

ABOVE THE ANIMALS

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Much of this week's combined reading, of Tazria and Metzora, concerns the spiritual ailment known as Tzara'as. Tzara'as is often translated as leprosy, but the two illnesses could not be further apart. Tzara'as was treated not by doctors, but by analysis by the Kohen (Priest)... and someone who was so thoroughly afflicted that his or her entire body turned white, was pure.

Tzara'as, we learn from the Medrash, came upon a person as a result of Lashon Hora, evil gossip. Moshe's hand turned white when he claimed that the Nation of Israel would not believe or follow him, and Miriam caught Tzara'as when she spoke about Moshe. So too, this evil came upon any Jew who spoke evil of his or her neighbor.

Tzara'as was an entirely spiritual ailment - just as loshon hora, gossip, causes intangible harm rather than physical. The spiritual nature of gossip is actually that which makes it such a great transgression, worthy of a special and unique punishment.

This was explained by the Rosh Yeshiva (Dean) of "Lakewood in Israel", Rabbi Yaakov Eliezer Schwartzmann. What advantage do humans have over animals? The answer is, our intellects. Scientists may have proven that gorillas can communicate - but not that they discuss philosophy! For us, communication provides worldly expression of our intellects.

Thus the person who gossips takes the most spiritual element of his or her physical existence... and uses it for evil. This is the great evil of gossip, because we use an inherently spiritual trait to cause harm beyond what mere sticks and stones could ever do.

Good Shabbos,

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