

MORE THAN SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Tazria

More than Scratching the Surface

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This week's parashah is the first of two to discuss the affliction of tzara'at. The Torah describes three types of tzara'at--se'et, sapachat and baheret--which the Midrash Rabbah matches with three powers that oppressed the Jewish People--Babylonia, Media (where Haman lived), and Greece, respectively.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l (1903-1993) elaborates on the connections between these three forms of tzara'at and the three oppressors. Regarding baheret and Greece, he explains:

A baheret is a superficial bright spot on the skin. Greece, too, was superficial, elevating form over substance. Judaism is concerned with the inner essence of things. The Gemara (Arachin 10b) relates that when the musical instruments in the Bet Hamikdash became worn out, craftsmen were brought from Alexandria, Egypt (a Greek city) to renovate them. However, the golden adornments that they added did not make the sounds more beautiful, and only when they were removed did the instruments work properly.

R' Soloveitchik notes that many of Eastern Europe's most influential sages were not noted as orators. R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1817-1896; rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania) had only one Shabbat Shuvah derashah, which he repeated year-after-year, always bringing his audience to tears. The wicked Bilam was a great orator, while Moshe Rabbeinu had a speech impediment. What made Moshe Rabbeinu effective was that he loved every Jew from the depths of his soul.

In Europe, R' Soloveitchik concludes, Eretz Yisrael was spoken of twice a year--at the end of Yom Kippur and at the Pesach Seder, when our ancestors proclaimed "Next year in Yerushalayim" with all their hearts. In contrast, R' Soloveitchik notes, many American Jews speak often of their great love for Israel and even call themselves "Zionists," but have no desire to act on their professed love. That is the affliction of baheret. (Quoted in Darosh Darash Yosef p.233)

"On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised." (Vayikra 12:3)

R' Aryeh Levin z"l (1885-1969; known as the "Tzaddik of Yerushalayim" and as the "Prisoners' Rabbi") and R' Chaim Shmuelevitz z"l (1902-1979; rosh yeshiva of the Mir Yeshiva) met at a brit milah. There was a long delay in beginning the brit, so R' Shmuelevitz turned to R' Levin and asked, "I am supposed to be at the yeshiva. What should I do?"

R' Levin replied: "I cannot tell his honor what to do, but I can tell you a story." This is the story he told:

When I [R' Levin] was younger, I met R' Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld z"l (1848-1932; rabbi of the Eidah Ha'chareidit in Yerushalayim) at a brit milah. There was a long delay in beginning the brit, so I turned to R' Sonnenfeld and asked, "I am supposed to be at the yeshiva. [R' Levin was mashgiach ruchani at Yeshivat Etz Chaim.] What should I do?"

R' Sonnenfeld replied: "It is difficult to pass-up an opportunity to meet Eliyahu Ha'navi. It is a rare occasion."

When R' Levin finished his story, R' Shmuelevitz said, "If so, we must wait." (Quoted in Brito L'hodi'am p.92)

From the same work:

R' David Cohen z"l (1887-1972; instructor at Yeshivat Merkaz Ha'Rav; known as the "Nazir") posed the following question at the brit milah of his grandson (son of R' Shlomo Goren z"l): Why is Eliyahu Ha'navi such a central figure at a brit milah? After all, this is a mitzvah associated with Avraham Avinu, as demonstrated by the blessing we recite--"To bring [the child] into the brit /covenant of Avraham Avinu"!

R' Cohen explained: The covenant that is made at the brit milah is the joining together of the past,

the present and the future of the Jewish people. Avraham Avinu represents our past. Those assembled at the brit represent the present. Finally, Eliyahu Ha'navi, the harbinger of the Redemption, represents the future.

"Upon the completion of the days of her purity . . . she shall bring a sheep within its first year for an elevation-offering, and a 'yonah' or a 'tor' for a sin-offering." (Vayikra 12:6)

R' Yaakov Ba'al Ha'turim z"l (14th century) comments that, of the two potential bird offerings, the "yonah" is mentioned before the "tor" because it is preferable to bring a yonah rather than a tor. Why? Because the species known as tor mourns when its spouse dies and never takes another spouse.

R' Akiva Yosef Schlesinger z"l (1835-1922; rabbi in Hungary and Yerushalayim) writes that in this light we can understand why the announcement of the eventual redemption is referred to in Shir Ha'shirim (2:12) as the "kol ha'tor" / "voice of the tor." We, too, mourn for the closeness to Hashem that we once enjoyed and we have remained loyal to Him until He returns to us, and in that merit we will be redeemed. (Tosfot Ben Yechiel)

Parashat Ha'chodesh

"This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you the first of the months of the year. Speak to the entire assembly of Yisrael, saying, 'On the tenth of this month they shall take for themselves--each man--a lamb or kid . . .'" (Shmot 12:1)

R' Klonimus Kalman Shapira z"l Hy"d (1889-1943; the Piaseczner Rebbe; killed in the Holocaust) posed the following question in a derashah he delivered in the Warsaw Ghetto on the Shabbat in 5701 / 1941 on which Parashat Ha'chodesh was read:

Rashi z"l writes that Bnei Yisrael had no merit in which to be redeemed, so Hashem gave them the mitzvah of Korban Pesach and the mitzvah of brit milah [which had been commanded to Avraham Avinu but had fallen into neglect]. This, said R' Shapira, seems to contradict an earlier Rashi (to Shmot 3:12) which says the redemption occurred in anticipation of Bnei Yisrael's later accepting the Torah!

R' Shapira explains: When Bnei Yisrael later came to the Yam Suf and Moshe prayed for salvation from the pursuing Egyptians, Hashem responded (Shmot 14:15, "Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to Bnei Yisrael and let them journey forth." What does this mean? Is one not supposed to pray in his time of need? Rather, Hashem was saying, "Why do you cry out *to Me*?"-i.e., *for Me*. The salvation will not happen for My sake, but for the sake of Bnei Yisrael.

Perhaps, R' Shapiro continued, this is what our Sages mean when they say that the angel Micha-el offers the souls of Yisrael on the altar above. Micha-el is the angel charged with always defending and promoting the Jewish People. Perhaps he does this by bringing the suffering of the Jewish People before Hashem. He says, "You, G-d, are always concerned with the honor of Your people. Look at them now!"

In our present circumstances [in the Warsaw Ghetto], R' Shapira said, we also can understand Moshe's complaint (Shmot 5:23), "From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people," and Hashem's reply (in the next verse), "Now you will see what I shall do to Pharaoh." Moshe said: You told me to speak to Pharaoh about traveling to the desert to observe a festival for Hashem. But, my speaking to him "in Your Name"--for Your honor--seems to have delayed the redemption. Hashem replied: "'Now' you will see." Since you have awakened My mercy by speaking of the honor of Bnei Yisrael (by saying that Pharaoh "did evil to this people"), the redemption will begin immediately.

With this, R' Shapira answered his original question. When Hashem told Moshe that the redemption would occur in anticipation of Bnei Yisrael's later accepting the Torah, He did not specify when that redemption would take place. Although Hashem was willing to give Bnei Yisrael "credit" for a merit that would occur in the future (receiving the Torah), that merit was not the result of any sacrifice on the part of Bnei Yisrael (yet). Therefore, it could not awaken sufficient merit to bring the redemption by a definite date. In our verse, however, He said, "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you . . ." In the merit of the dual sacrifice of circumcision and placing the blood of the Korban Pesach on the doorpost, Hashem promised that the redemption would occur immediately--"This month is *for you*." (Eish Kodesh)

Pesach

The Midrash Rabbah states that our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt in the merit of four things: They did not change their names or their language, they did not speak lashon hara, and they took precautions against immorality. R' Shlomo Ephraim of Lunschitz z"l (1545-1619; author of the Torah commentary Kli Yakar and other works) writes that these four traits contrast with the four groups of people who, say our Sages, will not merit to greet the Shechinah. They are: leitzim (interpreted by R' Shlomo Ephraim as "exceedingly haughty people"), chaneifim (interpreted by R' Shlomo Ephraim as "hypocrites"), liars (in financial dealings, according to R' Shlomo Ephraim), and those who habitually speak lashon hara.

R' Shlomo Ephraim elaborates: Exceedingly haughty people are concerned with making a name for themselves. Throughout history, many such people have asserted, or even believed, that they were gods. Bnei Yisrael did not change their "names" in Egypt. They never abandoned that fundamental trait of a descendant of Avraham Avinu--humility.

R' Shlomo Ephraim continues: Avraham referred to himself (Bereishit 18:27) as "dust and ash," but Moshe was even more humble, saying (Shmot 16:7), "What are we?" (literally, "We are mah / what?"). The Hebrew word "mah" has the same gematria (45) as "me'od" / "very much," as in the Mishnah (Avot ch. 4), "Me'od, me'od, you should be humble." Notably, three times 45 (one for "mah" and two for "me'od") equals 135, the gematria of "matzah"-thus demonstrating the connection between the humility of our ancestors and the redemption. (Orach L'Chaim: Drush L'Pesach ma'amarim 14-16)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the Hamaayan page.

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