

# A COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITY

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

And the person with "tzaraas" in whom there is the affliction- his garments shall be torn, the hair of his head shall be shaved, and he should cover himself up to his lips; he is to call out, "Tame'!-Tame'!"(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)

Why is the person with "tzaraas" made to stand outside the camp in isolation? Why does he tear his clothing, shave his head and cover himself in shame? Why does he shout "Tame' -Tame'"? What is the benefit of this morality play?

The Midrash accounts that each of the actions is meant to remedy one of the possible causes of his certified affliction. He's sent into isolation to quiet the fires of jealousy that prompted him to drive a wedge between people with ill will and gossip. He tears his clothing to deflate his egoistic drive for money above all. He is made to openly shame himself - declaring his contaminated status aloud to counter the haughtiness that caused him to presume his opinion should reign supreme.

The Midrash offers two reasons that account for the double expression. "Tame'-Tame'" 1-For the same reason that graves should be marked, in order to signal a warning to those who would become contaminated to keep a proper distance. 2- In order to publicize his condition so people will have mercy and pray on his behalf.

I remember a "far-out" self-portrait drawn in crayon by an old time college associate who had made a serious detour from healthy living. He had depicted himself as a photo negative where dark is light and light is dark. There he stood in a confusing swirl of colors, his hand raised in a foreboding pose as if to say, "Stay away!" and the caption of the picture read eerily, "Already dead myself, I attempted to warn my friends!"

On a slightly lighter note, after receiving another notice from school about bad behavior a frustrated father sat to explain to his child the source of each one of the gray hairs in his once black beard. "This one is from the last time the principal called. This one is from the time you broke the neighbor's window etc." The father looked to his child for a reply to his appeal for better behavior, and he answers blankly, "Oh! That's why Zaidy has such a white beard!" Sure the father has his agenda but other lessons are available and sometimes everyone can learn something different.

What should be our response to situations of disaster, local or global, subtle or direct, personal or national? Rather than gloat coolly from a distance we should see ourselves as being made to embrace whatever life lessons profound or practical that shout out from the unfortunate episode. If we hear about it, it is also a strong and personal invitation to feel and pray for the victims lest we become callous, overconfident, and fall prey ourselves, Heaven forefend, to things similar.

The afflicted individual is understood to have been responsible for his condition. He becomes the poster child for this social or moral cause. He shouts "Tame'-Tame'". 1- To warn people. "Don't make the same mistakes I have." He hopes that his example will forestall future marches of folly as he parades himself as the example of what not to do. 2- His pronouncements are an urgent appeal for empathetic prayer. He thereby makes a mandate for the many, atones for his foolishness, and in a meaningful way converts a personal problem into a community opportunity. Text Copyright &copy 2005 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.