

THE PREIST'S SUPREME TASK: DIAGNOSING SPIRITUALLY DAMAGED SOULS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah's concept of cleanliness and uncleanness, of purity and defilement, differs greatly from our ordinarily accepted notions and definitions. We appreciate the necessity for physical cleanliness. So does the Torah. Having a clean body is one of the prerequisites for acceptable prayer and performance of any of the mitzvot. It is also part of our requirement to honor our bodies and to show respect and consideration for other human beings as well.

But that is not the thrust of the cleanliness and purity that the Torah indicates in this week's parsha. The Torah speaks of a type of uncleanness of spirit and soul that somehow manifests itself physically. This type of spiritual uncleanness stems from human behavior that violates Torah principles and values - especially evil speech.

This type of behavior sullies our souls. In Biblical times the physical effects of such behavior could literally be seen on one's body. Painful and ignominious as the skin eruption was, it had a positive result of warning one as to the consequences of one's negative behavior and speech.

In our time this physical manifestation and warning is no longer present. But the dreadful process of damaging our souls by such behavior and speech continues to apply even today. We say in our prayers daily that the Lord granted us at the beginning of our lives a soul that was pure. When we return it to our Maker we should try to return it as close to its original state as possible. That is in effect what the entire parsha of Tazria is about.

The task entrusted to the kohein was to somehow assess the damage, if any, done to the soul. He had the expertise to be able to do so simply by examining the physical body of the person. It was one of the gifts of the kohein. He possessed such an ability to discern spiritual damage from viewing external symptoms. Apparently a holy person is able to do so.

Legend has it that the famed ARI (Rabbi Isaac Luria of sixteenth century Safed) was able to tell a person what one's sins and spiritual defects were simply by looking at the person's face. Legend also tells us that, because of this power, people rarely visited or conversed with him. We are reticent to know the real truth about ourselves and the state of our souls.

In Biblical times the Lord, so to speak, forced us by physical symptoms to come to the kohein and confront our true spiritual state. This was a blessing, albeit in disguise, for it allowed for the necessary diagnosis that could eventually lead to spiritual repair, improvement and advancement. This is the supreme task of the kohein in helping others achieve their betterment. It was therefore a spiritual experience of advancement for the kohein as well. Helping others always helps to cleanse one's soul and advance one's spirit.

Shabat shalom,
Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com