

LEARNING A LESSON FROM G-D THROUGH PUNISHMENT

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Rabbi Frand on Parshas Tazria - Metzorah

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 142, Eyeglasses in Halacha. Good Shabbos!

Learning A Lesson From G-d Through Punishment

A verse in our parsha says, "When you come to the Land of Canaan that I am giving you as an inheritance, and I will place a Tzaraas blemish on a house in the land of your inheritance..." [Vayikra 14:34]. Sometimes a person gets Tzaraas on his very own dwelling.

There is a very famous comment by Rash"i on this verse, where he states in the name of the Medrash that the Torah is giving the Jewish people good news. What is the good news? The Emorites used to hide large amounts of gold, treasures of gold, in the walls of their houses. Blemishes would come on the houses, requiring the Jews to break down the walls, and as a result they would find the treasures. They would thereby come to easy wealth.

There is a very strange aspect of this Medrash: Tzaraas comes for speaking Lashon Horah [gossip]. How can Tzaraas, which is a punishment, have such a 'rewarding' outcome? It doesn't make sense!

Rav Bergman in his work Shaarei Orah interprets this Medrash, and provides us with a very fundamental insight. The Ramba"m writes at the end of Hilchos Tzaraas [16:10] "a sign and wondrous matter occurred in Israel to warn them against Lashon Horah, for one who spoke Lashon Horah had the walls of his house change in appearance; ... if he persists ... the leather utensils in his house change... if he persists further his clothing changes ... if he still persists his own skin changes..."

What we see is that there is a progression of Tzaraas: first there was the type which affected the

house, which was the initial warning, (the yellow light). If one didn't stop, it got a little closer -- it affected the clothes he wore on his body (the red light). If he still didn't stop speaking Lashon Horah, then the panic strobe light went off -- it affected his own body, necessitating the whole process of being sent outside the camp, being "excommunicated" as it were, etc., etc.

Rav Bergman contrasts the Tochacha, the rebuke of the Jewish people, in Parshas Bechukotai (in Vayikra, Leviticus) -- which ends with consolation -- with the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Tavo (in Devarim, Deuteronomy), which although longer and more graphic, ends without any words of consolation. He explains that the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Tavo does not need a consolation; but the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukotai does.

Why are they different? They are different because in Parshas Ki Tavo, G-d speaks in the first person ("I will punish you..."). It is clear that the punishment is coming directly from the Hand of G-d. However, the most prominent theme of the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukotai is the absence of Divine Providence ("And you walked with me in a manner of 'keri'; so too I will deal with you in a wrath of 'keri'" [Vayikra 26:27-28]), which means that the punishment was that G-d told them "You are on your own".

To offer an example: there is one thing worse than being punished by one's father, and that is not having a father to administer punishment, or not having a father who cares enough about the child to punish him. When one has a father that worries and cares about a son enough to punish him when he is bad -- that itself is a consolation. Implicit in the punishment is a tremendous blessing -- there is somebody out there!

Heaven forbid when one doesn't have a father -- or even worse -- when the father doesn't care to punish, but tells the child "you're on your own -- do whatever you want -- I don't care!" That is worse.

This is the distinction, Rav Bergman says, between Parshas Bechukotai and Parshas Ki Tavo. In the former G-d chastises Israel for attributing everything to chance, and says "I will show you what it is like to be without a G-d that is concerned." That is such a terrible punishment that the Tochacha needs to conclude with a consolation.

But the rebuke of Ki Tavo, which is given in the language of "G-d will smite you...", as bad as that is -- it is at least apparent that it is He who personally is handing out the punishment. This has its own implicit consolation.

What emerges is the following: when a person is aware that the purpose of a punishment is instructive -- it is not really a punishment. If I realize, if I am aware that I am doing something bad and G-d says "Stop", and the way he says it is by punishing me -- then it is no longer really a punishment. It is reassuring. I know that I have a Father who cares about me.

When one speaks Lashon Horah and it affects the walls of his house, that is not a full punishment so much as a message of concern. Therefore if a person reacts to this message from G-d, all is as it

should be. No real punishment has transpired here. In fact reward is in order.

Everyone sins occasionally. Everyone has temporary lapses. If G-d sends an initial message and that suffices to correct one's lapses, then that is exactly what is supposed to be. Not only that, but the person is deserving of reward for listening to G-d.

With this, Rav Bergman explains the Gemara in Sota [9b] "Samson went after his eyes, therefore the Philistines put out his eyes". The Sages record that Samson prayed to G-d "In exchange for one of my eyes I want to have the strength to bring the building down upon the Philistines, and in exchange for my other eye, I want to receive Olam HaBah, the World to Come".

We can ask the same question which we asked concerning Tzaraas: Samson had sinned with his eyes, which is why he was punished. So why is he now asking for reward, based upon the loss of his eyes?

The answer is once again that there is a kind of punishment, which if it is accepted and causes the person to react and learn a lesson from G-d, is considered something positive. By reacting the way he was supposed to react, Samson was able to turn the punishment into a vehicle of reward.

The problem occurs when things happen to people and they do not react.

We now can understand the Medrash in our Parsha. When a person speaks Lashon Horah, the first sign from G-d is "Look at the wall". If a person reacts at that point, realizes that he has spoken Lashon Horah, and decides to repent and take corrective action, if he goes to the Kohen at that point, shows him the wall of his house, and follows the prescribed ritual, then he is deserving of reward -- a treasure in his house. Reacting at the initial stage of suffering is a mitzvah which should be rewarded.

But what happens if the person doesn't react and doesn't take the suffering as an instructive lesson from G-d? Then things get worse and worse. It affects one's clothes. And if he still doesn't react, it affects his own body. By then, it is strictly a punishment.

This can be inferred from the language of the Torah, if we look closely. Concerning a blemish which strikes a house, the language of the Torah is that "He [the owner of the house] will come and declare to the Kohen" -- voluntarily [Vayikra 14:35]; but concerning a blemish on the skin the language is "and he is brought to the Kohen" -- against his will [13:9; 14:1].

Happy is the person who has the foresight and the insight, the perception and the honesty, to react in the correct fashion when something like this happens.

Jealousy, Lust, and Honor Take a Person Out of *this* World

In this week's Haftorah we have the well-known story of Na-aman and Elisha. Na-aman was a Gentile king who was stricken with leprosy. He tried all types of doctors and all types of medicine

and nothing helped. Finally, he heard about the "man of G-d" who lived in Israel, and he personally came to seek out Elisha and hear what he would tell him.

He came with his entire entourage and stood outside the door of Elisha's tent. He thought that Elisha would be overwhelmed by the presence of a king, and would come out personally to greet him and bow down before him. Elisha, however, did not budge. He sent out a messenger to tell Na-aman that which he should do -- bathe in the Jordan River seven times.

Na-aman took this as an affront, and in a huff and a puff he was about to leave, asking "aren't the rivers of Damascus superior to the waters of the Jordan?" Finally his servants managed to calm him down and convince him that he had nothing to lose by trying this "cure".

He did follow Elisha's instructions. He was cured and returned to Elisha on his hands and his knees, asking for forgiveness, proclaiming "The L-rd is G-d". [Melachim II 5:1-19]

We can raise the following question: What was Na-aman's problem in the first place? He was the one with the problem. He was the one seeking the cure from Elisha, not the other way around. So why was he prepared to stand on his honor, and take issue with the fact that Elisha didn't show him the proper protocol? Let him swallow his pride and go for the cure! His own servants saw the lunacy of this attitude, but he could not see it!

We see from here a point that should always be kept in mind: "Jealousy, lust, and honor drive a person from the world" [Avot 4:21]. Rav Leib Chassman says that the term "from the world" does not just mean Olam HaBah, the World-to-Come. It includes that, because if one lets his Jealousy, lust, and honor-seeking take hold of himself, he will lose Olam HaBah -- but it means this world as well. A person can become so crazy, so blinded, and so obsessed that he gives up this world. One can willingly give up his health for his honor.

So powerful is the attraction of honor that it makes a person irrational. Any normal person would know, if he had leprosy, to do whatever a doctor ordered to find a cure. But one who is wrapped up in kavod, in his own honor, loses his perspective and gives up his life.

That is why a person must learn Torah, because it saves a person from sin. That is why a person must have a teacher, dedicated friends, and a proper environment, so that when he does things that everybody else knows is crazy, at least he will have people who can attempt to guide him back to the proper path. But that is the last resort. The first line of defense is Torah study. May G-d save us from such craziness!

Glossary

Tzaraas / Nega(im) -- spiritual plague(s) causing various types of discoloration of skin, clothing, or house walls; associated with various sins of speech

Lashon HaRa -- evil tongue; slander

Tochacha -- Rebuke

Keri -- for the Hebrew root 'karah' meaning 'happen', indicating chance occurrence (as opposed to Divine Providence)

Olam HaBa -- (a portion in) the World to Come

kavod -- honor (seeking)

Talmid Chochom / Lamdan -- a scholar who knew how to learn (Torah)

frum -- religious (Yiddish)

Yetzer HaRa -- Evil Inclination

Sources and Personalities

Rash"i--(1040-1105) R. Shlomo ben Yitzchak; Troyes and Worms, France.

Rav Bergman -- Contemporary, Bnei Brak, Israel.

Ramba"m -- (1135-1204) R. Moshe ben Maimon; Spain, Egypt.

Rav Leib Chassman -- (1869-1935) Mashgiach, Yeshivas Chevron, Israel.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#142). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: Eyeglasses in Halacha. The other halachic portions for Tazria - Metzora from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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