

LEARNING A LESSON FROM G-D THROUGH PUNISHMENT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Metzorah

Learning A Lesson From G-d Through Punishment

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!

The pasuk [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 house!

There is a very famous comment by Rash"i on this pasuk, where Rash"i states -- in the name of the Medrash -- that the Torah is giving the Jewish people good news. What is the good news? The Emorites hid 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 come into easy wealth.

There is a very strange aspect of this Medrash: Tzaraas is a punishment for speaking Lashon Horah [gossip]. How can Tzaraas, which is a punishment, have such a 'rewarding' outcome? It does not 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..."

We see 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 did not stop, it got a little closer -- it affected the clothes he wore on his body (the red light). If he still did not 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 Bechukosai (in Vayikra, Leviticus) -- which ends with consolation -- with the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo (in Devarim, Deuteronomy), which, although longer and more graphic, ends without any words of consolation. Rav Bergman explains that the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Savo does not need a consolation; but the Tochacha in Parshas Bechukosai does.

Why are they different? They are different because in Parshas Ki Savo, 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 Bechukosai 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 does not have a father -- or even worse -- when the father does not care to punish, but tells the child "you're on your own -- do whatever you want -- I do not care!" That is worse.

This is the distinction, Rav Bergman says, between Parshas Bechukosai and Parshas Ki Savo. 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 Savo, which is given in the language of "G-d will smite you...", as bad as that is -- at least makes it apparent that it is He who is personally handing out the punishment. This is 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, it 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 does not react, it affects his own body. By then, it is strictly a punishment.

If we look closely, this can be inferred from the language of the Torah. 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.

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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