

NO ESCAPING G-D

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The comprehensive nature of Halacha addresses every situation and circumstance and establishes clear expectations for our behavior and attitudes. Whether issues in the kitchen or the bedroom, our lifestyle is focused on the constancy of Hashem's involvement in our lives and the purpose that living life was intended to have. G-d's inclusion in our daily living transforms the mundane into the divine, the mortal into the eternal; and it is the mission of the Jewish people to model a lifestyle that integrates G-d into its every facet. The two Parshiot that we read this Shabbos underscore the meaning of "Dah Lifnay Mee Atah Omed" - know before whom you are standing, and the symbolic but real manifestation of that awareness.

In the beginning, it wasn't easy. The Jewish people had to come to terms with a G-d who revealed Himself as a constant in their lives. Along with His constancy came changes, expectations, and responsibilities. The various Mitzvos directed the Bnai Yisroel's thinking toward the constancy of G-d, and the building of the Mishkan established a physical focus for their devotion. However, it became clear that "Know before whom you are standing" involved more than praying three times a day, keeping Shabbos, and having separate dishes. It was a constant demand on their attitudes to consciously involve G-d in every facet of their lives.

Time took on new and greater significance. Eating and sleeping became the means toward the greater end of serving G-d. Social engagements and relationships referenced G-d as the scale by which their integrity and intent were judged. Family relationships reflected the successes and failures of parental education and training; and individual accomplishment was redirected toward the greatness of spirit rather than monetary or societal gain.

However, more overwhelming and invasive than anything else was the awareness of being constantly judged. "Know before whom you are standing" positioned G-d as judge, jury, and executioner. Nothing escaped His scrutiny. Actions, thoughts, hopes, and dreams were laid bare before the all-seeing and all-knowing Master of the Universe. Privacy was only in the eyes of the beholder or the self-delusion of the individual, when in reality everything was open and recorded by the Judge of all Judges! Add to this the extraordinary experiences of living in the desert and the constancy of G-d became nearly impossible.

For example, the Manna. Chazal teach us that the daily "food from heaven" involved much more than the daily reemphasis of their total dependence upon G-d. It also involved a daily and public

assessment of their relationship with G-d. The greater and more responsible our relationship with G-d, the closer the Manna would fall. Some found it outside their front doors while others had to walk out into the fields to collect their daily allotment. This created the truest yet most difficult manifestation of "Know before whom you are standing." It wasn't only G-d who knew your true self, but every neighbor and stranger could see your truest self!

However, in order for the Jewish people to accept their mission as role-models for the rest of the world of the integration of G-d into a lifestyle, this intense training was necessary. As role-models and teachers our every action would be scrutinized by a critical and unforgiving world. If we were to accomplish our mission as "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" we needed to come to terms with living in a fishbowl and being constantly and publicly judged. Keep in mind that the Bnai Yisroel had not yet sinned with the Miraglim - the Spies. They had not yet been punished to wander for forty years. Therefore, the year since leaving Egypt was essential to catapult the Jews into the awareness and responsibility of dwelling with G-d in their midst. It wasn't easy.

The Torah in this week's two Parshiot describes a condition called Tzaraat. As explained in the commentaries (see Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Vayikra Chap. 13) this wasn't leprosy. It was a physical manifestation of G-d's displeasure with an individual's social behavior, especially in regard to Lashon Harah - slander. Depending on the nature of the skin infection, a Kohain would diagnose the condition as Tzaraat, or some other dermatological condition. If it was Tzaraat, the infected individual had to leave the mainstream of society and live "outside the encampment". If it was some other condition, the patient would seek out the appropriate physician for diagnoses and treatment.

A careful analysis of the Halacha shows that the Tzaraat described in this week's Parshiot was not the dreaded, infectious, leprosy.

1. The Kohain made the determination, not a physician.
2. Items in the infected home were removed prior to the determination so that they wouldn't become impure.
3. No determinations were made during the holidays when the greatest number of people could be infected.
4. If the individual was completely covered by the skin condition he wasn't considered a Mitzora. Only as healthy skin became evident and he began to heal was he diagnosed as a Mitzora and forced to leave the camp.
5. This condition could only be determined in Israel. The same condition outside of Israel was not Tzaraat.

It becomes abundantly clear that the Torah is not describing a dermatological condition but a physical manifestation of divine judgment and displeasure.

The overwhelming presence that Hashem established in the lives of the Bnai Yisroel while in the

desert was to prepare them for life in the Land of Israel. In Sefer Dvrim, Moshe describes the Land as "It is therefore... constantly under G-d's scrutiny, the eyes of Hashem are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year." (Dvrim 11:12) The same quality of "Know before whom you are standing" that was established in the desert would continue into the Land. True, G-d would not be as overtly evident as He had been in the desert, but the Land of Israel would continue the integration of G-d into the lifestyles of the nation.

The various laws concerning agriculture would tie the produce of the Land to Hashem's direct providence. The presence of the Bais Hamikdash and the daily services would focus the nation on their daily obligations. The rainy and dry seasons, as stated in the Shema, would function in direct response to the nation's devotion to Torah and Mitzvot. The giving of Tzedaka and the Shmitah year would motivate G-d's direct concern and intervention as He guaranteed the continued economic welfare of the people.

Last but not least was the affliction of Tzaraat. As the people settled and grew accustomed to living with "G-d in their midst", the ever present ills of society would rear their evil heads. First and foremost among them would be Lashon Harah - slander. The ability to speak and communicate that was divinely gifted to us as a species would prove to be the most dangerous and challenging of all human characteristics. As a nation responsible for modeling the integration of G-d in the daily workings of society, it is expected that the basic human quality of speech would be treated with the respect and concern due its potential for good and bad. Therefore, Hashem chose Lashon Harah - slander, as the most overt manifestation of His constant judicial presence within the lives of the Bnai Yisroel. Just as Hashem's presence in the desert was seen daily in the giving of Maana and the daily judgment that attended that event; so too, Hashem's constant expectations were manifest in the blemishes that would appear upon the homes, clothing and bodies of the Bnai Yisroel. In a magnificent display of "A measure for a measure," justice was served as the cowardly and private slanderer would be publicly exposed for the destructive social force that he had become. In direct consequence for his sin against society, the slanderer was forced to live outside the protected boundaries and structure of "the camp" that he had undermined.

To say the least, this kind of relationship with G-d isn't easy. Yet, it also exposed the great love, concern, and closeness that Hashem had for His children. We only take issue with those people, actions, and ideas that mean something to us. Hashem's displeasure as evident in the appearance of a Tzaraat blemish was equally indicative of His love and caring. The only way to teach others how to integrate G-d into daily living is through personal example and education. The example we show our children will directly impact their ability to integrate G-d into their own lives. May we all merit to soon return to the Land and experience the evident constancy of G-d in all facets of daily life and society.

Good Shabbos.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
