

PARSHAS METZORAH - THE HIGH PRICE OF OIL

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The High Price of Oil 1.

If everything has an allusion in the Torah, the place you would look for classic Jewish guilt would be the offerings of the cured metzora. Keep looking. The message to the metzora on the rebound is one of unvarnished optimism.

Very rarely does the Torah combine the three very different messages of olah, chatas, and asham. Most of the time, a person stands before Hashem in the mikdosh with one of those themes in mind. In several situations, the Torah calls upon two different motifs, demanding that each should be given its due in a person's thoughts. For example, a woman after childbirth brings an olah and a chatas. Ready to bear the responsibility of motherhood, having spent mandatory periods of both tumah and taharah after delivery, these korbanos instruct her to train her sights on elevation (olah), as well as exercising caution in resisting what could compromise that elevation and reduce her spiritual stature (chatas).²

Only one other place does the Torah ask for all three kinds of offering. The nazir, whose attempt at elevation has gone awry (and has become tameh in contradiction to his vows) also brings all three. He, however, does so in a more muted manner: the olah and chatas requirements are satisfied by bringing birds. The recovering metzora does not get off that easily. He is required to bring animals, which make a more powerful visual statement. He also has little choice about which animals to bring. All three are lambs.

The lamb is the flock animal, whose life revolves around the care provided by an overseeing shepherd. The starting point in the new world of the metzora is recognizing the root of his social sins. Somewhere inside of him, he believed that he could go it alone, that he was dependent on neither Man nor G-d, but enjoyed enough self-sufficiency to assert his own independence. He needs to absorb the lesson that to reenter the community as a societal partner with all of its members, he must drop his ego a few notches, learn to be a follower, at least in part, and entrust his future to his Shepherd, rather than his own talents and devices.

Before his tzora'as, it likely never occurred to him that his behavior and attitudes were more than mildly dysfunctional. As part of his reeducation, we emphasize to him that his failings are complex and variegated. Addressing them requires all the help he can get. He therefore must direct his heart to the lessons that come with chatas, asham and olah.

Surprisingly, even his chatas and his asham require a minchas nesachim of flour, oil and wine. These symbolize his material sustenance, his well-being, and the joy he finds in them. They never accompany a chatas or asham, but here they are required. Focused as he is on the requirements of social living, he must bear in mind that he has not been chastised for merely failing in small part of his civic duty, as if such duty were just another irritation in his busy life. Instead, he is told that all his future happiness and well-being depend on his living as a loyal, dutiful citizen within the community of Jews.

One more anomaly requires explanation. The metzora brings a measure of oil, apart from the oil that is mixed into his mincha/ flour-offering. We might think of this separate quantity of oil as functioning simply for the purpose of anointing the ear, thumb and toe of the metzora, as specified later on.³ Halacha, however, does not support this. The oil left over after the anointing is treated in much the same way as the residual oil of a mincha. Once the proper portions of the mincha have been directed towards the mizbe'ach, the kohanim eat the remaining oil in the courtyard of the mikdash. This would indicate independent significance of the oil, apart from its function in anointing the metzora. Several usages of the root ShMN in connection with the human body all suggest that it is used as an expression of fullness and robust health.⁴ The metzora has just rebounded from a sin-induced disease. The implication ought to be clear to him. He can prevent a relapse by avoiding the antisocial behavior that led to his malady. But we hold out for him to consider that by getting his internal house in order, he will do much more than avoid negative consequences. Within the healthier spiritual lifestyle we predict that he will find a more comfortable, enriched existence.

We often have to remind ourselves that privilege begets responsibility. When we fail to properly utilize the tools He gives us, He does not just take them away, leaving us in a neutral position. We travel from comfort to discomfort, not a midpoint. Here, the Torah holds the hand of the metzora and travels the same road in reverse. From the depressive nadir of his isolation, the Torah does not lead him back to the doorstep of his community, but to a hill from which he can see only beautiful vistas ahead.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 14:10 2. See the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 12:6 3. Vayikra 14:14 4. See, for example, Yeshaya 17:4 and Tehilim 109:24