

IGNORAMUS KOHEN: FOOL OR AM HAARETZ?

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Parshas Tazria

Ignoramus Kohen: Fool or Am Ha'Aretz?

While Parshas Tazria begins with the laws of childbirth, the 13th perek [chapter] transitions to the laws of Tzaraas (in its various forms) that is the primary topic of both Parshas Tazria and Parshas Metzora.

All decisions regarding the status of Tzaraas must be pronounced by the Kohen. The Rambam [Tumas Tzaraas 9:2] writes: "Even though everyone is eligible to inspect (leprous) blemishes, the status of rendering someone Tameh [impure] or Tahor [pure] is dependent upon the (pronouncement of the) Kohen." The Rambam then describes a hypothetical case in which a Kohen was ignorant of the technical laws of Tzaraas. A Torah scholar who is proficient in the laws of purity and impurity serves as the Kohen's consultant. The "consultant" inspects the blemish and then directs the Kohen to pronounce it as Tameh (or Tahor).

Rav Ruderman, zt"l, once explained this idea as follows. A person contracts Tzaraas for speaking Lashon Harah [slander; gossip]. A person engages in Lashon Harah because he does not think his words have any effect at all. We therefore set up a ritual designed to impress him with the power of mere words. We may encounter a Kohen who does not understand the laws of Tzaraas. He really does not know what he is talking about; but the mere fact that he pronounces the words "Tahor" or "Tameh" will have a profound impact on the life of this gossip and slanderer.

Regarding the source of the absolute power given to the Kohen in determining the status of a potential Metzora, the Rambam cites the pasuk [verse] "Upon their utterance shall hinge every quarrel and every blemish." [Devorim 21:5]. The Rambam further states (based on a Toras Kohanim) that even if the Kohen is under Bar Mitzvah (a katan) or is mentally incompetent (a shoteh), the Talmid Chochom consultant can tell such a Kohen what to say and his pronouncement will have binding halachic effect.

The Kesef Mishneh commenting on this Rambam says that when the Toras Kohanim uses the word shoteh in this context it is not referring to the classic shoteh [mentally incompetent] individual which we find in all other areas of Talmudic law. The Kesef Mishneh argues that here we must be speaking

of an individual who is competent; it is just that relative to the Talmid Chochom's level of expertise in the laws of Tzaraas, he is by comparison "like a shoteh".

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin notes that according to this Kesef Mishneh, the proper terminology that should have been used by the Toras Kohanim and by the Rambam should be "Am haAretz" [ignoramus]. Shoteh typically means an idiot or an imbecile. However, Rav Sorotzkin explains, there is a special reason that this ignoramus Kohen is called a shoteh.

Normally, if a person who is not a scholar (the classic "am ha'aretz") is asked why he is not a scholar, he will respond that he never had the opportunity to learn. He will argue that he needed to make a living and the time constraints and pressures of earning a livelihood precluded his chance to devote himself to Torah study. However, this Kohen who remained unlettered will not have such an excuse. In the classic Jewish society, a Kohen's livelihood was taken care of by the community. He lived off of the priestly gifts. A Kohen's financial needs were taken care of. So why would there be such a phenomenon as an ignorant Kohen? What is his excuse? After all, there were only 2 weeks out of a year when a Kohen was called to service in the Temple!

"What did you do the other 50 weeks of the year, Mr. Kohen? What do you mean you never learned the laws of Tumah and Tahara? It must be because you had the opportunity to learn and did not take advantage of that opportunity!" Such a person is a fool! For this reason, he is not referred to as a Kohen, Am Ha'Aretz. He is instead referred to as a Kohen Shoteh!

Head To Toe Metzora Is Tahor: Why?

Later in the parsha, we learn of an interesting case. A person presents himself to a Kohen with a nega consisting of a white patch of skin. The Kohen is unsure of the status of the nega and puts the person in isolation. When the person returns a week later, the Torah describes the following scenario: "The Kohen shall look, and behold! The affliction has covered his entire flesh, then he shall declare the affliction to be pure; having turned completely white, it is pure." [Vayikra 13:13].

In other words, the small nega metastasized and spread throughout the body. There remains not a single spot on his entire body that is not now covered by tzaraas. The law is that the Kohen shall declare him to be pure! This is one of the paradoxes of halacha. On the face of it, it does not make any sense. When he had a little spot, he was in trouble. Now that the spot has grown and covered everywhere on his body, he is off the hook!

The Chasam Sofer in Toras Moshe discusses this paradox from a mussar perspective.

A Metzora basically suffers from a physical disease. Normally, Jewish law requires other Jews, in fulfillment of the mitzvah of Bikur Cholim, to visit such a person. Here, not only do we not advise other Jews to visit him, the Metzora is banished from our society. "Isolated he shall sit, outside the

camp" [Vayikra 13:46]. This flies in the face of everything the Torah is about! Why is that?

The answer is that the Metzora has demonstrated behavior that he is a danger to society. He is a Baal Lashon HaRah [Islanderer, gossip]. He causes strife among members of society and separation between people. Therefore, the Torah requires us to separate ourselves from him so that we do not learn from his practices.

The worst type of person is a person who is two-faced. We need to especially watch out for a person who acts one way outwardly but in the confines of his home or his heart, he is a different type of person. Such people give the appearance of one thing, but they are really something else. In contrast, when we clearly know that a person is bad, he is really not that dangerous. The wickedness is out in the open and people know to stay away and not be influenced.

The Chasam Sofer uses this idea to explain the paradox mentioned earlier. When a person has a slight nega, he gives the appearance of being good, so the Torah has smitten him with this disease to warn us of his true nature and to warn us to stay away from him. On the other hand, when a person is blemished from head to toe, he is totally wicked, and we will not make any mistake about such a person. Therefore, paradoxically, such a person does not require such an intense punishment. The Torah does not require us to isolate him from the rest of society.