

HEARING OUR MESSAGES

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe and Aharon, "When a person has a blotch, a discoloration, or spot on his skin like the curse of leprosy, then he should be brought to Aharon the priest, or to one of his descendants." (Vayikra 13:1-2)

At first reading, the first part of the parshah which deals with the birth of a boy and the mitzvah of Bris Milah, seems to have little to do with the second part of the parshah, which discusses the laws of tzara'as, the infliction of the skin that came, usually, as a punishment for speaking loshon hara—derogatory speech about someone.

Until, that is, one recalls that Bris Milah is the removal of skin, specifically the foreskin. The connection becomes even stronger when pointing out that Bris Milah means "Covenant of the Word," alluding to an agreement that we have with God to use our power of speech in a meaningful manner. As Onkeles points out back when Adam first received his soul, the main result of receiving his soul was the ability to speak. The holier a person is, the holier his speech will be, as the Zohar makes clear.

In fact, the orlah—foreskin—represents everything about a human that causes a person to spiritually descend to a point at which he can speak loshon hara, or in way not befitting someone made in the image of God. The Zohar even calls it the mate of the Sitra Achra, emphasizing its association with spiritual impurity, and how it can be a corrupting influence with respect to our creative powers.

Hence, the term orlah is also used with respect to speech:

The Children of Israel will not listen to me; how will Pharaoh listen to me and since I am of uncircumcised lips. (Shemos 6:12)

In fact, the Talmud even mentions that there is something called bris krusa l'sefasayim —a covenant made for the lips (Moed Katan 18a). Basically it means that one should speak honestly and accurately, that what comes out of one's mouth should be the same as what is in his heart.

However, unlike with respect to the actual orlah removed through Bris Milah, there is no skin on the lips that can be removed. If so, then what is the orlah with respect to the lips that is meant to be removed, what is the procedure, and how is it similar to the actual Bris Milah?

This is essentially what the parshah is teaching. Tzara'as is to the rest of the skin of the body what Bris Milah is meant to be to that part of the body. Just as Bris Milah removes the orlah to purify the

creative drive of a man physically, and of a woman conceptually (hence she is the focus of the matter in this week's parshah, and not the father), tzara'as was meant to remove the bad da'as that causes a person to sin in the first place.

For, if you recall, the First Man was not merely confronted by an Aitz HaDa'as, a tree of knowledge, but by an Aitz HaDa'as TOV v'RAH, a tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It wasn't just a tree of knowledge of good and evil, but of good knowledge and of bad knowledge, that is, knowledge that leads to Godly behavior and knowledge that leads unGodly behavior. The experience of tzara'as is meant to remove the bad da'as from a person.

For example, someone complained to me that he tends to get jealous of others, and knowing that it is wrong, he wanted to stop it. However, he found his jealous response to be so automatic that it was starting to eat him up and make him very frustrated.

So I asked him, "You really don't like feeling jealous of others, do you?" "No, not at all," he told me.

"Rather than feel jealous," I pressed him, "you'd rather feel good about the situation, right?"

"For sure!" he answered.

So, I asked him, "How would you feel if you said right now to yourself, 'I'm really happy for him. I'm glad he is succeeding. Why shouldn't he succeed? Wouldn't I want him to be happy about my success too?' " "I don't know," he said, "Let me try it."

So he did, and it worked, and he has since trained himself to say things like this every time he gets feelings of jealousy, and once he does, he feels better about himself and everyone else around him.

Let's analyze this for a moment. No matter where you go in the world, you will find that mankind is united on at least one issue: happiness. We may argue about what true happiness is, but we will not argue about whether or not human beings are hardwired to pursue happiness itself.

All the substance abuse in today's world comes about because some people are so desperate to feel good about life that they sacrifice the future to get it now. They spend money they don't have to buy it, and they become addicted to it which means they will suffer the pain of withdrawal later on.

This is true whether talking about drugs, alcohol, food, or even technology. In fact, some have even said, tongue-in-cheek, that today's terrorist no longer needs to shoot or blow up people to do serious damage to society. They merely need to find a way to shut down cell phone service and the internet for 24 hours, and people will probably self destruct.

Somehow people mistakenly learn, along the way, that putting others down makes them feel that they raised themselves up and makes them feel good about themselves. And yet, it never really does. Instead it makes them feel worse about themselves. It destroys their inner peace and happiness, creating an internal and often unconscious personal contradiction.

The fortunate face the contradiction head-on and work it through, like my friend did. He located the bad da'as, extracted it, and worked on replacing it with the proper da'as, which had the desired result of making him feel happier in life. And, learning from such examples we can apply the same process to all negative emotions, including anger as well.

The unfortunate ones face the contradiction and blink first. Rather than deal with it, they simply walk further down the same, wrong path, until they become so addicted to hating others that they will go to extremes to eliminate them, either metaphorically or actually. When such people become leaders of nations, they cause genocide.

That was the beauty of tzara'as: It came from Heaven, and it was impossible to hide. In non-Temple times, it is so easily to lie to oneself about negative behavior, because even if God does respond to such behavior, it can happen in a way that the person can choose to ignore the message and continue down his dark and shady path in life.

However, in Temple times, that was not possible. If a person spoke loshon hara, tzara'as first showed up on his walls. It wasn't like mould he could simply bleach away; he had to contact a kohen, get it assessed, and go through the process of doing teshuvah. It was a big deal, something his dinner guests would have noticed if it wasn't properly removed.

If he chose to ignore his message, and continued to err in his ways, the tzara'as moved onto his clothing.

"Hey, what's the weird stuff growing on your expensive sweater?"

"What weird stuff? Oh, that . . . that's just some mould left over from the winter."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"Because it seems to also be on your face as well . . ."

"What?! It is?! Yikes! I'll be right back . . ."

"Where are you going?"

"Ah . . . to visit my kohen . . . I mean, my cousin . . . my cousin who's a kohen . . ."

"Right! You can't fool me! You have TZARA'AS!!"

Run if you want, but one of the important lessons we learn from the story of Yonah is that not only can you not hide from God, you can't even run from him. If He has to, He'll even send a big fish after you, to swallow you up or something until you regain your senses and own up to your mistakes and responsibilities. Okay, maybe not a big fish . . . but something big enough to catch your attention, because that it is what life is all about, listening to your messages.

Since, as the Leshem states, the Final Redemption is supposed to begin on Pesach and end on Shavuot, and we are in-between the two holidays now, let me take this opportunity to apply the message of these parshios to the current situation for the Jewish people.

On many occasions, we have noted that there are two paths down which Moshiach and redemption can come, either what the Talmud calls "early" or "at the last moment" (Sanhedrin 98a), the former being the quickest and most pleasant route, and the latter being the latest and most difficult path. Which one Moshiach takes, apparently, is very much dependent upon how much we prepare ourselves and the world in advance of his arrival. So far, it's not looking too good.

A fundamental difference between the two, explained the Vilna Gaon, is that early also means more miraculous, and later means more through natural means, as he taught:

According to Rabbeinu HaGR"A, if we don't merit it, the beginning of the redemption will occur like in the days of Koresh and in the days of the Second Temple, from the left side, that is from the Trait of Judgment. "His left hand under my head" (Shir HaShirim 2:6) is talking about Moshiach Ben Yosef, and it will be with the permission of the kings of nations. After that, the redemption will be completed from the right side, with the Trait of Mercy, by way of the Kav HaRachamim, as the verse says, "With abundant mercy I will gather you in" (Yeshayahu 54:7). (Kol HaTor, Ch. 1:3)

This is a point worth dwelling on for two reasons: 1.) its historical significance, and 2.) the way it is the fulfillment of prophecy, and yet it goes widely ignored by so many Jews today, in spite of the fact that the U.N. vote, in 1948, in favor of the formation of a Jewish state in Eretz Yisroel, was against the odds, in spite of the fact that 6,000,000 Jews had just perished in the Holocaust.

In fact, even the U.S. State Department had been vehemently against the idea of Jewish state, at least where it was being formed, and had it not been for a remarkable man who just happened to be President of the United States at that time, and one who just happened to take the Bible seriously, it probably wouldn't have happened, not with the permission of the nations.

Indeed, President Truman was quoted as saying that what compelled him to support the creation of the Jewish state at that time was because he believed it was the fulfillment of the prophecy in the Torah that the Jewish people would eventually return to their land. Amazingly, many Jews did not feel the same way, and even the people declaring statehood were too secular to even believe in such prophecies, but the President at that time just happened to be a believer in God and His Torah, enough to appreciate the historical opportunity before him.

There is no question that Holocaust brought some mercy to the Jewish people at that time, but remarkably, not nearly as much as one might have thought it should. Anti-Semitism was still quite high, and there were still many dissenters in the U.N. The world should have given the Land of Israel to the Jewish people, begged them to take it as part of the reparation for not having saved them from the Holocaust, especially when it had been possible to for so long, but instead they had to vote on it: 33 in favor, 10 against (Greece, ironically, being one of them), while 10 abstained. Interestingly

enough, there were only 13 more in favor than the 20 who either dissented or abstained, as in The 13 Attributes of Mercy, the level from which redemption must be initiated:

The initiation of redemption is not possible except high up, which is the place that the actions of man cannot affect at all. It is the place of the beginning of the will for all revelations, may His Name be blessed, which exists in all worlds, and from there flowed the sod of the redemption from Egypt. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 3, Anaf 16)

I could go on about the importance of the U.N., symbolically-speaking, based upon the teaching of the GR"A, and as a rebuttal for those who still insist on quoting Kesuvos 111a, where it states that the Jewish people are not allowed to return to the land en masse against the will of the nations. There are other reasons to reject this point of view today as well, but this one is a direct hit.

What are we talking about really in the end? The argument is whether or not the Jewish people returned to the land and built it up as part of the redemption-process, that is, as a function of Hashgochah Pratis, meaning, with the blessing of God, or not. On the other hand, given the circumstances by which everything has occurred, and all the incredible miracles since then to allow the state to not only survive, but to thrive, against all the odds, how does the question even begin in the first place, unless a person just doesn't want to accept that the exile has come to an end, and it is time to come home?

The only issue, really, is how God can bless a secular state? Why would He work through secular Jews, many of whom had no regard for Torah or Jewish history at all, to work His redemption plan? How can something be holy if it is inhabited by people living such unholy lives?

Yet, Jewish history itself answers those questions, and I have discussed these answers in many places, including a new book, now being written called "Drowning In Pshat." All I can say is that it is amazing how such a clever, capable, and sharp people can take such an inept, incapable, and dull approach to Jewish history and redemption. No wonder we don't listen to our messages. We don't even hear them. So the tzara'as just moves from the walls of the house, to the clothing, and eventually to us, in a manner of speaking.

Text

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