

PARSHAS TAZRIA & METZORAH - WHEN TZORA'AS IS CONTAGIOUS

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When Tzora'as Is Contagious¹

He is a "tzora'as person." He is tamei. The kohen shall certainly declare him tamei. His affliction is in his head.

Our mesorah concerning tzora'as is clear. Whatever the symptoms, the root cause is aveirah. Tzora'as is a spiritual malady that is externalized as a visible stain upon the person.

Aveiros, of course, are not all of the same seriousness and magnitude. Neither is their manifestation. The point of our pasuk is that tzora'as of the head qualitatively differs from tzora'as elsewhere on the body. Ta'avah / lust and desire cause the latter, just as ta'avah urges and moves the body to transgression. Head tzora'as, on the other hand, stems from warped ideology.

Most of our pasuk seems entirely unnecessary to inform us that a mark on a person's head is a form of tzora'as. All the other elements of the pasuk serve as multiple warnings regarding the seriousness of head tzora'as. Simply calling him a "tzora'as person" suffices to keep the common people away. They have a natural aversion to the symptoms of tzora'as, and wish to keep their distance.

The kohen, however, is often a person of elevated spiritual station, and not likely to share the visceral response of others. Not fearing some sort of contagion, he may not be inclined to keep the tzaru'a at arm's length. He may prefer to engage the metzora. Therefore the Torah continues - emphasizing the role of the kohen - "he is tamei. The kohen shall certainly declare him tamei."

Still, one group may react differently to the ideological deficiency of the head-metzora. The truly accomplished in Torah may feel it their duty to bring him back through dialogue. Offering well-reasoned arguments to offset his faulty premises will surely bring about his return to the mainstream, they think. The Torah therefore takes one final step. "The affliction is in his head." People with faulty thinking and philosophies have greater power to draw people to their side than do the blandishments of ta'avah. Once a person has crossed the line to genuine heresy, he should be distanced by all, even by capable Torah teachers.

Those who mock Torah become even more set in their ways, more confident of their positions, after

discussion and debate with Torah authorities. Remonstrating with them is both futile and counterproductive.

The Right To Privacy²

To rule on which day it is tamei and which day it is tahor - this is the law of tzora'as.

Toras Kohanim derives from the word lehoros/to rule that a person cannot issue a decision on matters of nega'im unless directed by his rebbi. The Raavad enlarges upon this, citing a Yerushalmi, that a person must first be pointed in the direction of the psak by his rebbi, and only then follow through with the proper conclusion. Even if a veteran student who is well-learned and comprehends the subject material is not authorized to rule on these matters unless his rebbi steers him in the right direction.

The Raavad understands "lehoros" here more precisely as "to instruct." The upshot of our pasuk is that when questions of tzora'as arise, a seasoned rebbi should gather his students around, and seize a teachable moment, showing them the subtle distinctions between "which day it is tamei and which day it is tahor." We do not follow such a strict procedure regarding other halachic matters. This is the reason the Torah continues, "this is the law of tzora'as," i.e. it is only regarding tzora'as that we demand that a competent student not issue a ruling until his rebbi has indicated the proper disposition of the case.

This, perhaps, is the reason why our pasuk immediately follow one that speaks of the se'eis, the sapachas, and the baheres[3], which properly should have been mentioned in the order in which they were treated above[4] in all their detail. That would place them before the nega'im of garments and houses, which are here mentioned first[5]. It is the complexity of se'eis, sapachas, and baheres which account for the special stringency here.

Alternatively, we can account for the order by observing that these nega'im appear on the flesh of a person. We are struck by the indelicate way in which the metzora is treated. The kohen convenes a group of his students to stand over the "patient" and gawk at this symptoms. This is an enormous invasion of his privacy, and a source of embarrassment and discomfort. The Torah therefore underscores that this procedure is allowed and justified only in the case of tzora'as, which is a Heavenly response to some antisocial behavior on the part of the stricken person. Because he acted improperly to his fellow man by shaming him, experiencing some semi-public shame is part of his atonement. Under all other circumstances, however, a person's sense of privacy about his body - beyond any requirements of modesty - must be safeguarded.

1. Based on Ha'amek Davar, Vayikra 13:44

2. Based on Ha'amek Davar, Vayikra 14:57
 3. Vayikra 14:56
 4. In Parshas Tazria
 5. Vayikra 14:55
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