

THE LOVING TOUCH OF AFFLICTION

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The Loving Touch of Affliction¹

Chazal use *negaim* to illustrate a truism about Hashem's manner of dealing with His creatures. When He finds it necessary to afflict us, say Chazal,² He first visits those afflictions upon property somewhat distant from us, like our homes. If He must continue, He then strikes at closer property, like the clothing upon us. Only if those measures fail to achieve their intended effect does He turn to our bodies. In His compassion, He avoids striking us as the first resort.

The lesson may be valuable, but the illustration is puzzling. *Negaim* in our *parshah* are presented in the text in the reverse order than Chazal depict them! *Negaim* upon our bodies are featured first.

We will arrive at a solution to this problem by way of a detour. The gemara³ points out that the mitzvah system is so full and rich, that it literally surrounds us with Divine instruction and expectation. The gemara sees evidence of our preciousness to Hashem in His asking us to don *tefillin* on our heads, *tefillin* on our arms, *tzitzis* on our garments and *mezuzos* on our dwellings. All parts of our existence, it seems, are surrounded by mitzvos, channeling and elevating all aspects of our lives. *Tefillin* direct our minds and our hearts to serve Him. *Tzitzis* on the garments that cover our bodies provide protection to the rest of our anatomies against the allure of sin, safeguarding us from moving beyond the norms and limits that contain *kedushah* within. *Mezuzos* protect the *kedushah* we try to contain inside the small area that is ours to manage, and that we call home.

This thought of Chazal parallels the sectional division of our *parshah*, which deals with *negaim* of person, clothing and dwelling. We can readily appreciate the overlap. *Negaim* can be viewed as evidence of our preciousness and specialness, just as the mitzvos that He commands us. The Otzer Rav expands upon words of the Rambam, and provides an overview of the entire system of *negaim*. When the Jews lived in their own land, when the *Shechinah* as it were rested among them in that land, when our nation was sufficiently endowed spiritually to merit the gift of prophecy - when all those elements contributed to an elevated level of *ruchniyus*, then the slipping of a single individual was met with immediate visible manifestations of *tumah* in the form of *negaim*. You will find nothing similar to this in G-d's providence towards the rest of the world. He offers these warning signals only to *Klal Yisrael*, and only when they generally behave on the highest plane.

The most significant of these warnings comes as a *nega* to the body itself, because it alerts us to the

most potentially serious of failings, concerning a person's mind, emotions, or other parts of his being. *Negaim* affect clothing when a person's surroundings are deficient; his house is afflicted when there are shortcomings in his household. The prescription is the same in all cases. He is brought to the Kohen. By connecting to a person of *kedushah* and *taharah*, some of that *taharah* redounds to the afflicted person. The Kohen becomes his lodestar, showing him the way out of his confusion. The Kohen examines him, to see if the mark upon him is "deeper than the skin of the flesh."⁴ In other words, the Kohen determines that it is no ordinary, superficial blemish that he sees, but something deep and outside the natural order - a bona fide sign from Heaven, warning of the afflicted person's shortcomings. In that case, what he requires is an extra dose of *kedushah*. For this reason, he is sequestered for seven days, and if need be, for a second period of seven days.

Seen this way, we ought not to wince at the thought of *negaim*, but wistfully regret their absence from our lives today. They are powerful indicators of Hashem's love for us when we are at an elevated plane of spiritual performance, and living in our holy land. They serve as an invaluable early warning system before small failings grow into larger one.

Our description of the protective function of *negaim* has a parallel in a teaching of the *Bais Avrohom*.

"Do not cast me away from before You, and do not remove Your holy spirit from me."⁵ The two halves of the verse are linked, and form a single catastrophe. The petitioner asks G-d not to cast him away. He recognizes, however, that should it be so ordained from Heaven that he need be distanced from his Creator, that His holy spirit will in fact be taken from him as well. This is better than the alternative, because the removal of that holy spirit will signal to him that he has been cast away! Without that signal, he might not even realize it, making the change in his condition unproductive and ineffective.

We now understand the inversion that we inquired about at the beginning of this piece. It is certainly true that when Hashem needs to punish, He initially chooses His targets distally from Man. *Negaim*, however, are not always a form of punishment. Sometimes, they are sent to warn us of our failings. When that happens, pride of position belongs to the afflictions upon the body, because they most pointedly show Hashem's love for His people, and how He quickly rescues them before they become mired and trapped in sin.

The first *pasuk* of the current Chumash hints at the role of Hashem's rebuke. "And He called to Moshe, and Hashem spoke to him...."⁶ Calling and speaking are very different. The latter is direct, open and revealed. The former, on the other hand, is distant, indirect and mysterious. The *Bais Avrohom* explains the point. Hashem sometimes seems distant, remote, and unapproachable. He calls from the murky distance. We need to realize that in every call from afar, in every unanticipated set of circumstances, Hashem is also speaking to us.

We do not today have the privilege of individually receiving the jolt of a *nega*. The spirit of this

parshah, however, is timeless. "Hashem rebukes the one He loves."⁷ A Jew must realize that everything that befalls him is a call from Heaven. Through this realization, Hashem's judgment is tempered and moderated. Through this, comes *rachamim*.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 64-66

² Vayikra Rabbah 17:4

³ Menachos 43B

⁴ Vayikra 13:3

⁵ Tehillim 51:13

⁶ Vayikra 1:1

⁷ Mishlei 3:12