

TZORAAS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

We, in our current milieu and society, find it difficult to intimately relate to the facts, descriptions and rituals outlined for us in the subject matter of the parshiyot of this week. The laws and rituals of negaaim are addressed to those of past generations that were on a far different spiritual level than ours. Even the Talmud Bavli did not assign any specific volumes in its vast compendium of Torah to explain and elucidate the sections of Mishnah that do deal with these issues.

We are left with the necessity to study and attempt to understand the written word, and to receive merit for so doing even though the issues involved have no particular practical impact on our daily lives and behavior.

The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud associated the plague of tzoraas with the speaking of slander and with evil speech generally, though we do not really know the nature of tzoraas itself. It certainly was not leprosy in our current medical understanding of that disease. So this week's parshiyot remain obscure and mysterious to us in the extreme. However this does not mean that we are to ignore or downplay their appearance in the Torah.

The Torah does not contain extraneous or unimportant material. The word of God is not to be trifled with and all of the great rabbinic Torah commentators throughout the ages have grappled with deriving meaning and moral lessons from the words of these Torah parshiyot.

Part of the ritual of purification of the metzora was his isolation and quarantine - as he was sent out of the camp of Israel completely. The Netziv - Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin - in his classic commentary to Torah, associates the metzora with the Torah scholar who is found morally wanting in his behavior, speech and attitudes towards fellow human beings.

He implies that only where holiness exists - through the study and knowledge of Torah - can the physical symptoms of impurity and spiritual degradation be felt. The Torah scholar is therefore guilty of desecrating God's name by his untoward behavior and speech and thus his punishment is measure for measure - he himself is to be excluded from the camp of Israel.

The "ordinary" Jew, so to speak, does not feel the symptoms of tzoraas for he is not as exposed to the great holiness of Torah as is the eminent Torah scholar. The implicit warning here is the danger that faces a Torah scholar who does not rise to the level of truly moral behavior. I imagine that we can all be comforted somewhat in the fact that the plague of tzoraas is not quite relevant to us currently, as we are far removed from spiritual greatness and the levels of Torah scholarship

achieved by our forbearers.

However, even we ordinary Jews are bidden not to fall into the trap of desecrating God's name by our speech patterns and behavior. And that is probably the most cogent and important lesson that we can derive from the parshiyot that we will read this week.

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