

CONSTANT PRESSURE TO IMPROVE

by Rabbi Label Lam

And the person with "tzaraas" in whom there is this affliction-his garments shall be rent, the head of his hair shall be shaved and he should cloak himself up to his lips; he is to call out: "Contaminated, contaminated!" 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. (Vayikra 13:45-46)

This week's Torah portion reads like a medical journal outlining all the gruesome details involved with diagnosing and remedying the malady called "tzaraas". Our sages teach us that the prime cause of this particular disease and its rugged cure was for the seemingly slight error of misusing the power of speech.

We need to know why so much holy ink is spent on this subject which is parked right in the center of the centerpiece of the Holy Torah, an apparent interruption of contiguous topics. It's found sandwiched between the heights of the inauguration of the Tabernacle, which concludes with the death of the two sons of Aharon for going unlawfully into the Holy of Holies and those laws that invite the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

Maybe we can explain with a simple story of a stone. It was buried way beneath the ground for centuries until dramatic circumstances brought it to the surface. Seeing the potential in this clump of earth a miner brought it to the big city. It sat cloistered in a sack with other rock clusters unappreciated for years and years. After that period of time, it was placed on a merchant's desk for examination. He looked at it and hammered it and tested its strength until it was passed on to the select desk of a master craftsman.

With his refined skills and a few sharp instruments he began to cut and cleave the stone shedding its coarse exterior. Soon a new polished image began to emerge. Beautiful and symmetrical facets were made to shine one after the other until the former rock cluster, turned rock star, was now revealed as a beautiful diamond. The story does not end there. A powerful king decided he wanted this diamond to sit in the crown of his queen because of its dazzling beauty.

The king called his top jewelers and asked them to examine the diamond, to shine a light through it, to be sure it was flawless and worthy as he had hoped it would be. Upon inspection a slight, slight bubble deep beneath the surface was detected and a cure recommended. The stone was to be put back down under the earth again.

We can only imagine the existential anguish of that select stone having passed so many great tests

and almost within the reach of royalty to be completely rejected like that. After a time, though, the diamond was retrieved. The pressure imposed on it by having been put in deep isolation ironed out the ever so slight wrinkle and made it worthy to sit proudly in the crown of her majesty, the queen.

Having been lead out of Egypt to eventually create a holy residence for The Almighty is a drastic leap in stature that spells out "great expectations" as well. Along with the privilege of a "clergy parking sign" comes a long list of heavy responsibilities for the Rabbi of the community. The more exposure one has, the more intense and the deeper the inspection.

When we accepted upon ourselves to become "a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" there was an understanding that the eyes of the universe would be studying us. One might be tempted to look with nostalgia at the "good old days" in Egypt when the price of being "center stage" was not so steep, but we've "been there and done that" already. The only choice, having traveled so far, then, is to accept our fate. The price of occupying a holy place in the world is the awful and constant pressure to improve.

Good Shabbos!

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