

THOUGHT PROVOKING

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Tzaraas is an affliction that is commonly misidentified as leprosy. In fact, whereas leprosy is a medical condition, tzaraas is the physical manifestation of a spiritual deficiency. The Torah lists a number of blemishes and blotches that appear on various areas of the body which, if identified by a trained Kohen (priest) as tzaraas and declared by that Kohen as such, render the bearer tamei (ritually compromised). The bearer is sent out of the local population center to a remote location, where he contemplates his deeds, attempting to identify the misdeed he did that brought G-d to deliver this malady. The most common cause is lashon hara (slandorous speech).

Michtav Me'Eliyahu (1) ponders the process of introspection. The purpose of the tzaraas is to awaken a realization of the need for renewed attention to Divine service. In complete solitude, the days of seclusion are dedicated to contemplation of his endeavors and actions and the requisite repentance. Thus the Torah mandates that when the bearer attends to business outside his temporary home, he declares to all passers by, "Contaminated! Contaminated!" (Vayikra/Leviticus 13:45) While the basic purpose of this declaration, as explained by Rashi, is to assure that the public maintains a safe distance so they do not become ritually compromised, Rabbi Dessler expounds that the broadcast further serves to assure the bearer not lose focus from his task of reorientation and to remind the masses of the need to maintain their G-d consciousness. After the initial one-week quarantine, the bearer has a follow-up examination to see if the blemishes have disappeared, reduced or grown. The change in the size of the blemishes reflects the change in the bearer's proclivity to sin, a tangible compass of the bearer's spiritual direction.

Rabbi Dessler notes that in the greater scheme, the appearance of any affliction has its root in a spiritual void created by our misdeeds. The Zohar explains that every spiritual strength and weakness manifests itself on our visage, but Rabbi Dessler explains we no longer have the skill to decipher these manifestations. So, too, the metaphysical vacuum created by our sins leaves our physical selves unprotected from physical maladies. (This does not mean that physical misfortunes are punishments for our sins; it simply means that our sins allow for the deterioration of our special Divine barrier from challenges.) Every mitzvah (Divine command) has its own limb or organ that it protects; a misdeed in that realm leaves the corresponding anatomy susceptible. Proper restoration of Divine service serves to restore Divine protection.

The Torah's command of "he shall provide healing" (Shemos/Exodus 21:19) enjoins us to pursue medical attention for our sicknesses; we do not shun doctors and pursue faith healers. But,

concludes Rabbi Dessler, we must remember that a cause of our illnesses is our sins, and that our health and well-being, ultimately, come from G-d, to Whom we strive to become close.

The challenge of developing and maintaining our G-d consciousness is a monumental task that literally takes a lifetime to achieve. In a world of six billion people, one may at times start to wonder if his deeds really matter, is G-d really concerned with his service. Illness and challenge - like the epiphany experienced in near-miraculous successes - are our reminders that He watches, He cares and He wants us to grow and succeed.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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