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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

Likrat Shabbat - for PARSHAT METZORA

Even though the Torah may allude to the fact that "tzaraat" [leprosy] is caused by some type of 'improper' conduct - in Sefer Vayikra - no specific reason is ever given! Instead, the Torah dedicates two full chapters in Sefer Vayikra to explain how the "metzora", once identified, must be 'banished' from the camp, and how his return is only permitted after a week of confinement - and only after undergoing a rigorous ritual.

Would it not have made more sense for Sefer Vayikra to dedicate at least a few psukim to explain what transgressions cause this 'spiritual disease'? Does the Torah simply suffice with a few allusions to a cause, as found in the story of Miriam in Sefer Bamidbar (see 12:14-16) & as alluded to once again in Devarim 24:8-9. Can't the Torah be more straightforward and inform us explicitly that "tzaraat" is caused by certain transgressions!

When considering the predicament faced by one who contacts this 'leprosy', one could infer a very powerful lesson - applicable today, i.e. even during a time period when these Biblical laws no longer apply.

When a person contracts a strange skin disease, especially on a part of his body that can be seen by others, it is only natural that he would refrain from showing himself in public. Indeed, the Torah commands that the metzora must 'sit alone outside the camp' (see Vayikra 13:46), and that he must inform others that he is "tamey" (see 13:45) - but even if the Torah had not commanded this confinement, the "metzora" most probably would have confined himself - on his own volition; maybe not outside the camp, but more likely inside his own home.

But what would the metzora do next? From a psychological perspective, this predicament is very troubling. What would stop this "metzora" from locking himself in his room to brood - to remain alone in his misery for weeks, or months, or years?

This "metzora" needs not only a support group, but also a framework whereby he can slowly return to the 'mainstream' of life 'within the camp of Israel' -- but not right away. Instead he first needs to recognize that he has a problem; and then he requires seven days of confinement to ponder his actions, to ASK HIMSELF - what caused this disease (see Rashi on 13:46).

Afterward, society must offer him a step by step framework whereby the metzora can 'cleanse himself' - to get off to a new start, and slowly return to normal daily life of kedusha within the camp of Israel (the goal of Sefer Vayikra).

This may be the reason why Sefer Vayikra doesn't tell us the precise cause of "tzaraat" - for the precise reason for why he contracted this leprosy is between himself and God - it is not supposed to be public knowledge.

In other words, it is not the job of the community of point fingers - to accuse the metzora - to tell him precisely what he did wrong!

Instead, it becomes the responsibility of the community (led by the kohanim) to 'mainstream' the "metzora" back into

society, to give him the necessary support and encouragement so that he can realize that his predicament is only temporary.

The various rituals that the kohen must perform provide the necessary framework that can facilitate this return. Without these procedures, the "metzora" may have remained destitute for the rest of his life.

Based on very insightful Ibn Ezra, I'd like to support this approach by comparing these laws of the "metzora" to the laws of "sitting shiva" [Jewish bereavement laws].

In his commentary on Vayikra 13:45, Ibn Ezra notes the textual similarity between the laws of how the metzora must dress and care for his hair during these seven days - to the laws of "aveilut" [mourning]. [See 13:45 and compare with Yechezkel 24:15-17.]

Hence, Ibn Ezra concludes that the purpose of these seven days is for the metzora to contemplate his own behavior, so that he can realize the purpose and meaning of this 'spiritual punishment'.

However, just like in the laws of mourning, these seven days are followed by a "yom ha'shvi'i" and then by a "yom ha'shmini" (see 14:9-10). Even though halacha confines the mourner to his home for seven days, he is also commanded to leave his home as soon as those seven days are over, to return to society - to overcome the grief and return to a productive life of "kedusha".

Just as the laws of "shiva" provide a framework for the mourner to first deal with his bereavement, and then enable his return to society, so too the laws of "tzaraat". [See Ibn Ezra on 13:45.]

This may explain why Sefer Vayikra - "torat kohanim" - never tells us what the metzora did wrong to deserve this punishment. As far as society is concerned, that is a private matter between God and the person who has contracted that disease. Rather, it is the job of society, led by the Kohanim, to help that person - to recognize his difficult predicament and provide him with not only a framework, but also the necessary encouragement to return to a productive way of life,

On the one hand, the metzora himself must utilize this seven day 'time-out' for introspection, to contemplate his behavior and think of ways to improve himself. He could even ask the kohen for some guidance, during his frequent visits, and during the performance of the various symbolic rituals.

It may even be for this purpose that the Torah provides us with several allusions for the cause of "tzaraat". Those allusions can serve as a guide for the person who contracted this disease - to help him ascertain why this happened.

However, society must also remember its own obligation not to neglect the "metzora", just as the society of Am Yisrael must not neglect anyone who becomes destitute or feels isolated.

In this manner, the laws of "tzaraat" are quite applicable even today. And if we follow their guidelines, hopefully we will become worthy of God's Presence in our midst - the prerequisite (see Ramban 13:47) for the Biblical laws of "tzaraat" to truly apply.

Something to think about as we 'cleanse' ourselves, and our houses, and our clothing, from chametz this week.

shabbat shalom,
menachem