

TAZRIA (LEVITICUS 12:1-13:58)

A Taste of His Own Medicine

2011 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

PARSHAS HACHODESH

This Shabbos will be a very busy one in the synagogues of the world. As is done every regular Saturday, we will read the weekly Torah Portion. Then we will continue preparing ourselves for Passover by opening a second Torah scroll and reading the Torah Portion that announces the advent of the Month of Nissan, the first month of the Jewish year. (See “Nissan Maximum” and “Double Dating”.)

“A Taste of His Own Medicine”

Of the many misunderstood portions of the Torah, this is way up there in the distortion department.

This week's reading deals primarily with the diagnosis and treatment of "*Tzora'as*," leprosy in its various forms. When a person finds a suspicious growth on his skin, he is required to submit to an examination by a Kohain/Priest. Depending upon the results of this priestly analysis, the patient is cleared, isolated until further examination, or quarantined as a leper.

Many have praised the wisdom of the ancient Hebrews in realizing the importance of isolating patients with communicable diseases. The leper was segregated from the Camp of Israel, dressed in a way that clearly identified him as contagious, and would announce "*Unclean! Unclean!*" to anyone who approached. (Leviticus, 13:45) How insightful of the Israelites in the desert to realize that they could prevent an epidemic by keeping people with infectious diseases away from the general population.

Except for one problem. It makes no sense!

A great rabbi was once told about the virtues of a particular doctor. "He's very devout," the rabbi was told. "He gets up at dawn and prays at sunrise every day. He studies Talmud every day and maintains the strictest level of Kashrus in his home."

"That's all very nice," said the rabbi. "But tell me, is he a good doctor?"

Why would a person who suspects he has leprosy call a *Kohain* instead of a doctor? Also, who ever heard of a garment developing a leprous growth, or even a house, as described in next week's Torah Portion?

Obviously, if we want to understand the leprosy described in the Torah, we need to look beyond the medical books. "*Tzora'as*" is actually a spiritual disease, not a physical one. It is a message from Heaven that we need to improve ourselves. That is why we call the Kohain. A doctor can tell us about nutrition and hygiene, but a Kohain's job is to teach us how to get closer to G-d.

So why the quarantine? If *Tzora'as* is a spiritual malady, a tap on the shoulder from G-d, why does that have to do with anyone else? If G-d is sending a message to a "sinner," why would that affect anyone else?

The Talmud tells us that the disease of *Tzora'as* is a punishment for *Loshon Hora*, gossip. When Miriam spoke against her brother Moses, she was struck with "leprosy." When Moses accused the Children of Israel of not having sufficient faith in G-d, G-d punished him by making his hand leprous. *Tzora'as* is a message from G-d that we are sinning with gossip.

And what a powerful message it is! When we gossip, when we shoot verbal arrows at our fellow humans, we are, in effect, putting them into isolation. When we spread rumors about people, we sometimes cause the subject of our chatter to be spurned and ostracized. Once I tell you what a terrible person so-and-so is, you will avoid him and treat him like a pariah.

What better lesson from G-d, what clearer consequence could there be for the gossip, than to find out personally what it feels like to be on the outside looking in? The Torah tells the gossip, "Now YOU will sit outside of the Camp of Israel. People will avoid YOU! Next time you will think twice before you open your mouth to speak against another person."

Words Can Kill!

Israel is currently involved in a struggle that threatens her very survival. And the weapons used against her are not of a military variety; the real weapons are much more insidious. The Palestinians are waging a war of words – and they are winning.

When CNN reports the legitimate return of fire at terrorists trying to murder innocent people as a "renewed breakout of hostilities between Israelis and Palestinians," they tell the world that the two sides in this conflict are of equal guilt. Even worse, many in the media portray Israel as trampling on the "legitimate rights" of the individuals who are out to destroy Israel. And the more the world reads, hears, and sees misreporting of the events in Israel, the more public opinion turns against us – and the harder it becomes to maintain U.S. support for Israel.

Much like the leper of this week's Torah reading, Israel is being ostracized due to harmful words being uttered against her.

Bring Peace to the Middle East

The Torah teaches us that the leper contracts this spiritual disease as a result of sinning with his tongue and making the subject of his gossip into a "virtual leper." G-d repays the sinner "*midah k'negged midah* – measure for measure."

But the concept of "measure for measure" works with reward as well as punishment. When we do a Mitzvah, G-d rewards us in kind. Perhaps it's time for us to fight our own war of words. Every time we feel like saying something negative about someone, let's stop a moment and think...do I really want to speak against my fellow Jew and cause others to look at him with disdain? Would I want someone to do it to me? How do I feel when the media do it to the State of Israel?

Perhaps if we can learn to use restraint in our words about other people, G-d will reward us by protecting our People from the bitter and vile war of words against us.

It may not bring Peace to our Homeland, but it will certainly bring peace to our homes.

Have a great Shabbos.

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