the skin of a child does not render him impure, even if the spot meets the criteria of *tzara’at*. The Torah therefore emphasized that the laws of *tzara’at* apply to any “*adam*,” including young children.

Rav Meir Dan Platsky, in his *Keli Chemda* (Parashat Lekh-Lekha), cites Rav Yisrael Yehoshua of Kutna as questioning the need for this inference. Earlier in Parashat Tazria (12:3), the Torah reiterates the command of *berit mila*, stating that on a child’s eighth day, “the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.” The Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (34b) states that the Torah adds the word “*basar*” (“flesh”) in this verse to emphasize that an infant must be circumcised even if there is a *tzara’at* infection on the foreskin. Normally, it is forbidden to surgically remove skin with a *tzara’at* infection (as the Gemara establishes in Masekhet Shabbat 132b, based on the verse in Devarim 24:8). The Torah therefore emphasizes that the flesh of the foreskin must be removed even if it has a *tzara’at* infection. Rav Yisrael Yehoshua of Kutna notes that if the Torah needed to emphasize that the *mitzva* of circumcision overrides the prohibition of *ketzitzat baherto* (removing a *tzara’at* infection), then it quite obviously assumed that even minors are capable of contracting *tzara’at*. If the status of *tzara’at* were applicable only to halakhic adults, then there would be no need for the Torah to inform us that an eight-day-old child with a *tzara’at* infection on his foreskin must nevertheless be circumcised. As such, the fact that the Torah needed to indicate this provision should itself provide us with a Biblical source for the applicability of the laws of *tzara’at* to minors. The question thus arises as to why the Gemara needed a different source – the Torah’s use of the word “*adam*.”

Rav Platsky addresses this question at length, and amidst his discussion he proposes that this issue might hinge on a debate between Rashi and Tosafot regarding the scope of the prohibition forbidding the removal of a *tzara’at* infection. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (132b) establishes that this prohibition includes “pure infections” – meaning, discolorations which do not render the individual *tamei*. According to Tosafot, the Gemara refers to skin which became one of the colors that qualify as a *tzara’at* infection, but the individual was not declared *tamei* because the discoloration began fading before the culmination of the required waiting period. Rashi, however, explains that the Gemara refers even to a white area on the skin that does not meet the criteria of “whiteness” that are necessary for a discoloration to qualify as *tzara’at*. Rav Platsky notes that according to Rashi, the prohibition against removing skin with a *tzara’at* infection applies even to a discoloration that will never be capable of rendering the individual *tamei*. This is in contrast to Tosafot’s understanding, that this prohibition is relevant only to a discoloration which has the potential to confer *tum’a* (such as if the fading stops and the discoloration spreads anew). According to Rashi, then, even if minors were excluded from *tum’at tzara’at*, they would still be included in the prohibition against removing skin with a *tzara’at* infection, since this prohibition does not depend at all on the potential for *tum’a*. Hence, the fact that the Torah needed to emphasize that circumcision should be performed on an infant with a discoloration on his foreskin does not prove that a minor is capable of contracting *tum’at tzara’at*.

Rav Platsky then concedes, however, that this line of reasoning may be flawed. The Gemara derives the prohibition against surgically removing skin with a *tzara’at* infection from the Torah’s command to follow the *kohanim*’s instructions with regard to *tzara’at* (Devarim 24:8). This command, the Gemara understood, requires one to consult with a *kohein* for guidance when he notices a skin discoloration, rather than avoiding the problem by removing the infected skin. It could certainly be argued, Rav Platsky notes, that if a minor were incapable of contracting *tum’at tzara’at*, this prohibition would not apply to minors, even according to Rashi’s view, because this prohibition is rooted in the requirement to consult with a *kohein* to determine one’s status. True, in Rashi’s view, this prohibition applies even if one is certain that the discoloration does not qualify as *tzara’at*, but this is because the individual is nevertheless obliged to consult with a *kohein* to determine that the discoloration is halakhically benign. This does not necessarily indicate that somebody who cannot attain *tum’at tzara’at* is forbidden from removing skin with a discoloration which does not qualify as *tzara’at*. Seemingly, then, even according to Rashi, the question posed by Rav Yisrael Yehoshua of Kutna stands, as the fact that the Torah needed to emphasize that *berit mila* is performed on an infant with a discoloration on the foreskin seemingly proves that minors can contract *tum’at tzara’at*.

Sunday

Parashat Metzora presents the laws relevant to *tzara’at ha-bayit* – a situation where the walls of one’s home are “afflicted” with discolorations, which, should they meet certain criteria, require that the house be completely dismantled. Rashi, commenting to the introduction to this section (14:34), cites the famous comment of the Midrash that the phenomenon of *tzara’at ha-bayit* was foreseen as “happy tidings” for *Benei Yisrael*. They were informed that the inhabitants of the Land of Israel, from whom *Benei Yisrael* would seize the land, would hide treasures inside the walls of their homes. God would facilitate the discovery of these treasures by bringing about a situation of *tzara’at ha-bayit* that would require the dismantling of the home – thereby exposing the treasures that would otherwise have remained hidden, thus instantly blessing the homeowner with great wealth.

Many later writers have suggested allegorical readings of the Midrash’s comment, as alluding to something deeper than God’s strategy for exposing the Canaanites’ hidden fortunes. Indeed, the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (71a) cites a *berayta* stating that there has never been, and will never be, a situation of *tzara’at ha-bayit*, such that Canaanite treasures were never discovered in this fashion – seemingly proving that the Midrash’s remarks should not be understood literally.

One explanation that has been advanced (by Rav David Braverman, in [*Hi Sichati*](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/264_27_79.pdf))is that the Midrash here speaks of the “treasure” of potential within each and every person. Unable or unwilling to take note of our strengths and capabilities, we sometimes tend to confine ourselves to our “homes,” isolating ourselves, figuring that we have nothing valuable to contribute. The Midrash here urges us to “dismantle” the “walls” that we erect around us, recognizing the vast treasure-trove within us. Rather than isolate ourselves, denying the world the precious gifts that we can offer it, we are too look deep within ourselves to unearth our hidden potential, and utilize it to the fullest for the benefit of mankind.

If so, then *tzara’at ha-bayit* represents the flipside of *tzara’at ha-guf* – bodily *tzara’at*, which is commonly viewed as a punishment for the sin of *lashon ha-ra* – gossip and negative speech about other people. A person afflicted by *tzara’at ha-guf* is forced into quarantine (“*badad yeisheiv*” – 13:46), and the Gemara (Arakhin 16b) explains that the individual is punished this way for having divided between people through his gossip and slander. Bodily *tzara’at* is a punishment for excessive socialization, arrogantly imposing oneself upon other people’s lives, forcing him into isolation, whereas *tzara’at ha-bayit* is a punishment for excessively humble withdrawal, forcing the individual out of his home and into society. The Torah here addresses two different models. One is a person who feels too confident in himself, becoming a self-appointed arbiter of other people’s conduct who seeks to exert control over their behavior by speaking about them to others. The second model is the inappropriately humble person, who denies his capabilities and thus lives withdrawn and isolated, preferring to avoid people, mistakenly assuming that his interactions will not benefit anybody, and could only cause harm. The Torah here warns against both extremes, urging us to extend beyond the confines of our private lives and use our God-given talents and capabilities to impact the world, while maintaining appropriate limits, respecting people’s privacy, and drawing the line between beneficial, productive interaction and reckless, destructive gossip.

Monday

Parashiyot Tazria and Metzora speak at length about the various manifestations of *tzara’at* – discolorations on a person’s skin, clothing or home, which *Chazal*, in numerous contexts, understood as a punishment that would befall a person for the sin of *lashon ha-ra* – negative or slanderous speech about other people.

The Gemara in the third chapter of Masekhet Arakhin cites a number of different comments from different sages emphasizing the special severity of this transgression. In one such passage (15b), the Gemara cites Reish Lakish as remarking, “In the future, all the beasts will assemble around the snake, and will say: A lion tramples [its prey] and eats; a wolf tears apart [its prey] and eats. But you – what enjoyment do you have [when you bite your victim]? It will reply to them: And what advantage is there to ‘a person of the tongue’?” When challenged to explain why it bites people and other creatures, which provides no discernible benefit, the snake will point to the “*ba’al ha-lashon*” (“person of the tongue”) – the habitual gossip, who “bites” other people in the sense of destroying their reputations and, thereby, their relationships and livelihood, without deriving any benefit from disseminating this information.

Essentially, the Gemara here condemns gossip and talebearing as an activity which inflicts great harm in other people without yielding any benefit to the speaker. As opposed to other crimes, such as theft, which, while obviously wrong, can nevertheless be understood as an unlawful attempt to gain something which one needs or craves, talebearing inflicts harm without providing benefit for the culprit. In this sense, the sin of *lashon ha-ra* is compared to a snakebite – which causes pain and damage without yielding benefit for the snake.

Later writers have raised the question of why the Gemara assumes that talebearing provides no benefit. After all, as most of us can – unfortunately – attest, sharing unflattering information about other people brings a certain degree of enjoyment and satisfaction. People relish the opportunity to speak of other people’s faults and failings, especially if there is an element of vindictiveness involved, where the subject of the “juicy” report is somebody against whom we have a grievance. Why, then, does the Gemara describe the “*ba’al ha-lashon*” as inflicting harm without receiving any benefit?

Perhaps, the Gemara precisely seeks to teach that the enjoyment received from speaking *lashon ha-ra* is not real. Sharing negative information about others provides only a fleeting, artificial feeling of satisfaction. It provides us with a false sense of superiority, momentarily deluding ourselves with a sense of self-importance. When we speak of other people’s faults, we distract our attention from our own failings. We silence our own conscience by focusing our attention on the flaws and shortcomings of other people, and this is why such talk brings us enjoyment. But this enjoyment is deceptive. The satisfaction experienced by talking about other people’s failures is not real. Even if it succeeds in temporarily distracting us from our own deficiencies, we do not forget about them. We are still cognizant of our own faults and weaknesses, even as we try to ignore them by dwelling on those of other people. Deep down, we still feel insecure and uncomfortable about ourselves, even if we can, for a moment, enjoy the intoxicating effect of talking about the faults of others, thereby freeing our minds from the uncomfortable burden of our own faults.

True joy and satisfaction are experienced by acting in a way which we know is correct, by being the people who we know we should be and are capable of being. The Gemara here perhaps teaches us to avoid the false satisfaction of putting others down, to strive for genuine, authentic self-esteem through personal growth and real achievement. The way to truly feel good about ourselves is to be people whom we can truly feel good about, and not by looking at what others do wrong.

Tuesday

The opening Mishna of Masekhet Negaim lists the four different shades of white that qualify as a *tzara’at* skin infection which renders an individual *tamei* – the colors of snow, the fleece of a newborn lamb, white plaster, and the outer layer of a peeled egg.

The Mishna establishes that these four colors are arranged into two groups of two for the purposes of the laws of *tzara’at*. As the commentaries explain, *Chazal* reached this conclusion on the basis of the Torah’s introduction to its discussion of bodily *tzara’at* in Parashat Tzaria (13:2), where it describes someone who has on his skin either “*se’eit*,” “*sapachat*” or “*baheret*.” The Sages understood that the word “*sapachat*” stems from the root *s.p.ch.*, which refers to something appended, or secondary, such that there the Torah speaks here of four different colors: the primary colors of “*se’eit*” and “*baheret*,” and secondary colors of each. In all, then, there are four shades of white which qualify as a *tzara’at* skin infection.

However, the *Tanna’im* disagree as to how these four shades of white are grouped. According to Rabbi Meir, the two primary colors are snow-white and the white of an egg. Plaster is the secondary color to snow-white, and the white of fresh fleece is secondary to the color of an egg.

Rash Mi-Shantz notes the difficulty of Rabbi Meir’s position, given the accepted tradition that the white of an egg is the least white of these four colors. The generally accepted sequence, in descending order of whiteness, is snow, fresh fleece, plaster and an egg. It is hard to understand, Rash Mi-Shantz writes, why Rabbi Meir would list the white of an egg as a primary color, and a whiter shade – that of fleece – as its “subordinate” color. Rash Mi-Shantz proposes that Rabbi Meir must have reached this conclusion based on his understanding of the text, and he proceeds to explain how Rabbi Meir might have read the relevant verses to reach this surprising conclusion. (*Tosafot* in Masekhet Shavuot 5a explain Rabbi Meir’s position differently.)

In any event, the majority opinion among the *Tanna’im* disagreed. According to the majority view, the two whitest colors – snow and fresh fleece – are the two primary colors. The secondary color of snow (the whitest shade) is the whiter among the two secondary colors – meaning, plaster. And the secondary color of fleece (the less white among the two whitest colors) is an egg (the least white of all four colors).

The practical consequence of this arrangement, as Rash Mi-Shantz explains based on the Gemara’s discussion in Masekhet Shavuot (5-6), involves the possibility of “*tzeiruf*” – combining two different shades. In order to qualify as *tzara’at*, the discoloration on the skin must be at least the size of a *geris* (bean). The question thus arises as to whether a discoloration qualifies if it is the size of a *geris*, but it consists of two different shades of white, each of which occupies a space smaller than a *geris*. It is to answer this question, Rash Mi-Shantz explains, that *Chazal* arranged the four shades into two groups. This arrangement instructs that each primary shade of white combines with its subsidiary color to meet the required size of a *geris*. If a discoloration consists of a primary shade as well as the other secondary shade, and neither occupies the space of a *geris*, then this does not qualify as *tzara’at*. (However, the two primary shades indeed combine with one another to meet the minimum size requirement.)

The Tosefta (beginning of Negaim) cites Rabbi Akiva as advancing a different view. He is quoted as positing that the Sages grouped the four colors into two categories for the purpose of testing the proficiency of a *kohein*. Meaning, a *kohein* is eligible to determine the status of a suspected *tzara’at* infection only if he is familiar with the different shades of white and their groupings. The implication of Rabbi Akiva’s comment, as the Yerushalmi (cited by Rashi Mi-Shantz) understood, is that in his view, the classification of the four different colors is of no practical halakhic consequence. According to this understanding of Rabbi Akiva’s position, all four shades combine with one another to meet the minimum size criterion. The grouping was established purely for the purpose of ascertaining that a *kohein* would be familiar with the different shades, and how they compare with one another. Indeed, the third Mishna of Masekhet Negaim states, “These four colors combine with one another” – implying that there is no practical difference between the four different shades. (The commentators struggle to offer alternative understandings of this Mishna.)

Likely on the basis of the Yerushalmi, the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tuma’t Tzara’at* 1:3) rules that all four shades combine with one another, and the grouping was made only for the purpose of testing a *kohein*’s proficiency.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shavuot (5b-6a), however, understands Rabbi Akiva’s view differently. As Rashi explains, the Gemara understands that according to Rabbi Akiva, each color combines with the color immediately adjacent to it on the whiteness scale, with the exception of fleece and the white of an egg, which combine even though they are two levels apart on the scale.

Wednesday

The Mishna in Masekhet Negaim (4:5), in discussing the laws of skin *tzara’at*, addresses the case of two white discolorations which appear on a person’s skin, and they are connected by a thin line of white skin. The question in such a case becomes whether these two spots are to be treated as two separate infections, or as a single infection. The Mishna establishes that in this instance, the two spots are considered a single discoloration, unless the strip of white connecting them is exceptionally thin – not even the width of two hairs.

The Rash Mi-Shantz explains the practical implications of this *halakha*. If the line connecting the two spots is just a hairsbreadth, then the properties of one do not affect the other. For example, the presence of two white hairs in a suspected *tzara’at* infection confirms the infection as *tzara’at*, conferring a status of impurity upon the individual and requiring him to undergo the process outlined in the Torah for *metzora* (persons stricken with *tzara’at*). If the line connecting two spots is only a hairsbreadth, then the presence of two white hairs in one area would render that area a definitive *tzara’at* infection, but not the other. An earlier Mishna (3:1) establishes that two *tzara’at* infections are not dealt with simultaneously. Therefore, if one of the two connected spots has two white hairs, the individual is considered a *metzora* and completes the entire process required of a person stricken with *tzara’at*, and only thereafter is the second spot (assuming it is still present) examined. And if the second spot qualifies as a definitive *tzara’at* infection, then the individual must repeat the entire process. If, however, the line connecting the two spots is the width of two hairs, then the two spots are treated as a single discoloration, and the presence of two hairs in one spot – or, for that the matter, the spreading of one spot, which also confirms the status of *tzara’at* – renders the pair of spots a definitive *tzara’at* infection, and the individual must undergo the process just once.

The *Kessef Mishneh* commentary to the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tum’at Tzara’at* 4:7) adds that this question comes into play also in a different case – namely, if a single white hair appears in one discoloration, and another white hair appears in the other. If the white strip connecting the two spots is too thin, such that they are considered separate discolorations, then neither is definitively confirmed as a *tzara’at* infection in this case, as each contains only a single white hair. If, however, the strip is wide enough to halakhically combine the two areas, then we would regard this situation as one of a discoloration containing two white hairs, such that the individual would be declared a *metzora*.

Thursday

The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 15:6) notes that the Torah in Parashat Tazria juxtaposes its discussion of the *korban yoledet* – the special sacrifice brought by a woman after childbirth – and the laws of *tzara’at*. Rabbi Yochanan, as the Midrash cites, offers an explanation for the connection between these two subjects: “The Almighty said: I told you to bring a childbirth sacrifice, and you did not do so; by your life, I will compel you to come to a *kohein*…” According to Rabbi Yochanan, *tzara’at* infections would surface as a punishment for a person who stingily decides not to offer – or not to allow his wife to offer – the sacrifice required after childbirth. If one refuses to go to the *Beit Ha-mikdash* and bring a sacrifice to the *kohein* to offer, then he will end up going to a *kohein* for a much less happy purpose – to examine his suspected *tzara’at* infection.

Rabbi Yochanan is then cited as explaining along similar lines the juxtaposition in Sefer Bamidbar (5) between the command of the priestly gifts and the laws regarding the suspected adulteress. If a person refuses to bring his required gifts to a *kohein*, Rabbi Yochanan warns, he will end up coming to a *kohein* under embarrassing and painful circumstances – to determine whether his wife had been unfaithful.

Returning to Rabbi Yochanan’s comments regarding the *korban yoledet*, it is perhaps significant that Rabbi Yochanan cites here particularly the verse that concludes the section dealing with these laws – “If she cannot afford a sheep…” (12:8). The Torah requires the woman after childbirth to bring a sheep, but it adds a provision that if her financial condition does not allow her to bring an animal sacrifice, she has the option of offering instead two small birds. Rabbi Yochanan notes that this verse appears immediately preceding the section which discusses the laws of *tzara’at*, and he then proceeds to present his explanation for the link between the two topics. It is possible that Rabbi Yochanan cited specifically this verse simply because it is the final verse of the section addressing the *korban yoledet* requirement, and thus forms the link between this requirement and the subject of *tzara’at*. Alternatively, however, we might consider the possibility that Rabbi Yochanan speaks here not of somebody who ignores the *korban yoledet* requirement altogether, but rather of somebody who is in a position to offer the standard sacrifice, but instead brings the less expensive sacrifice. The person whom Rabbi Yochanan here admonishes brought a sacrifice – but decided to consider himself (or herself) too poor to offer the normal sacrifice, when in reality he had the means to do so.

The Torah recognizes that on some occasions, and in certain areas of religious life, we might be “poor” – less capable than others and than we would like to be. We are not expected by the Torah to do more than we can, nor should we expect ourselves to do more than we can. It is important to recognize our limits and not to wastefully expend time or energy, or endure unnecessary and harmful stress, trying to extend beyond our limited capabilities. However, Rabbi Yochanan here warns against the phenomenon of pretending to be “poorer” than we really are, of allowing ourselves to achieve less than our potential with the excuse that we are not capable of achieving more. We must honestly assess how much “wealth” we possess, acknowledge the full extent of our potential, and not feel content achieving anything less.

Friday

In the beginning of Parashat Tazria, amidst its discussion of the laws relevant to a woman after childbirth, the Torah (12:3) briefly reiterates the command of *berit mila* – circumcising a boy on his eighth day of life. The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (132b) infers from this verse that circumcision must be performed even if a *tzara’at* infection is present on the foreskin. Normally, it is forbidden to surgically remove a piece of skin with a *tzara’at* infection instead of following the procedures which the Torah outlines later in Parashat Tazria regarding *tzara’at*. However, an exception is made if such an infection appears on the foreskin, in which case the foreskin is removed in fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *berit mila*.

Rav Eliezer Horowitz of Tarnogrod, in his *Noam Megadim*, suggests that this *halakha* symbolically conveys a meaningful lesson about people and their ability to change. The Torah on a number of occasions metaphorically depicts repentance and positive change as the “circumcision” of the heart. For example, Moshe admonishes in Sefer Devarim (10:16), “You shall circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and no longer stiffen your neck.” Similar to the image of a “stiff neck” – which refers to the refusal to “bend,” to change one’s habits or attitudes – the image of the “foreskin of the heart” describes the stubborn refusal to be impacted. When a person is impervious to change, it is as though a thick, protective layer covers his heart, shielding it from influence – much like the foreskin concealing the male organ. And thus the process of opening one’s mind to embrace new ideas or behaviors is allegorized as the “circumcision of the heart,” the removal of the “foreskin” which had previously protected the heart from being molded in any way. Likewise, later in Sefer Devarim (30:6), Moshe foresees the time in the future when “the Lord your God shall circumcise your heart and the heart of your children to love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul…” – opening our hearts to be receptive to guidance, instruction and inspiration.

*Tzara’at* infections are commonly viewed as a punishment that would befall a person for the sin of *lashon ha-ra* – of speaking about people with arrogant disdain. The *Noam Megadim* sees *tzara’at* as a manifestation of hubris, of a feeling of superiority stemming from overconfidence. And on this basis, the *Noam Megadim* proposed a symbolic explanation of the *halakha* requiring circumcision even if the foreskin is afflicted by *tzara’at*. This *halakha* teaches that we are capable of “circumcising the heart” of even those stricken with “*tzara’at*” – with snobbery and arrogance. We might assume that when the “foreskin” covering a person’s heart is afflicted with “*tzara’at*” – hubris and conceit, no change can be effected. If somebody feels certain that he knows better than everyone else, that his ideas and lifestyle are correct and above scrutiny, it might appear that his heart can never be “circumcised.” In truth, however, even such an individual is capable of change. The possibility still exists of removing the cover off the person’s heart. We are to acknowledge and believe in the human capacity to change even when such change seems impossible, because even the thickest “foreskin” over a person’s heart is capable of being removed to allow the heart to be inspired and the person to grow.

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