

Tazria/Metzora – Laurence Ross (*reprinted*)

ג' אייר תשע"ז – 29th April 2017 – שבת פרשת תזריע-מצורע

והובא אל-אהרן הכהן או אל-אחד מבניו הכהנים

“He shall be brought to Aaron the Kohen or to one of his sons the Kohanim. The Kohen shall look at the affliction on the skin of his flesh...” (Vayikra 13:2/3)

In the combined Sedras of Tazria and Metzora, we see a gradual sequence of ritual impurity, starting with childbirth, and progressing to disease in the flesh, then in garments, culminating in disease in the walls of the home and the inevitable desolation of man’s life and the destruction of his property. The disease that is mentioned is called tzoraas, [צרתת] often translated, or mistranslated, as leprosy.

The basic source text of the huge number of commentaries on the cause of tzoraas is Gemorah Arachin 16a, where R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonasan: ‘Tzoraas afflictions come upon a person for seven [sinful] things: for harmful talk [lashon hora], for murder, for vain oaths, for illicit relations, for arrogance, for theft, and for stinginess [צרות העין]. The Gemorah continues by citing Scriptural sources for each of the seven items, eg ‘He who slanders his neighbour in secret – him will I cut down (atzmis/אצמית [Psalms 101:5]. The Gemorah in 15b had already demonstrated that this word atzmis connotes a punishment of tzoraas afflictions.

That daf noted above, 15b, quotes R. Yochanan in the name of R. Yose ben Zimra: ‘Whoever speaks loshon hara is regarded as though he has denied the fundamental principle!! [כאילו כפר בעיקר] [לו' kofer b'ikkur].

As the Torah is not a story book, but a Book of practical Divine Guidance, we should take this to heart every day and most appropriately, every year that we come across these combined Sedras. Further, as noted by R. Zalman Sorotzkin in his Ozneyim LaTorah in Parshas Tazria, tzoraas is not a physical illness requiring the attention of an ordinary doctor. Rather it is a disease of the soul. He points out the same Gemorah in Arachin 16a and notes the obvious, that tzoraas is caused by some of the gravest transgressions in the Torah.

He points out that the afflicted person needs to have his spirit healed by someone who can guide him to the way of Hashem. The Torah entrusted this mission to the Kohanim. If possible, the person should be seen by “Aaron” himself, the most outstanding healer of souls. But if he is not available, he should be seen by “one of his sons the Kohanim”.

It is instructive to note the Ramban on Vayikra 13:47 where he points out that tzoraas on a garment or on houses is not found in nature and does not occur in the world altogether! Tzoraas of a person is a physical illness albeit a physical manifestation of a spiritual malady. But a garment cannot develop a disease. However, when an incident of sin or iniquity occurs with one individual, there will appear a discoloration on his flesh or his garment or his home. This indicates that the spirit of G-d has departed from him.

Another oft-quoted source is the Sefer Hachinuch on Mitzvah 170 - ואת-הנתק לא יגלח - ‘But he shall not shave the nesek’ [Vayikra 13:33]. This discusses the prohibition of cutting off the developing tzoraas. This might seem to be a practical approach, to cut away the offending marks and hairs, so that such embarrassing signs are not visible to people. The Sefer gives its reason for the prohibition: not to try and hide it away; to reflect on his condition and the causes; that a person should accept the personal punishments that Hashem brings upon him and not resist, rather, beg or pray to Hashem to heal his wounds and alleviate his pain.
