

EVERYONE IS VULNERABLE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The entire subject of tzoraat is shrouded in mystery and wonderment. The exact nature of the disease is not really known to our medical practitioners.

The traditional translation of tzoraat as leprosy is undoubtedly misleading and inaccurate. The rabbis of the Talmud treated this disease as mainly a spiritual one, albeit reflected in actual physical symptoms. Slander, narrowness of vision, jealousy of others and bad character traits were assigned by the rabbis as being some of the potential causes of the onset of the disease.

Since tzoraat could occur not only on one's body but on one's clothing and in the walls of one's house, it made everyone vulnerable- stripped bare of the veneer of possessions and false appearances that characterize human life. They are exposed publicly as being people of poor character, greedy, self-centered and even malicious towards others.

In the haftorah of the week we read of the four metzoraim - Gehazy and his three sons - who were cursed by Elisha for their greed and for the desecration of God's name when Gehazy pursued Naaman, the Aramean general, and asked for the wealth that Elisha had refused to accept.

Even in the moment of triumph when they discovered the encampment of their enemy to be deserted and abandoned, they could not restrain their impulse of greed and proceeded to loot the camp before reporting their discovery to the king of Israel.

Apparently it is easier to cure tzoraat itself than it is to remove the character flaws that brought about the tzoraat in the first instance.

Since tzoraat was a disease of character traits and flaws, it is natural that the Torah placed the responsibility of diagnosing and curing the disease, not upon doctors or healers, but rather on the kohein - the priest of Israel.

The kohein was to be the spiritual mentor and guide for Jews. The prophet proclaimed: "For the lips of the kohein shall guard knowledge and wisdom and people shall seek to learn Torah from him for he is likened unto an angel of God."

The kohein was the sole healer of these hidden character weaknesses that lay deep within a person's soul and personality. Apparently with the decline of the spiritual strength of the kohanim in Second Temple times, the disease of tzoraat also disappeared.

We have no record of its actual appearance in Second Temple times, though the rules of purification

enumerated in this week's parsha were continued to be studied and appear as a separate mesechet in the Mishna.

The rabbis always spoke of tzoraat as something that required study and analysis - drosh (to search and analyze.) If one actually did that and underwent the searing self-analysis that is required to uproot the possibility of tzoraat in one's person then in the words of the rabbis "vkabel sachar - one will be rewarded and receive payment."

That lesson remains valid for all times and under all circumstances. We no longer have any kohein capable of discerning tzoraat nor do we actually have tzoraat itself in our midst. But, the root causes of tzoraat still exist abundantly within us and our society.

Before the coming of the great Pesach holiday let us attempt to purify ourselves from those negative causes and traits.

Shabat shalom.

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