

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of  
Elka Raizel *bas* Dovid a”h  
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

## **Craving for Critique**      **PARSHAS TAZRIA-METZORA 5777**

The main feature of the two *parshiyos* of *Tazria-Metzora* is, of course, the topic of *tzara’as* – the skin condition which, if meeting certain specifications, renders the individual ritually impure. When one finds such a condition developing, he presents himself before a *kohein*, who determines whether the proper qualifications are met. If they are not, he retains his status of ritual purity; if, however, the *kohein* determines that he has bona fide *tzara’as*, he then declares the individual “*tamei*” (defiled).

### **Blind Spot**

What happens if a *kohein* himself begins to develop such a condition? Can he inspect his own symptoms and make the determination on himself?

The Mishnah (*Nega'im* 2:5) addresses such a case. It rules:

כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אָדָם רֹאֶה חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עֶצְמוֹ.

“One can view (and rule upon) any manner of afflictions – except for his own.”

Now, the subject of this Mishnah, as stated above, is a *kohein* who discovers a condition developing on his own person. The Mishnah requires him to be seen by a fellow *kohein*, as he himself is not authorized to rule on his own situation.

However, the *Talelei Oros* (*parshas Tazria*) gleams from here an important lesson pertinent to all people, even beyond the realm of *tzara’as*. Chazal’s statement here alludes, as well, to the notion of shortcomings in character. In general, people are quite alert to the faults of others and quick to recognize and point out even the most miniscule imperfection in someone else. But when it comes to their *own* faults – well, then, the Mishnah’s dictum applies: כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אָדָם רֹאֶה חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עֶצְמוֹ – A person can detect all manner of blemishes – that is, **except for his own**.

This is a natural tendency, one which almost no one escapes – even the most elevated souls. That is why we find that the righteous, to their credit, went out of their way to elicit criticism from others. They understood that criticism is crucial for character improvement; but they were also well aware that it is only human nature to have a blind spot when it comes to self-examination. And so they sought out the services of outsiders who could look upon them with an impartial eye and offer suggestions for improvement. The Vilna Gaon serves as one of the most well-known and prominent examples. It is hard to conjure up a mortal figure from (relatively) modern times more perfect and lofty than he. And yet, he actually hired the Maggid of Dubno to function as his private critic. (That’s correct; he paid money for someone to offer him ongoing constructive criticism!)

A similar attribute is ascribed to the venerated Chiddushei Harim, founder of the Gerrer Chassidic dynasty. The Chiddushei Harim was a prime disciple of the saintly Rebbe of Kozhnitz and spent much of his formative years in his shadow. At one point, however, he elected for a change in venue, travelling instead to further his spiritual development under the tutelage of the Rebbe of Peshischa. The disappointment of his original mentor was quite profound. Later on, the Chiddushei Harim suffered severe tribulations, losing twelve children. He deduced that this tragedy was visited upon him as a consequence of the pain he had caused his initial Rebbe by leaving him.

And yet, even in light of all that he endured, the Chiddushei Harim insisted that he had made the right choice – and given the chance, would even do it again. Why? After all, the Rebbe of Kozhnitz, his original Rebbe, was a holy and lofty individual! But the Chiddushei Harim explained the difference: “In Kozhnitz, they showered me with caring and warmth. But that is not what I needed! I traveled to Peshischa because there they would pick apart my bones. And in that way I could gain perfection.”

### **A Taste for Blood**

It may be somewhat difficult for us to relate to such sentiments. After all, most of us, to be honest, don't particularly enjoy *tochachah* (admonishment) – let alone seek it out. How were these great men able to not only withstand the withering criticism, but even, it appears, to relish it?

Obviously, their attitudes were mature and pristine enough to appreciate the true value of this exercise. R' Yechiel Michel Stern (*Hatorah V'hamitzvah*, vol. I, p. 298) compares a friend who offers criticism to a leech. But that is a salutary matter. There are two creatures who, at first glance, perform a similar function: the snake and the leech. Both bore their teeth into a person's flesh. Interestingly enough, however, these creatures evoke opposing reactions. People are terrified of and repulsed by snakes; upon seeing one, they attempt to crush its skull. A leech, on the other hand, has certain medicinal properties, and people are sometimes willing to spend vast sums to procure one. The difference can be described as such: Upon biting a person, a snake transfers poison from its own glands into the person's flesh. The leech, on the other hand, extracts the toxicity found in the patient's flesh and absorbs it into its own body. This, then, is the true function and benefit of a companion who offers criticism: he thereby extracts the spiritual poison and blemish from the object of his critique.

Along these lines, the *passuk* states: צְאִינָה וּרְאִינָה בְּנוֹת צִיּוֹן בְּמַלְכֹךְ שְׁלֹמֹה בְּעֵטְרָה שְׁעֵטְרָה לֹא אָמוּ – “Go out and see, O daughters of Tzion, the king, Shlomo – (look at) the crown with which his mother has adorned him on the day of his wedding, and the day of his heart's rejoicing” (*Shir Hashirim 3:11*). What is this “crown” that was supplied by Shlomo's mother? The Alshich clarifies the matter by citing a narrative recorded in the Medrash (*Vayikra Rabbah 12:5*). Apparently, Shlomo Hamelech overslept the morning after his wedding. This prompted a reaction from his mother, Bassheva, who entered his chamber and slapped him about with her slippers. It was this admonition, asserts the Alshich, that served as the “crown with which his mother has adorned him on the day of his wedding.”

It seems that Shlomo – in his wisdom – truly appreciated and valued this experience. And he reiterated the sentiment by declaring in his *sefer*, Mishei (27:5,6): טוֹבָה תּוֹכַחַת מְגֵלָה מְאֻהָבָה – “Overt rebuke is superior to hidden love; faithful are the wounds supplied by one's beloved.”

For us, it may not be the simplest level to attain – but it is certainly something to bear in mind strive for.

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