YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat TAZRIA-mETZORA**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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This shiur is dedicated in memory of Rabbanit Frieda Heller z"l
whose yahrzeit falls on the third of Iyar,
by her granddaughter, Vivian Singer.

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***Tzara'at* and the Presence of the *Shekhina***

Summarized by Yair Oster

Translated by David Strauss

The central theme of *Parashot Tazria* and *Metzora* is the laws of impurity in general, and of a *metzora* and *tzara'at* in particular. Why does the Torah devote such a major section to the laws of impurity specifically here, in the middle of the book of *Vayikra*? *Sefer Vayikra* is largely concerned with matters of *kedusha* (sanctity): from the sanctity of the sacrifices and the *Mishkan*, through the sanctity of Israel in *Parashat Kedoshim* and the sanctity of the priesthood in *Parashat Emor*, and ending with the sanctity of the land and society in *Parashot Behar* and *Bechukotai.* Why does the Torah stop, in the midst of its various discussions of sanctity, and expand on matters of impurity?

It would seem that the key to resolving this question lies in the difference between *tzara'at* and the other impurities detailed in the two *parashot*. The other impurities – a woman after childbirth, *zav*, *nidda*, and a man who experienced a seminal emission *–* all share a common feature, namely, their connection to the natural world. In dealing with these issues, the Torah in effect recognizes the impermanence and transience of the natural world, and copes with it by way of the concept of impurity, which indicates a missing out on or a lacking of life.

In contrast, *tzara'at* has nothing to do with the natural world. The Ramban goes on at great length to explain how *tzara'at* is a supernatural phenomenon, coming from heaven by way of individual providence. Proof for this can be brought from the fact that *tzara'at* can affect the whole body, but also a garment or a house. A person with *tzara'at* does not turn to a physician, but to a *kohen*, who decides each time what the next step will be – initial confinement, further quarantine, declaration of impurity, or declaration of purity.

In this way, *tzara'at* teaches not only about itself but about the whole: that all diseases come from God and are under His control – just like everything that happens in the world.

This teaches us to seek the presence of the *Shekhina*, the sanctity, in every aspect of life. The Land of Israel is more holy than the rest of the world, and Shabbat is more holy than other days, but there is a certain degree of sanctity in all aspects of our lives, and we must seek it constantly.

This point explains an interesting connection that exists in the books of the Prophets between *tzara'at* and war. In the *haftara* of *Tazria*, we read of the *tzara'at* of Na’aman, who was the commander-in-chief of the army of Aram, and in the *haftara* of *Metzora*, we read of the siege of Shomron and the four *metzora'im* who brought the news that they were saved.

What is common to *tzara'at* and war is the strong sense regarding each that it is something mundane and human, regarding which there is no Divine intervention. We know that "if the Lord does not watch over a city, the watchman wakes/watches in vain" (*Tehillim* 127:1), but often it is easy to forget the presence of God. This motif appears repeatedly in the *haftara* for *Parashat Metzora*. It begins with the captain who was unwilling to accept the prophecy regarding a decline in prices (II *Melakhim* 7:2) and continues in the camp of Aram, which hears noises but is unable to attribute them to anything other than natural causes – which drives them to a far-fetched explanation that Israel may have hired the Egyptian army or the Chitites to help them fight against Aram (ibid. v. 6). Anyone who reads the preceding chapters, about the appalling economic and social situation in which the people of Israel was mired, will find it hard to believe that the people of Aram were willing to accept this flimsy explanation and flee on its account, and yet flee they did (v. 7). Finally, the king of Israel is not prepared to accept the story of the escape and is convinced that it is actually a particularly sophisticated military trap (v. 12).

By juxtaposing these issues, the prophet teaches us that both with respect to a person's private medical matters and in matters of war and national events, it is God who is really in charge. The persistence of this providence attests to the presence of the *Shekhina*, the holiness that pertains not only to specific times and places but to the entire world. By virtue of that constant presence of the *Shekhina*, the world becomes a holy place, and so we must relate to it.

Another matter that can be learned from the *parashot* dealing with a *metzora* relates to the nature of the *metzora*. *Chazal* enumerate the sins for which *tzara'at* comes as a punishment:

Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: Because of seven things the plague of *tzara'at* is incurred: slander, the shedding of blood, vain oath, incest, arrogance, robbery, and envy. (*Arakhin* 16a)

What characterizes all these reasons is egocentrism: a person sees himself as the center of all things, both at the expense of other people and in relation to God. This trait can find expression in slander, in murder, in arrogance, etc.

We also see this trait in the *haftara of Parashat* *Tazria*. Na'aman feels that he is the center of the universe – a great warrior and commander of a regional superpower, with many underlings and subordinates to do his bidding. This leads to egocentrism and selfishness, and so he is stricken with *tzara'at*. The *tzara'at* does not alter these features in his personality, and when he comes to Elisha, he does not understand his suggestion to bathe in the Jordan – for there are many more impressive rivers in Damascus:

Are not Amana and Farpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean? So he turned, and went away in a rage. (II *Melakhim* 5:12)

However, his process of purification also includes repentance, and an understanding that the focus is not on himself. This process eventually succeeds, and indeed *Chazal* ascribed to him (*Gittin* 57b) the respectability of being a *ger toshav* (resident alien).

In contrast, Gechazi tried to enhance his own status, taking a monetary fee from Na'aman without considering the implications of his actions for others. It is therefore understandable that Elisha cursed him: "And may the *tzara'at* of Na'aman cleave to you and your descendants forever" (II *Melakhim* 5:27).

The Mishna in *Sanhedrin* (10:2) lists Gehazi as one of the people who have no share in the World to Come precisely because of this point. *Chazal* say that Gechazi was a great Torah scholar, and this is also reasonable, for he was a disciple of Elisha. Nevertheless, since he placed himself at the center and failed to see his surroundings, he has no share in the World to Come.

Another figure appearing on the Mishna’s ignoble list is Yarovam. He too is a figure of great power and ambition, chosen by prophecy to lead Israel. Yet when he is offered the opportunity of his dreams by God Himself, "I, you, and the son of Yishai will stroll in the Garden of Eden," all he is interested in is "who is at the head?" When he was told that David would be at the head, he replied, "If so, I do not want it" (*Sanhedrin* 102a).

In other words, "all this has no value in his eyes" (*Esther* 5:13) because he is not at the head, because it is not his name in the headlines, because he is not in the limelight.

This message has always been important, but it is all the more so in our modern era. Today, it is much easier for a person to think he is responsible for his own destiny, that he is running the world, and that God does not intervene. In the past, the sense of dependence, which for us is reserved for places like a hospital, was pervasive in all areas of life. Diseases killed children right and left, medical complications were unresolvable, and people felt themselves to be much more dependent on God. Thus, we are burdened with a more difficult task; precisely in a more comfortable and peaceful world, we must separate ourselves from our immediate experience and see the presence of God in reality.

In this context, the message of the *parasha* is even more complex. *Parashat Tazria* opens with "If a woman conceives and bears a male child," and the well-known question is raised: Why must the mother bring a sin-offering? Even today, every woman who gives birth sacrifices of herself for the continuity of the people of Israel, and this was all the more true of women in ancient times! Every pregnancy was fraught with complications; every birth involved significant mortal danger. Why, after all that self-sacrifice, should the mother have to bring a sin-offering?

In addition, one may ask why this *parasha* is juxtaposed to the *parasha* of the *metzora*, rather than to the laws of a *zava* and *nidda*, to which it is more naturally connected.

It would seem that the answer to these questions is that the Torah is trying to emphasize the fact that even in birth, in a process that is not only natural but also very desirable, there may be a problematic imbalance created, which must be addressed. Often after birth the mother feels that she and her child are at the center, and ignores whatever else is going on around her. The sin-offering is a response to this imbalance.

We must learn to see the world as a place where the *Shekhina* is constantly present, and from that perspective, each of us must realize that we do not stand at the center of the universe.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Mosheh Lichtenstein on Shabbat *Parashat Tazria-Metzora* 5777.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)