

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Metzora, April 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Metzora – more lessons from Tzora'at

This week we read Parshat Metzora. This is the second Parsha that deals with the laws of Tzora'at.

Why so much focus on Tzora'at?

Last week we mentioned that over 12% of the Pesukim in sefer Vayikra are devoted to the laws of Tzora'at. Why does the Torah focus on this affliction to such an extent? The following idea might shed some light on this question.

The prohibition against eating insects is one of the most serious prohibitions in the Torah¹. If someone eats a piece of pig, they are guilty of one sin. But if someone eats a tiny insect they can be guilty of up to six separate prohibitions!² The Pri Chadash explains why the Torah is so stringent regarding this issue. It is quite difficult to accidentally eat pig. But it is very easy to accidentally eat an insect. Insects are very common and they are difficult to see. We could accidentally consume a number of insects just by eating an unchecked piece of lettuce! Therefore the Torah increased the number of prohibitions to encourage the Jewish people to be extra careful in checking for insects.

Perhaps a similar argument applies to lashon hara. Errors of speech are so prevalent that most people don't even realise that they are sinning. Almost every time we open our mouths we are at risk of saying something that is damaging to another. Thus, perhaps the Torah increased the number of pasukim concerning Tzora'at to remind us of the severity of these prohibitions and to encourage us to be extra careful in checking the words that come out of our mouths.

Be among the disciples of Aharon – love peace and pursue peace

As discussed last week, only a Kohen can diagnose Tzora'at. Kohanim were descendants of Aharon, who was renowned for his efforts in bringing peace between people. In Pirkei Avot (1:12) we are advised to be among the disciples of Aharon - loving peace and pursuing peace.

As we learnt last week, the sins that lead to a person being afflicted with Tzora'at all represent forms of anti-social behaviour, the main sin being lashon hara (negative speech). It is specifically Kohanim who diagnosed Tzora'at because perpetrators needed to learn from them to use their words in a loving manner and for the pursuit of peace. This is a powerful message for the person that was suffering from Tzora'at. And a powerful message for us.

However, if Aharon's descendants represent peace and love, it seems strange that they should be the ones chosen to diagnose Tzora'at and thus cause pain to people. Perhaps we can understand this by looking at the story behind the 19th blessing in the Shemoneh Esreh³. As the name suggests, the Shemoneh Esreh (which literally means 18) originally had 18 blessings. However, after the destruction of the second Bet Hamikdash, the Jewish people were under serious threat from various sects of heretical Jews. Rabban Gamliel, the Nasi, decided to add an additional blessing to the Shemoneh Esreh asking Hashem to help defeat these heretics. Shmuel HaKatan was chosen to

¹ Bedikas Hamazon, Chapter 2, by Rav Moshe Vaye.

² Four prohibitions for a water insect; five prohibitions for a land insect; and six prohibitions for a flying insect.

³ I first heard the story about Shmuel HaKatan composing the 19th blessing from Rabbi Mordechai Becher. Historical details about the 19th blessing were taken from the Artscroll siddur.

compose this blessing. Pirkei Avot teaches that Shmuel Hakatan was a person who lived the maxim of not rejoicing in the downfall of your enemy. As it says:

Shmuel Hakatan says: 'When your enemy falls do not be glad, and when he stumbles, do not let your heart be joyous...' (Pirkei Avot 4:24)

Why was Shmuel Hakatan chosen to compose the blessing against the dangerous heretics? Rabban Gamliel understood that Shmuel HaKatan could be trusted to show the appropriate level of restraint in his rebuke and to use the minimum level of harshness as was absolutely necessary.

Similarly, the Kohanim represent Aharon and the pursuit of peace. Presumably they would be reluctant to impose a diagnosis of Tzora'at on a person. They would only do so if absolutely necessary. Perhaps by choosing those who pursue peace to proclaim such a devastating sentence contains an important lesson for the perpetrator and for us. Sometimes we may need to speak harsh words of truth to someone. By emulating Shmuel Hakatan and the Kohanim's attitude to other people's suffering, we can hopefully use the right level of restraint.

This is like the parable of the homeowner and the cat as told by Rav Chaim Brisker. The homeowner and the cat both want to rid the house of mice. But there is one crucial difference – the cat hopes that more mice will appear for it to catch whereas the homeowner hopes that there will not be any more mice. When we have to speak harshly, or impose a harsh decree or decision that may cause others pain, we should try to be like the homeowner, and not like the cat. In other words, we should be pained to cause any strife to others. This attitude will be reflected in our words and manner of speaking.

Who is greater – Moshe or Aharon?

One doesn't need a degree in psychology to work out why people say lashon hara. We all like to feel good about ourselves. That is human nature. There are two ways to accomplish this. The hard way is to work on ourselves. The easy way is to put other people down so that we look relatively better in comparison. Ironically, putting other people down actually makes us look worse.

Rav Moshe Feinstein's interpretation of a comment by Rashi teaches us the folly in putting other people down.⁴ Rashi (Sh'mot 6:26) explains that the Torah sometimes mentions Moshe's name before Aharon's name, and sometimes it mentions Aharon's name before Moshe's name. This is in order to tell us that Moshe and Aharon were equal. This comment from Rashi is difficult to understand. The Torah itself testifies that Moshe was the greatest prophet that ever lived! How could Rashi say that they were equal? Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that Moshe and Aharon were equal in that they both fulfilled their potential. Hashem does not compare us to other people. He only compares us to our own potential. Therefore it does not matter how we appear in comparison to other people. Rather, we should focus on how we measure up against ourselves. Keeping this idea in mind might help to deter us from speaking negatively of other people.

Let's try something this week:

1. Whenever we speak we can try to emulate Aharon HaKohen and use our words to pursue peace.
2. If we need to impart a rebuke or harsh judgement or decision, it should cause us pain. We should try to emulate Shmuel Hakatan and use as much restraint as possible. Strive to be like the homeowner, not like the cat.
3. To avoid tearing down others to build ourselves up, remember the powerful lesson from Rav Moshe Feinstein. Let's remember that it really doesn't matter how we appear compared to the people around us. Our performance only matters when compared against our own potential.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

⁴ Seen in the Artscroll Stone Chumash – footnote to Sh'mot 6:26.

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’reiacha kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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