

Parshas Tazria – Rabbi M Taubman (reprint)

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This Sedra deals initially with the טומאה associated with childbirth, only then does it go on to discuss the טומאה of צרעת associated with the discolouration of the skin. At first glance the two cases seem to have nothing to do with each other.

But, if we look at the other laws of טומאה in this Sidra we can reveal an underlying theme. The laws of Niddah and Ziva involve fluids being expelled from the body. This action is not under ones conscious control. The process of childbirth is similar in that it is also not under ones conscious control. It would seem that self-control or lack of it is the connecting factor in all these cases.

The same idea can be applied to Tzora'as. The person with Tzora'as has no conscious control over the changing colour of his skin. No matter how hard he tries and how much will power he exerts, the skin will or won't change colour, on its own accord.

The above idea explains why the Mitzvah of Bris Milah is also included in this week's Sedra. The Mitzvah is intrinsically connected with self-control and is not merely tacked on after mentioning giving birth to a male child.

Circumcision has the effect of giving back ones self-control. This can be shown by the following ideas. Normally, it is forbidden to cut off any Tzora'as found on the body. The exception to this rule is that removal of the foreskin in performing Milah is allowed. This would seem to be because in all other circumstances, removing the Tzora'as does not increase one's own self control mechanism that the Tzora'as hints is in need of strengthening. Only Bris Milah is in itself the symbol of and an aid to regaining self-control.

This is why the Midrash discusses that after eating from the Aitz HaDaas (Tree of knowledge), Adam's foreskin grew back. It symbolises that he now lacked the self-control that he was created with. In contrast, after Avram had performed Bris Milah, he gained the name Avraham with the addition of the letter Heh, symbolising that Avraham was now in control of all 248 limbs of his body. (The numerical value of Avraham is 248.)

As an aside one should note that the severest type of טומאה - contact with a corpse relates to an event over which we have the least control. It is evident that we cannot will ourselves to die. Nor can we will ourselves alive again.

The purpose of many Mitzvot and ideas in the Torah is thus to aid the human being to gain control of our own actions to the greatest degree possible. Any time that we are not in control is considered non-spiritual. As Hashem is in control of himself, not being in control distances ourselves from Hashem.

The lack of self-control is one of the concepts on which the principle of טומאה is based. The root lack of self-control being associated with טומאה can be found in the episode of Adam in Garden of Eden with the Snake. Adam did not have the self-control to withstand the persuasive nature of the snake which tempted Adam (through Eve) to eat from the Aitz Hada'as. The snake thus embodies man's "lack of self control", which, although part of human nature, we must be overcome. This is why, in Midrash terms, the snake is spoken of as having Tzora'as (See Arachin 15b).

If we are not in control of our actions we limit ourselves as human beings and become animal like in nature. Animals have a different type of control over how they act. Animals act on instinct to a greater degree. (Instinct being a lower form of thought.)

In many respects therefore, Parshas Tazria discusses what happens when we lose self-control whilst Parshas Metzora comes to explain how we can achieve self-control.

[This idea also explains the connection between Parshas Shemini and Tazria/Metzorah. After the death of Nadav and Avihu the laws of Kashrus and טומאה are proclaimed. Only then does the Torah continue with the events that took place after the deaths of Nadav and Avihu. The major element of their sin was that they lacked complete self-control. Which in effect is the same as acting without thought. Thus Kashrus attempts to give man back his self-control. The laws of טומאה show that there are certain instances where man is not in control of his environment. This is not a desirable state of affairs and so G-d institutes various purifying processes. Each purifying process matches the טומאה exactly. The purification process gives back to man, that which he desires and needs most, his self-control. It is only once self-control has been re-established can the story continue.]