

NEGAIM: OPENING THE BOOK

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Tazria deals with the laws of negaim, a skin condition often associated with leprosy. According to the Talmud, negaim or tzaraas are not forms of leprosy, and are not contagious. They are instead physical manifestations of a spiritual malaise which strike, specifically, those not careful to guard their tongues against lashon hara - gossip and malicious speech.

In the calendar Luach B'nei Yaakov, which happens to sit next to my desk, this week's section is partially dedicating to teaching people the importance of not degrading others with our speech. It discusses a "story" that could have happened during the times of the Beis HaMikdash (Holy Temple), when the condition existed. We can safely assume that when Mashiach comes, the Beis HaMikdash is rebuilt, and the Kohanim return to their priestly status, that negaim will re-emerge (well, hopefully not re-emerge) as a factor in our lives (Kohanim are the only ones qualified to decide the laws of negaim).

A girl comes home from school one day. She shows her mother a strange white spot on her hand. She doesn't know what it is, and calls her husband, the girl's father. "This may be a nega," he says. "We must go to the Kohen." "Can't we take her to a doctor," the mother says. "No, first we must go to the Kohen - only he can pronounce whether this is tzaraas." They go to the Kohein. "This may be tzaraas," he says, feeling their pain. "She must be quarantined for a week, outside the city." "A week? But her sister's getting married next week - our whole family is being hosted this Shabbos by the chasan's family! Can't this wait?" It can't.

She misses the aufruf. Thankfully, she's released after the week-long quarantine. It's not over, though. The Torah prescribes that after being released from a tzaraas quarantine, the subject must completely remove all bodily hair. The poor girl (who could be any of us) overcomes her extreme embarrassment and goes to her sister's wedding, despite feeling like a complete spectacle. She vows never again to be drawn into silly conversations that belittle others in order to boost the egos of those participating. So does everyone who sees her. [May Hashem have mercy and spare us from all sickness and harsh punishments.]

Why does Torah prescribe that the slanderer suffer specifically from tzaraas, an illness that appears as a bodily blemish?

Rabbi Avraham ben Mussa zt"l was one of the great rabbis of Sali, Morocco, about 250 years ago. He once travelled to Tunisia. Unknown there, he rented a small room. After putting his things away, he

went out into the street to inquire about where the shul is found, and other such things. A Jew happened to recognize him. "Rabbi, it is a great honour. This evening, a wealthy man is making a wedding, and all of the rabbanim from the area will attend. It will be an opportunity for the rabbi to meet the local rabbis. I'm sure you will be given a place of honour at the head table."

R' Avraham asked the man the address of the wealthy mechutan, and thanked him for his help. R' Avraham later made his way to his home (weddings at the time were celebrated at home), where he found the tables lavishly set. He was a bit early; most of the guests were just beginning to trickle in. R' Avraham sat down at a table in the meantime to rest, still tired from his journey.

Soon, the mechutan came in to check that things were in order. Seeing the stranger, whose clothes were still dusty from his travels, he assumed him to be a lowly pauper. "Please, sir, if you don't mind. This table is for important guests. I would be happy to have you attend the wedding - there is a table there in the back for needy."

"Oh, ok." R' Avraham said, taken aback. He stood up from where he was sitting. Instead of going to the back table as instructed, he left the home and went back to his room.

The mechutan entered the kitchen to check on the foods cooking. To his shock, he was suddenly unable to see anything. He sat down, hoping this was a momentary blackout. Half an hour passed. He realized something terrible had happened; he was suddenly blind. On the day of his daughter's wedding.

He was a G-d fearing man. Such a sudden and unexpected occurrence, he felt, could not be a matter of chance. "What could I have done to deserve this?" he asked his friends. "That man you asked to sit in the back... you know, he just got up and left. Maybe he was an unknown scholar?"

Hearing the suggestion, the mechutan immediately sensed they were right. He began to ask around. Eventually the situation came to the attention of the man who had met R' Avraham in the street and given him directions. "Do you know who that was? R' Avraham ben Mussa, the famous scholar of Sali!" The mechutan, accompanied by a group of his closest friends, followed the man to R' Avraham's room. The blind man fell to his feet, begging R' Avraham's forgiveness. "Had I known you to be a Torah scholar," he said, "I would never have sent you to the back."

"That, my friend, is exactly why I left. Know, that it is not for the honour of the Torah that I took affront - after all, you had no way of knowing I was a Torah scholar. Rather, it is because you deigned to judge me by my clothing, as if one's clothing, physical appearance, or even social stature has some bearing on his true worth. Your eyesight will return only when you accept on yourself to treat all men with respect." He did.

The sometimes overwhelming desire to put others down stems at least partially from judgmentalism - from the absurd idea we can, with a casual glance and a turn of the nose, decide the worth of others. There are many instruments through which we channel our judgment: clothing,

social status, looks, friends, wealth, smarts... The common denominator is that in doing so, we commit the most blatant case of judging a book by its cover. Humans are almost infinitely complex - gosh, we don't even understand ourselves - and to think that by hastily painting a mental portrait of someone else, we can figure out what makes them tick, is presumptuous and condescending.

Perhaps the Torah punishes the gossip with physical blemishes to remind them, and us, that they're way too focused on external appearances. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2008 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **Torah.org**