

MAKING ONE'S 'BED' - AND LYING IN IT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Examining the multi-faceted purification process of the metzora, it becomes evident that the Torah is going out of its way to break his spirit. Some of the things he is forced to go through are downright degrading. He is quarantined outside of city limits; everyone who passes by is obligated to insult him; his hair, including all bodily hair, must be shaved off.

This is not surprising. Atonement for sin requires that the penitent sinner purge himself of the moral flaw that brought about his misdeeds. The underlying cause for slander and malicious speech - the sins that are punished by tzara'as - is arrogance, because it breeds the contempt for others that leads one to gossip and talk about others with disregard for their feelings. The metzora's repentance thus involves his resolve to rectify this flaw, which is both symbolized and stimulated by the actions taken to demean the metzora and break his arrogance and callousness.

Not only does a metzora become tamei (ritually impure); he also becomes a conduit to impart his impurity to others, not unlike those who come into contact with a corpse. Indeed, according to Chazal, our Sages, a metzora is "considered as if he were dead." When Hashem told Moshe to return to Egypt to redeem the Jews, he feared for his life; he was a wanted man for having killed in his youth an Egyptian who was beating a Jewish slave. His greatest fear was from two Jewish taskmasters, Dasan and Aviram, Pharaoh's informants. Hashem reassures Moshe that he has nothing to fear from his two nemeses: "Go, return to Egypt, for all the people who seek your life have died. (Shemos/Numbers 4:19)" In fact we know that Dasan and Aviram were far from dead. Indeed, they reappear in parshas Korach to join the rebellion against Moshe's leadership. So why does Hashem declare them dead? There are numerous explanations. One of them is that they had contracted tzara'as - thus they were technically dead (see Nedarim 64b). (One could imagine that a metzora, who's skin and perhaps hair and beard had become discoloured, would have a hard time being an informant, due to his embarrassment.) Indeed, it is fitting that they contract tzara'as, for they had sinned by informing against their fellow man - who had come to the defence of an innocent Jew being beaten by his master.

If, as we discussed, the process of the Metzora is designed to break his arrogance - the root of malicious speech - how does this relate to his symbolic deadness?

In 5634/1874, the young tzaddik R' Aryeh Mordechai zt"l, grandson of the holy Yid HaKadosh of Peshischa zt"l, decided to leave his native Poland and settle in Eretz Yisrael. On his way, R' Aryeh

Mordechai passed through Frankfurt am-Main, where he was invited to be the personal guest of the famed Baron Rothschild. The baron was famous not only for his riches, but for his piety as well. Not just in regard to his world-renowned charity and kindness, but for his fear of G-d and strict adherence to Torah and mitzvah observance. His boundless love for Torah and its scholars made him a highly-regarded figure in Jewish life. Thus, one can well imagine the warm reception given R' Aryeh Mordechai by the baron. The magnate alone stood ready to tend to his guest's needs, and made sure the stay at his home would be a most pleasant one.

One evening, after his business affairs were complete, the baron knocked on the door of his guest and invited him for a stroll in his mansion's expansive gardens. Along the scented paths, decorated with flowers and fruit trees, guest and host engaged in conversation that centered around their mutual love for Torah and mitzvos.

(It is told that the Rav of Pressburg, R' Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer zt"l, was once invited by the baron to take a similar stroll. On the way, Baron Rothschild asked the Rav if, perhaps, he had noticed anything in the house or its conduct that was not fitting for the house of a G-d fearing Jew. "Yes," he replied smiling, "I did. In our holy Torah, it says (Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:15), 'And Israel became fat, and he rebelled.' Yet here, although you have been blessed with great wealth and opulence, you have in no way at all rebelled against the Almighty! To the contrary, you use your resources to enhance and beautify the Torah!")

As he now strolled along with his guest, R' Aryeh Mordechai, they passed by a small, well-maintained cottage on the outskirts of the garden. "What is this cottage for?" inquired the guest.

"It is my private office," the baron replied vaguely.

"Yet didn't you already show me a different room in your home which you said was your office?"

The baron thought for a moment, and then looked around to make sure no one was there. "Since you ask," he said in a whisper, "I will reveal to you the secret of my 'other' office, the contents of which even my closest family members are not aware. Besides me, no one has ever stepped into this office."

The baron withdrew a key and opened up the cottage's door. Inside, he lit a lamp, and immediately R' Aryeh Mordechai was frozen in his spot. The cottage consisted of one, windowless room that was completely bare, save for the coffin that stood in the centre of its floor. Inside the coffin were shrouds, and the sefer Ma'avar Yabok (which deals with the laws of death and bereavement).

Without waiting for the obvious question, the baron explained. "Every day, in the middle of my numerous business dealings, I quietly take a break and come to my 'office.' After locking the door behind me, I don the shrouds and lie inside the coffin. For about half an hour, I read the final confession, and the prayers one says upon one's death bed.

"This activity is vital to me. It ensures that I never, G-d forbid, become arrogant and start to believe I

am invincible. Every day I must deal with great wealth flowing through my hands, and "rub shoulders" with numerous wealthy and famous contacts from all over the world. It would be all too easy for me to start believing that these are all my accomplishments; that my name and fame will live on forever. So, you see, I need this little reminder of the frailty of my existence and my total dependence on Hashem." Needless to say, at least to one R' Aryeh Mordechai, the mystery of the wealthy baron's ability to remain steadfast in his commitment to Torah and mitzvos despite his great wealth and prominence no longer seemed so difficult to understand.

Perhaps by acting with callousness and arrogance towards his fellow Jew, the metzora has failed to recognize his own faults and mortality. He has failed, so to speak, to "lie down in his own coffin." Thus, as a consequence, the Torah declares him tamei with a level of impurity similar to one who comes in contact with the dead. If he will not, on his own, deal with others with humility and modesty, then he will be humbled by the tzara'as affliction.

"What should a person do if he fears falling prey to his yezter hara?" asks the Gemara. "Let him remind himself of the day of his own death (Berachos 5a)." While not all of us have the psychological stability and mental fortuity to undergo the "Baron Rothschild treatment," a dose of humility and mortality stands one in good stead when dealing with others.

Have a good Shabbos.

Dedicated in loving memory of Levi Yitzchak ben Avraham Leib. Ye'hei zichro baruch.

Text Copyright © 2003 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Project Genesis, Inc.](#)**