

GETTING THE MESSAGE

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

One of the peculiarities of tzaraas (1) is that someone whose body is fully engulfed in the disease is considered tahor (ritually pure). The Torah lists a number of blemishes and blotches that can appear on various areas of the body which, if identified by a trained Kohen (priest) as tzaraas and declared to be tzaraas, render the bearer tamei (ritually compromised). The possessor is sent out of the local population center to a remote location, where he contemplates his deeds, attempting to identify the act that brought G-d to deliver this malady. The most common cause was lashon hara (slandorous speech). But the Torah notes that if "the Kohen shall look and the affliction covers his entire flesh then he shall declare the affliction to be pure, having turned completely white, it is pure. And on the day that healthy flesh appears in it, it shall be contaminated." (Vayikra/Leviticus 13:13-14) How is it that partially afflicted he is impure but completely diseased he is pure?

This is the nature of a spiritual illness. The Chofetz Chaim (2) explains that this illness is consistent with G-d's revulsion for haughtiness - as stated in Mishlei/Proverbs (16:5), "The haughty of heart are an abomination of G-d" - and His appreciation of humility.

The root cause for the willingness to speak derogatorily of others is the speaker's sense that the negative traits or acts of others makes him superior to them. The Chofetz Chaim elucidates that the tzaraas sufferer is exiled, not even allowed to reside with other others who have tzaraas, to humble him as he considers his great sin and repents. This is necessary for someone who bears only a few splotches of tzaraas, who, without being exiled and forced to spend a week in absolute solitude, would feel no significant consequence to being tamei and could, therefore, dismiss it as irrelevant. The exclusion from society is a necessary component to appreciating the Divine displeasure and creating the humility that is essential to repentance. But for one who is completely afflicted, from the top of his head to the tip of his toe, there is no dismissing the situation. Exile is extraneous and unneeded, so the Torah classifies him as tahor.

We no longer have tzaraas as an explicit reminder that G-d maintains an interest in our spiritual success, but He does send us cues on a regular basis. They may not be as obvious as turning lily white from top to bottom, but they are there...we just need to look for them.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) an affliction that is commonly misidentified as leprosy; whereas leprosy is a medical condition, tzaraas is the physical manifestation of a spiritual deficiency

(2) Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities

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