

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Metzora (Vayikra 14:1–15:33)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Metzora – More lessons from Tzora’at

This week we read Parashat Metzora. This is the second Parsha that deals with the laws of Tzora’at. Even though these laws are not practically relevant today, there are many lessons that are relevant. Let’s learn some of those lessons.

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).

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 prohibition against eating insects is one of the most serious prohibitions in the Torah¹. If someone eats pork, 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 Chadash³ explains why the Torah is so stringent regarding this issue. It is quite difficult to accidentally eat pig. But it is much easier to accidentally eat an insect. Insects are very common and they are difficult to see. One could accidentally consume a number of insects just by eating one unchecked piece of lettuce! The number of sins accrued functions as a deterrent to encourage people to be extra stringent in checking for insects.

Perhaps a similar argument applies to lashon hara. Errors of speech are so prevalent that many people do not even realise that they are sinning. Almost every time we open our mouths, we are at risk of saying something that may damage another. Thus, perhaps the Torah increases 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. Pirkai Avot (1:12) advises us to be among the disciples of Aharon - loving peace and pursuing peace.

It is specifically Kohanim who diagnosed Tzora’at because they are best placed to teach perpetrators by example how 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, a question arises. if Aharon’s descendants represent peace and love, then why would they davka be the ones chosen to diagnose Tzora’at and thus cause pain to the people being diagnosed? Perhaps we can understand this concept by looking at the story behind the 19th blessing in the Shemoneh Esreh.⁴ As the name of this Tefillah suggests, the Shemoneh Esreh (which literally means 18) prayer 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 compose this

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 (see Parashat Shemini, Vayikra 11:41-44).

³ Yoreh Deah, end of siman 84 (abridged).

⁴ I first heard the story about Shmuel Hakatan composing the 19th blessing from Rabbi Mordechai Becher. The historical details about the 19th blessing were taken from the Artscroll siddur.

blessing. Pirkai 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...' (Pirkai Avot 4:24)

Why was Shmuel Hakatan chosen to compose the blessing against the dangerous heretics if he was renowned for **not** wanting his enemies to suffer? Rabban Gamliel precisely chose him, because he 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 that was absolutely necessary.

Similarly, the Kohanim represent Aharon and the pursuit of peace. They would presumably be reluctant to impose any unnecessary difficulty or pain on a person. They would therefore show self-restraint and extreme caution in their diagnosis of Tzora'at. This idea contains an important lesson for us. Sometimes we may need to speak harsh words of truth to someone. However, if we try to emulate Shmuel Hakatan and the Kohanim's attitude to the suffering of other people, we can hopefully reach the right level of restraint.

This is like the well-known 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 shouldn't look forward to more opportunities to criticise. Rather, 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 reason that people speak lashon hara is to elevate themselves by default. 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 however, by putting other people down we are behaving in a worse manner and actually lowering our own spiritual status.

Rav Moshe Feinstein's interpretation of a comment by Rashi teaches us the folly of putting other people down.⁵ Rashi⁶ points out that the Torah sometimes mentions Moshe's name before Aharon's name, and sometimes it mentions Aharon's name before Moshe's name. Rashi explains that this teaches 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 one claim 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, we too should avoid mentally comparing ourselves to others. Rather, we should focus on how we measure up against ourselves. Keeping this idea in mind might help deter us from speaking negatively about others.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we speak, 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, we should do so with pain and reluctance. 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 in order to build ourselves up, remember that our performance and spiritual level only matters when compared against our own potential.

The next Darchai Noam will IY"HB for the week after Pesach (29 Nissan / 4 May). I wish you all a Chag Kasher v'Sameach!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Seen in the Artscroll Stone Chumash – footnote to Parashat Vaera, Shmot 6:26.

⁶ In his commentary to Parashat Vaera, Shmot 6:26, based on the Mechilta 7:1.

About Darchai Noam

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The pasuk 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, usually 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're'echa kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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