

SELF DESTRUCTION

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

There is an underlying theme to the message of the Metzora. This spiritual disease that causes discoloration of the skin or of hairs upon the skin, in unpredictable patches is caused by sins of speech gossip, slander and the like. When a person notices the discoloration, he is to immediately approach a kohen and show him the abnormality. It is up to the kohen to not only to determine the status of the affliction, but to actually invoke the status of impurity on the man through his rendition of his adjudication on the matter.

The physical affliction of tzora'as is definitely not a contagious one. In fact, the Torah teaches us that there are times that the kohen can hold off on his declaration; e.g. a groom during the week of wedding festivities is spared the humiliation of isolation. If tzora'as were a communicable disease it would surely warrant immediate isolation despite the circumstances. Yet when a man is declared as tamei (impure) he is kept in isolation. The Torah explicitly explains: "All the days that the affliction is upon him he shall remain contaminated; he is contaminated. He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall be outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:46).

The question is simple. If the sins of anti-social behavior cause the malady, why is the man isolated? Would it not be better if he is embarrassed within the community and learns to better himself through communal interaction? How will solitude help him cure his societal ills?

There is a classic tale of the gentleman who purchased a plane ticket from New York to Los Angeles. The man was quite finicky about traveling, and asked the agent for a window seat. Somehow, he was not placed by the window, rather in the aisle.

During the entire trip, he fidgeted and squirmed. Immediately after the long journey the man went straight to complain.

"I specifically asked for a window seat," he exclaimed. "Your agent in New York assured me that I would be getting a window seat. Look at this stub. It placed me right in the aisle!"

The customer relations agent in Los Angeles was not fazed. Unfazed she asked the man, "Did you ask the person in the window seat to trade places?"

This time the man was irate. "I was not able to!"

"And why not?"

"There was no one in the seat."

My grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, of blessed memory, in his classic work *Emes L'Yaakov* explains. People often blame the ramifications of their doings on everyone else but themselves. Truth be told, a person who is afflicted can circumvent confinement by not reporting the negah to the Kohen, or even by pulling out the hairs that are discolored. It is akin to a man who is sentenced to house imprisonment. His hands are tied together with the rope attached to his teeth. He is told to watch himself and not escape.

In essence, a negah is merely a Divine wake-up-call. It is heaven's way of letting an individual know that there is something wrong. It is a personal message and must be taken personally. And so in solitude the man sits and ponders what exactly needs correction.

If a person wants to correct himself, he need not cavort with others to do so. If one can remove the barriers of false flattery and social mendacity, he can do a lot better for himself: because self-improvement is dependent upon self-motivation. Without the truth meeting the self, any attempt toward self-improvement may lead to nothing more than self-destruction.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated in memory of Judah Leib (Jerry) Lipschitz by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Lipschitz.

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