

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Moshe *ben* Ya'akov *a"h*  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

## More Than Just Skin Deep

## PARSHAS BAMIDBAR 5777

We are surrounded by a society that attaches much importance to externals. The person elected president of the United States is usually a cutting figure, fit and trim-looking, with a full head of hair, perfect teeth, and other such cosmetic qualities. It is hard to imagine someone with an outbreak of acne, for example, ever being able to secure such a position.

This is because, as stated, modern society is unfortunately a very superficial one. But Hashem, of course, looks beneath the surface, valuing only one's inherent goodness and the purity of his heart.

### The Bane of Blemishes

Thus, it may come as a surprise that external factors did seem to play some role in connection with *Kabbalas Ha'Torah* – the Receiving of the Torah at Sinai. One would have thought that physical appearance and abilities should be of little importance when it comes to this event. However, Chazal inform us that Hashem healed Klal Yisrael of all their blemishes at the time, saying: כָּךְ הוּא קְבוּדָה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה שְׂאֵתָן אוֹתָהּ לְדוֹר בְּעֵלֵי מוּמִין – “Is it proper regard for the Torah that I should grant it to a generation afflicted with blemishes?” (*Bamidbar Rabbah 7:1*).

This sentiment, then, is somewhat of a wonder. It is definitely helpful and appreciated for anyone suffering from a skin ailment or leg impairment to have these matters rectified. But the given reason almost appears to be a superficial one – as if it is not befitting for the Torah to be given to people whose physical appearance and capabilities are less than stellar. Why, indeed, should this be a factor when it comes to Torah and *mitzvos*?

We find a similar issue in connection with the Temple service and the subject of offerings. The Torah (in Parshas Emor) deals extensively with the matter of disqualifications due to *mumin* (blemishes), including such items as lameness, boils, etc. Animals in possession of such *mumin* cannot be offered on the altar; a *kohein* who is similarly afflicted is likewise disqualified from performing the Temple service. Now, we may understand, perhaps, why an animal may be rendered disqualified from these imperfections; after all, one is offering a ‘gift’ of sorts to Hashem, and the gift may be deemed unfitting if it appears unbecoming. As the Navi (Prophet) declares: וְכִי־תִגִּשׁוּן עֲגֹר לְזִבְחֶ... הַקְרִיבָהוּ נָא לְפָנֶיךָ הַיְרָצֵךְ אוֹ הֲשֵׁא פְנֵיךְ – “And when you bring forth a blinded (animal) to be sacrificed... (consider) offering (the same) to your governor (as a gift); would he be appeased by you or show you favor?” (*Malachi 1:8*).

But how are we to understand this statute as it relates to the *kohein* himself? He may be an earnest and devoted servant of Hashem, sincerely desiring to serve Him and engage in these most hallowed rituals. But he is disqualified... because of something like a skin-condition? Why should such seeming superficialities play any role in such lofty and spiritual matters?

### Bringing out the Best

In an eye-opening dissertation, R' Baruch Sorotzkin (*Habinah V'haberachah, parshas Nasso*) clarifies the issue. He explains that the actual detrimental factor does not lay with the physical blemish in and of itself. It has more to do, rather, with the mindset of the individual. That is, one afflicted with such a blemish tends to be self-conscious about it and thus begins to feel lowly in his own eyes. This results in a most undesirable outcome: a sense of discouragement

that prevents him from putting forth the full extent of his abilities. In other words, it is his (mistaken) self-perception arising from such a blemish that prevents him from reaching his full and actual potential.

This, explains R' Baruch, is why the matter of blemishes played such a central role in connection with *Kabbalas HaTorah*. It was not just a cosmetic issue. Rather, as the first generation to receive the Torah, it was they who would begin the vital process of *mesorah* (transmission) – preserving the Torah with utter completeness, to be passed on without the most miniscule change to succeeding generations. The extent of their success in this endeavor would affect the course of Torah preservation and observance for the rest of history. And so it was essential that they reached their potential in this area and put forth every ounce of their effort. As such, Hashem removed their blemishes, such that there would be no factor weighing upon them and preventing the submission of their full energies.

The same idea may be underlying the laws of blemishes as it relates to the *kohanim*. They were engaged, as stated, in the all-important endeavor of *avodas Hashem* – Divine service. In the very beginning of his *sefer Sha'arei Avodah*, Rabbeinu Yonah states that the exercise described above is the basic prerequisite to proper *avodas Hashem*. “The first step,” he writes, “is that a person must recognize his true worth,” such that he will always strive to reach his potential and remain on the level that he is truly capable of attaining. And so, as a blemish tends to obstruct one’s ability to reach this potential, it is untenable that someone so afflicted be involved with the Temple service, which must be performed in the most full and complete manner.

The lesson – as we approach Shavuot, the Festival of *Kabbalas Ha'Torah* – seems quite clear. As we renew our subservience to Torah and *avodas Hashem*, it is critical that we likewise follow this exercise of recognizing our true potential and worth. To this end, Chazal convey the following sentiment in the well-known Mishnah (*Sanhedrin 4:5*):

לפיכך נברא אדם? חידו, ללמדך, שכל המאבד נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו אבד עולם מלא. וכל המקיים נפש אחת מישראל, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיים עולם מלא... לפיכך כל אחד ואחד חייב לומר, בשבילי נברא העולם.

“Man was created as a single individual (i.e. when Hashem created man, He did not initially create a whole group, but started with Adam Harishon alone) for the following reason. Hashem wished to impart a vital lesson: whoever destroys a single Jew is considered to have wiped out an entire world. And whoever preserves the life of a single Jew, is considered to have saved an entire world. (Rashi explains that this principle is borne out by the fact that the entire world population is descended from a single individual: Adam Harishon.) Therefore, each and every individual is obligated to declare: ‘The world was created for my sake’ (Rashi explains: ‘I bear the importance of an entire world’).”

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