

EYEING THE EYE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

In this week's Torah portion, the Torah deals with various types of tzoraas, commonly mistranslated as leprosy. Tzoraas is a Heavenly affliction that strikes a person for various transgressions he committed, most commonly for slandering a friend.

Embedded in this form of Divine retribution are miraculous properties, one of which is that it targets not only a person but his belongings-his house, clothing and possessions.

The verse at the end of this week's Torah portion instructs the kohein how to treat tzoraas when it afflicts clothing. The posuk uses a singular expression; "vehinei lo hofach hanega es eino." If the kohein sees that the garment even after being washed remains unclean-still contains signs of tzoraas-it must be destroyed.

The language vehinei lo hofach hanega es eino is laden with symbolic meaning. Ayno, literally means "its eye," which means the blemish [tzoraas] has not changed its eye. This unusual choice of words contains profound insights into human nature, and the working of Divine justice, explains the saintly Chidushei Harim.

He notes that punishment of tzoraas is brought about by tzoras hoayin, literally narrowness of the eye. [Note the similarity between tzoraas and tzoras.] Narrowness of the eye refers to a person's tendency to view another through negative, critical lenses. His is not the benevolent, charitable gaze of a tov ayin, who sees the good in others, who hopes and prays for his neighbor's well-being. The "tzar ayin" perceives only another's shortcomings and flaws; he begrudges his neighbor's good fortune and is preoccupied with his own ego.

The Chidushei Harim explains that when the verse says 'vehinei lo hofach hanega es eino,' the tzoraas did not change its appearance, a double meaning is implied. The affliction didn't change because the ayin, (eye)-the person's negative outlook -did not change. Since the person failed to do teshuva for his callous view and behavior toward his fellow Jew, the tzoraas continues to attach itself to his clothes.

We explain that the word "nega" (affliction) is really the same word as "oneg" (pleasure), and is spelled with identical Hebrew letters except for one difference-the location of the ayin. In oneg, the ayin is at the very beginning of the word; in nega, the ayin is at the end.

Everything is dependent on our hofach es eino, changing the eye. If we have a "good eye," taking a

positive approach to others and to life, life then becomes a pleasure and a delight. We are connected to the Divine for we see the innate goodness and Divine energy within one another. However, the metzora who continues to demonstrate mean-spiritedness remains with the nega; he has not been able to change his "eye." He is preoccupied only with himself and therefore, is appropriately afflicted.

Most of us have a bit of tzar ayin in our nature. A Jew's responsibility is to convert that trait and become a tov ayin, a person with a benevolent eye.

In Biblical times, only when the metzora succeeded in uprooting his negativism toward others did the affliction disappear. Today, we do not have that powerful incentive to spur us to change. Yet it is still incumbent on us to try to improve our character. When we have "a good eye," we are happy with our lot and judge others charitably. We walk with a spring in our step and uplifted spirit. We are at peace.

If we harbor feelings of being shortchanged and look at others begrudgingly, however, then we are truly afflicted. Although highlighting others' shortcomings may be temporarily gratifying, keeping a jaundiced eye will prove toxic in the end-to ourselves.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

Sincerely

Rabbi Naftali Reich

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