

GETTING BENEATH THE SKIN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The laws of the Metzora, the subject of this week's parsha, are many and complex. One of the types of tzaraas afflictions appears as a white patch on the afflicted person's skin. This patch has to be a minimum size (no smaller than a gris - bean), as well as a certain degree of whiteness (at least as white as the membrane of an egg). The white patch has to have the appearance of being "deeper than the skin." All of the above conditions were essential in order to qualify the affliction as tzaraas.

Even then, though, the sufferer can not be qualified as a metzora until at least one of the following additional three conditions are met: 1) Two white hairs have sprouted from the white patch. 2) A healthy patch of skin appears within the afflicted area. 3) The affliction is witnessed to be growing.

So, if, G-d forbid, one woke up one morning with a gris-sized egg- white coloured patch of skin, deeper in appearance than his own, which also contained either white hairs, healthy skin, or was growing, he was declared by the Kohen/Priest to be tamei - ritually impure, and remained so until such a time as his affliction no longer contained the aforementioned qualities.

With regard to the white patch appearing "deeper than the afflicted's own skin," there seems to be disagreement among the mefarshim (commentators). Rashi (13:3) understands that this is a natural phenomenon - i.e. a white patch by definition will always appear deeper than the darker skin surrounding it. Rashi is therefore at a loss to explain how the Torah can later state (13:4), "If a white patch (called a "baheres" - one of the impure colours) appears on his skin, and its appearance is not deeper than the skin, and its hair has not changed to white..." when, by definition, white always appears deeper! Ramban (ibid.) deals with this question by explaining that since, in this instance, white hairs have not appeared within the afflicted area - but rather the hair within the affliction has remained dark - the beholder's eye is naturally attracted to the dark hairs within the affliction, and he therefore can not perceive the deepness of the white, although it is certainly there.

Rambam (Tum'as Tzaraas 1:6) however, disagrees. It is possible, he maintains, that a white patch may appear as a surface affliction, or it may appear to be from beneath the surface. The Torah stipulates, he explains, that the tzaraas affliction must appear to be beneath the surface of the skin. If, however, it seems to be level with, or resting above the skin (as did the liquid paper my students decorated themselves with as a "case study" of tzaraas this week) then this is not a tzaraas affliction, and he is tahor - pure.

Having explained this, why is it that the Torah is so adamant that the tzaraas appears "deeper than

the skin," whether we see this as a natural phenomenon (Rashi, Ramban), or as a requirement of the tzaraas (Rambam)? It is important to remember that according to Chazal, our Sages, tzaraas is not a physical illness, but rather the physical manifestation of a spiritual malady. In particular, tzaraas is seen as a result of lashon ha-ra, one who gossips about or slanders others.

We all know ba'alei lashon ha-ra - individuals who somehow have a knack at seeing the bad in others, and are fairly good at publicizing it. Perhaps, at times, we even find ourselves falling into the trap of gossiping about others. Consider, for a moment, the following question: What is, in your view, is the distinguishing and defining characteristic of the ba'al lashon ha-ra? The one quality that all ba'alei lashon ha-ra seem unfailingly to have. Are they rich? Or poor? Are they healthy? Ill? Smart? Dumb? It seems to me that the one trait all gossipers have is negativity - they are unhappy with themselves. When a person has the need to denigrate others, it is almost certainly symptomatic of the fact that he has, to some degree, a negative self- image. Instead, however, of acknowledging his own shortcomings, he prefers to project his own faults onto those around him. He deals with the bad within by searching for bad without.

Think for a moment: Do we fall into the trap of lashon ha-ra when we're feeling great about life? Have you ever seen a chassan or kallah (bride or groom) sitting at their own simcha, gossiping about the guests? They're on top of the world - they have no need to look for the bad in others!

The worse we feel, the more likely we are to fall into the trap of lashon ha-ra. Conversely, the happier and more satisfied we are with our own lives, the easier it becomes to find the good in others, and overlook the bad.

David Ha-Melech says in Tehillim (Psalms 34:13-14), "Who is the man who desires life, who loves days - seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit." One who "desires life," who "loves his days" - can not help but to "see good" in others (Mefarshim). He feels great, and he projects his own good feelings onto those around him. For such a person, it is easy to, "Guard your tongue from evil..." Perhaps, then, this is why the Torah stresses that the tzaraas affliction is "deeper than the skin." One who finds himself afflicted with tzaraas - the ba'al lashon ha-ra - can not be healed from his ailment until he realizes that the bad he so readily finds in others is actually coming from within.

Healing, then, involves two processes: 1) Focusing on the good in one's own life, and not the bad ("Who is wealthy? One who is satisfied with one's lot!"). 2) Doing the right thing. The more we do what's right, the better we feel about ourselves, and the less we feel the need to look for the bad somewhere else. Indeed, in its description of the healing metzora, the Torah says (at the beginning of next week's parsha, which is in essence a continuation of this week's - 14:3), "And the Kohen shall exit the camp (to where the metzora dwells), and the Kohen shall look, and behold! - the tzaraas affliction has been healed from the metzora!" Aren't the final words of the verse - "from the metzora" - redundant? Of course the tzaraas healed from the metzora - it certainly wasn't the Kohen who was

ailing! What the Torah is stressing, mefarshim explain, is that healing can only be from the metzora himself. The tzaraas will heal when the metzora - who continually finds bad in others - recognizes that his negativity comes from within.

Great people, it is said, speak about ideas. Average people speak about things. And little people speak about others. The next time we feel the urge to speak negatively about others - the next time we find someone getting "under our skin" - perhaps we should try reminding ourselves that this need is just a sign of our own littleness. Pick up a sefer and learn a dvar-Torah. Do a mitzvah or a chessed. You'll feel so great that you'll likely find you no longer have the need to nitpick about others' faults!

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