

# SKIN DEEP

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

It first appears on the skin as a sickly white lesion, and then it begins to spread. It looks like leprosy, but it is not. The Torah in this week's portion identifies as tzoraas, a strange phenomenon that appeared when the Holy Temple existed. These lesions were not life threatening, yet the Torah views them with utmost seriousness. The afflicted person was put under priestly observation, and if his condition deteriorated, he was quarantined. What is the significance of the tzoraas lesions?

Our Sages tell us that these lesions afflicted those who spoke malicious gossip and slander. They caused innocent people to be estranged from their friends and neighbors. Therefore, they themselves must suffer the isolation of quarantine. The questions, however, still remain. Why does the quarantine have to result from skin lesions rather than some other affliction?

The answer goes to the root of the mentality of malicious talk. Why do some people have a tendency to see only the worst in others? Because they themselves have those selfsame weaknesses and shortcomings. "Those who find failings in others," our Sages tell us, "are surely guilty of the same failings." People who engage in slander are not willing to accept others at face value. They are always driven to dig down underneath to find the negative undercurrents in others, because they themselves are so thoroughly negative.

The skin is the perfect metaphor for the positive approach to the perception of others. Take a look at a handsome person and imagine him for a moment as a skeleton entwined in ligaments, nerves and bloody tissue. Suddenly, he is not so handsome any more. But to make people more appealing to each other, Hashem covered all their internal systems with a layer of beautiful skin. As a result, those who look at people as they appear find them appealing, but those who dwell on what goes on underneath find them repulsive. The slanderer sees only the weaknesses of others because his own weaknesses are so prominent. He seeks to expose others because he himself is so thoroughly exposed. Therefore, his skin, the organ of concealment, is afflicted, and he is quarantined.

*A weary traveler was trudging along a dusty road, thinking about where he could spend the night. Far off in the distance, he saw the towering walls of a city, and he wondered if this would be a good place to seek hospitality.*

As he approached the city, he saw a sage sitting under a tree.

"Tell me, good sir," said the traveler. "Do you know this city?"

"Indeed I do," said the sage.

"Then perhaps you could tell me what kind of people live here?"

"I certainly can," said the sage. "But first tell me what kind of people live in your own city."

"My own city?" said the traveler, his eyes shifting back over his shoulder. "It is an evil place. The people are nasty. They watch you all the time with suspicious eyes, and they whisper about you behind your back. Stay away if you know what's good for you."

"Well, I am afraid you are out of luck, my friend," said the sage. "Unfortunately, you will find exactly the same kind of people here."

A short while later, a second traveler approached the city. He too saw the sage under the tree and decided to inquire about the inhabitants.

"I will be glad to tell you," said the sage. "But first tell me what kind of people live in your own city."

"My own city?" said the second traveler. "It is such a wonderful place. The people are kind and considerate. They are always eager to help each other in any way they can."

"I'm happy to tell you, my young friend," said the sage, "that you have come to the right place. Those are just the kind of people you will find here. I think you will find this city a most compatible place."

In our own lives, we almost continuously find ourselves in a position of being able to judge other people, to find fault in what they do or to look at them in a positive light. The Torah instructs us never to think evil of others and certainly never to verbalize such negative thoughts. The key is to focus on improving ourselves, to purify and perfect our own thoughts and motivations. If we do so, we will undoubtedly recognize the same noble sentiments in others, and we will find the world a most compatible place indeed. Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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