

Parshas Metzora 5771

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO TZARA'AS TODAY – PART II

In last week's issue, a relatively common misconception concerning the institution of *tzara'as* was clarified. Rather than a standard skin ailment that may have been more prevalent in certain times or locales, *tzara'as* was demonstrated to be a wondrous occurrence that could only "infect" a noble soul.

A NATIVE PHENOMENON

The Ramban (*Vayikra 13:47*) picks up this thread, bringing particular support from *tzara'as* of the house. Specifically, the Ramban focuses on the verse in this week's *parshah* that introduces this topic: "When you enter the Land of Cana'an... I will place the *tzara'as* affliction in the houses of the land of your inheritance" (*Vayikra 14:34*). Apparently, the contents of this section apply only in the Land of Israel.

This restriction deserves closer examination. Usually, it is those laws that are agricultural in nature that apply only in the Land of Israel, as presented by the Mishnah in Kiddushin (1:9):

כל מצוה שהיא תלויה בארץ, אינה נוהגת אלא בארץ. ושאין תלויה בארץ, נוהגת בין בארץ בין בחוצה לארץ.

"Any mitzvah that is dependent upon the ground (i.e., has an agricultural component) is applicable only in the Land of Israel. That which is not dependent on the ground is applicable both in the Land and outside of it."

Tzara'as of the house is by no means an agricultural mitzvah; yet its occurrence is restricted to the Land of Israel. The Ramban contends that there is another factor that makes it endemic to this specific location: its uniquely

spiritual quality. As stated, *tzara'as* is not a mere physical ailment, but a manifestation of a spiritual condition. It affects someone who – due to their elevated level – had merited close association with the *Shechinah* (Divine Presence). On account of a particular spiritual deficiency (the sin of evil gossip, as previously discussed), the *Shechinah* has been forced to temporarily withdraw, leaving a "scar" on the body, clothing or house in the wake of its departure. As the entire affair is of such an overt, miraculous nature, the process is restricted to the Chosen and Holy Land.

SOUL SICKNESS

Also addressed last week was the issue of *tzara'as* in the modern era: Chazal inform us that *tzara'as* is occasioned by the perpetration of *lashon hara* (evil gossip). It would appear that even today there are those who engage in this unfortunate practice; why don't we see them coming down with *tzara'as*? (See last week's issue for the approach of R' Isaac Sher.) This question is (also) taken up by the Chofetz Chaim (*Shmiras Halashon, Sha'ar Hazechirah, ch. 5-6*), whose following explanation touches on many of the fundamental aspects of this subject:

Echoing the aforementioned theme of the Ramban, the Rambam (*Yad Hachazakah, Hilchos Tumas Tzara'as, 16:10*) likewise refers to *tzara'as* as "a wondrous sign," which devolves on the deserving individual with a clear and instructive purpose: to help guide him on the path of repentance from his temporary and unfortunate foray into the realm of evil gossip. Hence, the condition appears first in his house. Should he fail to heed its message, it will then hit closer to "home," showing up on his chairs and furniture. If he needs still further prodding, it will encroach even further, this time surfacing upon his clothing. And if he proves to be a stubbornly "slow learner," having neglected until this

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point to improve his ways, Hashem will then afflict his very body.

In fact, the Chofetz Chaim demonstrates how almost every aspect of the entire process of dealing with *tzara'as* performs the function of encouraging the sinner's spiritual "rehabilitation." True repentance entails numerous factors, not the least of which is sincere regret over his past actions and a strong commitment – which the penitent must live up to – to avoid this transgression in the future. These elements are brought to the fore throughout the process of ritual cleansing from this condition.

The *metzora* (one afflicted with *tzara'as*) is relegated to solitude; the Torah instructs him to remain alone, outside the camp, basically devoid of human contact. In such a setting, the *metzora* has plenty of time and impetus to contemplate his situation, how he got there and how he can improve it. Surely, under these conditions, he will experience the necessary regret and make a firm commitment to avoid repetition of such behavior and seek the forgiveness of those harmed by his tongue.

Such soul-searching has the effect of gaining Divine favor, and he soon starts to see improvement in his condition. Periodic examinations by the *kohein* (who also serves in a role of mentor and advisor) to determine if he has healed sufficiently may lead eventually to his return to the camp. When finally returning home, upon reflecting on the whole ordeal he has been through, the (ex-) *metzora* would undoubtedly be overcome with emotion. Seeing firsthand the overt intervention of the Hand of Hashem – the gossip was afflicted when he strayed from the path and was granted salvation upon repenting from his misdeeds – the *metzora* would surely be moved to fulfill his resolutions.

Alas, this was all true as long as there was a Beis Hamikdash, which facilitated the whole cleansing process (and the required sacrifices that played a key role); but no more. It is for this reason, contends the Chofetz Chaim, that *tzara'as* does not appear in our times: the desired result would not be achieved. Lacking the encouragement supplied by witnessing the effects of the ritual cleansing process, the afflicted individual would not respond. And without proper

repentance, the *tzara'as* would remain. Those afflicted would be marked for the rest of their lives.

This does not mean, however, that the phenomenon has completely disappeared. On the contrary, cautions the Chofetz Chaim, it is as much in effect today as ever, as the truths taught by Chazal are timeless. Even one who speaks *lashon hara* today is afflicted with *tzara'as*. The only difference is its *outward manifestation*. It remains concealed, though, temporarily restricted to the individual's *soul*.

The sober truth is that even in 2011, many people are carriers of this awesome disease. Though temporarily shielded from public view, the affliction – like all blemishes of the soul – will one day be revealed for all to see. Unless, of course, we cure it first, which can be achieved through sincere repentance. Perhaps then we can succeed in stamping out the disease of *lashon hara* from our midst – once and for all.

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