

PICKING UP THE MESSAGES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

The Midrash in this week's parsha tells a very perplexing parable:

There was a king who got married. When he brought his bride into his palace, she was taken aback by the whips hanging on the walls. "Don't worry," the king told her. "Those are for the slaves—for when they misbehave. But you—you are here to eat, drink, and celebrate!"

So too, concludes the Midrash, when the Jews read [in the Torah] the laws of the leper, they were gripped with fear. Said Moshe: "Don't worry—these are for the nations of the world. For you [is prepared] eating, drinking, and celebration, as it is written (Tehillim/Psalms 32:10) 'Many are the afflictions of the wicked; but he who trusts in Hashem, is surrounded with kindness.'" [Vayikra Rabbah 15:4]

A most comforting parable, to be sure. Except that halachically, the very opposite is true: The laws of leprosy, as presented in this week's parsha, apply only to Jews and not to non-Jews. In fact, were a non-Jew to come down with a case of leprosy such as prescribed in the Torah, he would not be rendered spiritually impure, would not be obligated to leave the city, etc., as is his Jewish counterpart. (see Rambam, Laws of Leprosy, 3:1)

The Midrash seems to understand leprosy as being symbolic of all forms of suffering, which "were given to the nations of the world but not to us." Yet we all know Jews that have suffered, Hashem yiracheim. What is this Midrash's intent?

The leprosy that we encounter in this week's parsha, according to Chazal (our Sages), was a physical manifestation of a spiritual malaise that was meant to alert its recipient to his own shortcomings, in the hope that it would lead him to repent. Like the loving parent who must, on occasion, give his child a petch'l (smack), the Almighty uses leprosy as a painful yet ultimately loving reminder not to stray from the path of the Torah. (Once we strayed so far that such reminders became impractical, Torah- leprosy ceased to exist.)

And like the loving parent who at first gives a gentle potch in the hope that his child will get his message before he really deserves a spanking, the Almighty also begins gently. Before striking our bodies with this painful and embarrassing affliction, Hashem first causes leprous spots to appear on our clothing, vessels, and houses. It's only when we fail to take heed to the previous messages that it becomes necessary to afflict our bodies. (Vayikra Rabbah 17:5)

Today, we may no longer experience leprosy. But for the sensitive recipient, Hashem has His way of getting His messages across, and reminding us when we're veering from the straight path. If we aren't hearing the messages, the fault lies with us.

"If you see the great nations feuding with each other," say Chazal, "look for the steps of Moshiach." (Bereishis Rabbah 42:4) "Everything that occurs in this world," they say, "carries a message for Israel." (Yevamos 63a)

It is told that the holy Chafetz Chaim once suddenly cried out, "Oy—the Mississippi River just flooded! Many people will perish!" The Chafetz Chaim zt"l lived in the small Russian town of Radin. Most of the people in Radin had never even heard of the Mississippi. No one knew how their holy Rebbe knew that it had flooded. And why was he so upset? Whom could he possibly know in that area that would be affected, or possibly killed, by the flood?

Another time, a Jewish businessman who had taken up residence in China was in Europe on business, and decided to travel to Radin to get a blessing from the famed tzaddik. "Tell me," asked the Chafetz Chaim, "what's doing in China."

"Life as a Jew isn't easy," he sighed. "Authentic Jewish homes are few and far between. We have no rabbis to give us guidance and direction, and no Jewish schools for our children."

"Yes," said the elderly sage, "I hear the same story from Jews in North America, in South America, in South Africa, and in Australia. It's very difficult to remain a Torah-observant Jew in such circumstances, but it can be done. It is for Jews like you that I wrote the sefer Nidchei Yisrael (The Dispersed of Israel)—take a copy, study it, and teach it to others. Besides the Jewish community, what else is doing in China?"

Not sure why the great sage was taking such an interest in the local news, he nonetheless related, "Actually, just before I left there was a great disaster: A huge dam collapsed, and entire cities were flooded. Thousands of Chinamen died, and hundreds of thousands were left homeless. There is also a great amount of disease and famine as a result. But the Jewish areas weren't really affected."

The visitor was astonished at how hard the Chafetz Chaim seemed to be taking the news. "Rebbe," the gentleman remarked, "what's it got to do with us?"

"Suppose someone would take a box, and stand up in the huge marketplace of Warsaw, the capital of Poland, where 95 percent of the people are Gentiles, and started screaming something in Yiddish, who do you think is the subject of his urgent message—the Jews or the Gentiles?"

"Obviously the Jews," he said.

"But why—they are such a small percent of Warsaw's population?"

"Yes, but he's speaking in Yiddish. Only Jews understand that language!" he said in exasperation, not understanding what the Chafetz Chaim was trying to get at.

"Exactly!" exclaimed the sage. "When assessing its intended subject, we must always examine who is capable of understanding and appreciating the message—only then can we determine its intent.

"When disaster strikes, who gathers in the shuls to pour their hearts out to Hashem? Who gathers in the study halls, to listen to the words of their sages, and try to understand what they might have done to bring such pain and suffering upon themselves? Who 'understands the language' of Hashem's messages hiding behind the guise of current events? It is for those who seek to understand—for us—that their messages are intended!" [Mayan Ha- shavua]

Leprosy, pain and suffering, have the potential to awaken the slumbering Jew from his spiritual siesta. Hopefully, their attentive recipient (us) realizes the message is intended for him without ever having to feel its painful repercussions. May we all be aroused to teshuva sheleimah (complete repentance) through a spirit of kindness and compassion.

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