

THE 'EYES' HAVE IT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Tazria-Metzora

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 335, The Microscope in Halacha. Good Shabbos!

The 'Eyes' Have It When It Comes To Tzaraas of Clothing

At the end of Parshas Tazria, when the Torah states the laws of the Tzaraas affliction affecting clothing, the pasuk [verse] says, "the Kohen shall look, after the affliction has been washed, and behold (if) the affliction has not changed its appearance (lo hafach es eino) and the affliction has not spread, it is contaminated, you shall burn it in fire..." [Vayikra 13:55].

Although the literal and straightforward interpretation of the expression "lo hafach es eino" means that the appearance of the affliction has not changed, the Chidushei HaRim (R. Yitzchak Meir of Ger [1799-1866]) cites a beautiful insight based on a Gemara [Eruchin 16a]. The Talmud mentions that Tzaraas is a punishment for certain specific sins. The most commonly known sin in this category is that of tale bearing (lashon haRa). However, the Talmud teaches that Tzaraas is also a punishment for "tzorus ha-ayin" [narrowness of the eye]. This term does not merely refer to stinginess and being tight-fisted. A person is described as "narrow of eye" if he never sees the positive. It is the opposite of generosity of spirit. It connotes someone who always sees evil. It is a stinginess that extends beyond one's money to the way in which one views life in general.

If tzaraas is a punishment for "tzorus ha-ayin", it would follow that the remedy which would cause the tzaraas to go away is repenting and changing from a 'narrow eyed' (tzar ayin) person to a 'good eyed' (tov ayin) person. In other words, change from being a disciple of Bilaam the wicked, who was a 'narrow eyed' person, to being a disciple of Avraham who was a generous person, possessing a 'good eye' [Avot 5:19].

If the tzaraas does not improve... If it stays the same size then the garment has no remedy. The garment remains impure and ultimately it must be burnt.

The Chidushei HaRim says that the expression "lo hafach es eino" has a double meaning. Certainly, on a simple level, the meaning of the phrase is that it did not change its appearance. But, the phrase also connotes the fact that the affliction did not change the 'eye' of the owner of the garment. In order to repent and to have his garment's affliction remedied, his 'eye' must change - from being stingy of spirit to being generous of spirit.

In addition, the Chidushei HaRim says that the word "Nega" [affliction], which appears in this pasuk can actually be considered a rearrangement of the letters of the word "Oneg" [pleasure]. The difference between the word "Nega" and the word "Oneg" is just a matter of where the (letter) "ayin" is placed. (The letter "ayin" also connotes 'eye'!) In these two words, the letters 'Nun' and 'Gimmel' are stationary. The only difference between the words is whether the 'ayin' is at the beginning or at the end. This alludes back to our theme that the difference between having an affliction and having pleasure is completely dependent on the placement of the 'eye'. If a person has a 'good eye', with the proper approach and the proper perspective on life - he will have 'Oneg'. Otherwise he will be stuck with 'Nega'.

If a person finds himself incapable of changing his perspective, he will wind up being forced to burn his clothes. "If the affliction has not changed its appearance (lo hafach es eino)... you shall burn it in fire..."

The Peddler's Lesson: Listen To Your Messages

There is a famous Medrash that tells of a peddler who came into a city and inquired "Who wants longevity? Who wants longevity?" Rav Yannai inquired of the peddler what he was selling. The peddler directed Rav Yannai to the pasuk in Tehillim: "Who is the man who desires life...? Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit" [Tehillim 34:13-14]. Rav Yannai commented that he never understood the interpretation of this pasuk until this peddler taught him about it.

All the commentaries are bothered by an obvious question on this Medrash: how is it that Rav Yannai never understood the interpretation of a straightforward pair of pasukim [verses] in Tehillim, until a peddler explained it to him? It would seem that there is nothing subtle to understand here! What did the peddler see that Rav Yannai did not see?

The Shemen HaTov explains that certainly Rav Yannai understood that a person who desires life needs to guard his tongue. But Rav Yannai had understood that the only way to guard one's tongue from evil is to become a hermit. Rav Yannai thought that cleanliness of speech required being somewhat anti- social. Rav Yannai believed that mixing with society, having friends and engaging in conversation was a sure formula for NOT being able to live up to the standards of "Who is the man who desires life".

Rav Yannai was shocked that the PEDDLER was "selling" this verse. Peddlers are known for their 'gift of gab'. They travel from city to city and from house to house and have plenty to tell and plenty to share and plenty to say. In classic Hebrew literature, the peddler was always portrayed as a gossip. The very name of the profession (Rochel) is related to the word for tale-bearing (Rechilus).

Rav Yannai's revelation was not so much the interpretation of the pasuk but the teacher of the lesson: "If the peddler can tell me that a person such as he can be careful about Lashon HaRa (gossip), then my approach must change. I now realize that a person can intermix with society, talk, be sociable and still be careful not to speak Lashon HaRa."

Rabbi Layzer Levine, the father-in-law of Rabbi Berel Wein, grew up in the house of the Chofetz Chaim, Rabbi Yisrael Mayer Kagan. [Rabbi Kagan was the author of numerous works of Halacha and ethics, but is known by the name of his largest work on the laws of gossip, "Chofetz Chaim" ("desires life", from the passage in Psalms quoted above).] It is well-known that the Chofetz Chaim was himself the paradigm of someone who was careful not to speak Lashon HaRa. Therefore, we imagine that he was a person of very few words, who rarely spoke to those around him.

Rabbi Wein heard from his father-in-law that the opposite was true. The Chofetz Chaim was constantly talking! He was constantly engaged in conversation with people. And nonetheless, he was careful about Lashon HaRa.

That is what Rav Yannai learned from the peddler.

In addition, there is another lesson here. Many times in life we are bombarded with messages. Some of these messages are very important. Some of these messages may come from the most unlikely of sources. Even the lowly peddler can deliver a powerful message to the great Rav Yannai. However, we must listen for such messages. Someone like Rav Yannai, who is constantly open to messages, will constantly learn and constantly grow.

"From all my teachers I have become wise" [Tehillim 119:99]. A person must have the ability to learn from every teacher and from every situation. The messages are out there. Our job is to remain awake enough to receive them.

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