

Parshas Tazria Metzora – Why the Kohanim? - Dr J H Freilich

שבת פרשת תזריע-מצורע – ר"ח אייר תשפ"ג

Rav Shneur Askenazi, a senior lecturer for Chabad, notes a long-time problem affecting Klal Yisroel, namely that we don't know how to communicate a criticism to another person in a way that the other person will accept it. This can affect one's relationship in a marriage as well as in other scenarios. He quotes R' Eliezer ben Azariah in Eruchin 16b remarking that if one person says to the other 'remove the twig from between your teeth', a euphemism for a small aveirah, he responds with 'remove the beam from off your eyes' i.e you are guilty of a bigger aveirah. We see the need to speak in a pleasant and sensitive manner for the message to be accepted by the recipient.

With this introduction, we can approach the question how has it come about that the Kohanim have been charged (as in Devorim 20,5) with dealing with the affliction of Tsoraas (loosely translated as leprosy)? Tsoraas is a topic which is detailed across the 2 sedras of Tazria and Metzora. There are 14 Perokim of Mishnayis Negoim devoted to it and 16 Perokim in the Rambam. In outline, the affliction can affect a person's body, his clothes and even the walls of his house, in altogether 72 ways (cf M' Negoim 1,4) and the consequences can be far-reaching. In the case of a person's body being affected, it could lead to him being cast out of the community for the duration of the affliction. In the case of a house it may have to be demolished, leading to severe financial loss. We note that Tsoraas is considered by chazal as a spiritual malaise associated with speaking badly about a fellow Jew (cf Eruchin 16b).

What we are endeavouring to comprehend here is why has the Torah made such an intricate subject the responsibility of the Kohen? What knowledge does the Kohen have of these matters or what skills does he come with? Wouldn't a Talmid Chochom, a dermatologist or a medical expert be better equipped to deal with these matters? Yet we find that it has to be a Kohen, even an Am Ha'aretz, that pronounces a person to be Tomei or Tohor albeit taking his cue from a Ben Torah (cf Rambam Tumas Tsoraas 9,2). Not even Moishe Rabbenu can take on the lead role. This is evident in the case of Miriam who was punished with Tsoraas on account of criticising Moishe Rabbenu for not resuming married life. (This was notwithstanding her role as arch mid-wife of Klal Yisroel in Mitzraim.) The question was who could ratify her status as Tomei or Tohor. The Gemara in Zevochim 102a disqualifies Moishe Rabbenu as a non-Kohen and the issue was resolved by HKBH performing the task.

Rav Ashkenazi proposes the following explanation. We know that Aharon had the middoh of Ahava (cf Pirkei Ovos 1,12). This goes back to the time when Hashem revealed Himself to Moishe at the burning bush. Moishe was reluctant to take on the leadership of Klal Yisroel. He felt it more appropriate that Aharon, his senior, should have that role so that there shouldn't be fraternal envy, which had sadly occurred in previous generations. Hashem responded that "I knew.. he will see you and rejoice in his heart. (Shemos 4, 14)" Aharon will be happy for you to be the leader even if it means he is only second in command. That is because intrinsically he was Ohev Habrios. That is why in Birchos Kohanim, the Brochah they recite mentions B'Ahava (see Sotah 39a Maharatz Chius). At a time when a person is struck with Tzoraas, he needs someone with empathy to present the distressing news to him with sensitivity. For this reason, the Kohanim, who have this middoh in their DNA, were chosen for this role. Similarly, if one wants to be mekarev people, first show that you care for them before asking anything of them. This is how Hashem was mekarev the Bnei Yisroel when He brought them out of Mitzraim.

In cherished memory of my mother Mrs Cissie Freilich o"h whose Yahrzeit was on 27th of Nissan & my wife's mother Mrs Regina Preizler o"h whose Yahrzeit is on 3rd of Iyar