YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Metzora**

**Sicha of HarAV MOSHEH lICHTENSTEIN**

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

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**Sanctity and Impurity**

The main topic in *Parashot Tazria* and *Metzora* is impurity in general and that of a *metzora* and *tzara'at* in particular. Why are these passages located where they are, in the central part of the book of *Vayikra*? Most of the book of *Vayikra* deals with matters of sanctity, from the sanctity of the sacrifices and the *Mishkan*, through the sanctity of Israel in the passage of "You shall be holy" and the sanctity of the priesthood in *Parashat Emor*, to the sanctity of the land and of society in *Parashot Behar* and *Bechukotai*. Why does the Torah stop in the middle of its discussion of sanctity and expand so extensively on matters of impurity?

The key to resolving this question seems to lie in the difference between *tzara'at* and the other impurities spelled out in these *parashot*. The other impurities – that of a birthing mother, a *zav*, a menstruant woman, a man who experienced a seminal emission – have one thing in common: a connection to the natural world. In dealing with these issues, the Torah essentially recognizes the transience and ephemerality of the natural world; it deals with them with the help of the concept of impurity, which signifies the missing out on or lack of life.

In the case of *tzara'at*, on the other hand, the connection to the natural world seems to be non-existent. The Ramban explains at length that *tzara'at* is a supernatural phenomenon that comes from heaven. Strong proof for this may be adduced from the fact that *tzara'at* can be found not only on all parts of the body, but also on garments or on the walls of one's house. A person who is afflicted with *tzara'at* does not turn to a doctor, but to a priest, and it is he who decides on the next stage of the process; he sends the *metzora* into isolation, and he declares him pure or impure.

In this respect, *tzara'at* can be seen as a model, as a phenomenon that teaches not only about itself but about life in general – that even diseases and other phenomena, which seem to be connected to and to derive from natural law, come from God.

This insight requires us to seek the presence of the *Shekhina* – sanctity – in every aspect of life. *Eretz Yisrael* is holier than all other lands and Shabbat is holier than all other days, but in every realm of our lives there is holiness on some level, and we must seek it out continually.

This point explains an interesting connection found in the books of the Prophets between *tzara'at* and war. *Tzara’at* appears in the context of Na'aman, the commander of the army of Aram, and the story of the four lepers appears in the context of war. It may be noted that in these two realms, *tzara'at* and war, there is a sense that we are dealing with a realm void of the presence of the *Shekhina.*

We know, of course, that "unless the Lord keeps the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (*Tehillim* 127:1), but it is often easy to ignore God's presence. In the story of the four lepers, the captain was unwilling to accept the prophecy about the lowering of prices (II *Melakhim* 7:2). Afterwards, the people in the camp of Aram were not prepared to accept a supernatural explanation for the noises they were hearing, to the point that they were willing to accept the weak explanation that Israel had perhaps hired the army of Egypt or the Chitim to help them fight against Aram (ibid. v. 6). Anyone who reads in the previous chapters about the terrible economic and social situation of the people of Israel at that time will find it difficult to believe that the people of Aram were prepared to accept such a forced explanation and flee based on it. Indeed, the king of Israel was not ready to accept that Aram had run away; he was convinced that this was an especially sophisticated military trap.

The proximity between the issue of *tzara'at* and the issue of war emphasizes for us regarding both issues that the course of events is managed by God, and not by man.

**The Meaning of the Traits that Characterize the *Metzora***

Another matter that can be learned from the passage dealing with a *metzora* relates to the traits that characterized the *metzora. Chazal* tell us that *tzara'at* results for seven different things. What all these things have in common is the person's attitude towards himself as the center, both in relationship to other human beings and in relationship to God. This can find expression in slander, in bloodshed, in snobbery, and the like.

This is reflected in the *haftara* for *Parashat Tazria*. Na'aman feels that he is standing at the center of the world. As commander of the army of Aram, he has many soldiers subject to his command, and this causes him egocentrism and selfishness, and he therefore becomes afflicted with *tzara'at.* When he comes to Elisha, he does not understand the suggestion that he bathe in the Jordan. Surely in Damascus there are much larger and more impressive rivers in which he could bathe:

“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)

Na’aman’s process of purification includes a process of repentance and an understanding that the focus is not himself. In the end, this process succeeds. In fact, *Chazal* say (*Gittin* 57b): "Na’aman was a resident alien [*ger toshav*, one who abstains from idolatry, but does not keep the *mitzvot*]."

Gechazi, on the other hand, tries to promote his own status. He does not consider the consequences of his actions and accepts a monetary reward from Na’aman. Thus, it is understandable that Elisha curses him: "The *tzara'at* of Na’aman shall cleave to you, and to your seed forever" (II *Melakhim* 5:27).

The *mishna* in *Sanhedrin* lists Gechazi among those who do not have a share in the World to Come precisely for this reason. *Chazal* say that Gechazi was a great Torah scholar, and this stands to reason, for he was a disciple of the prophet Eliyahu. Nevertheless, because he set himself in the center and failed to see what was going on around him, he lost his place in the World to Come.

Another character appearing on this dishonorable list is Yerovam. He too was a strong and ambitious figure who was chosen by prophecy to lead Israel. Nevertheless, when he receives the answer to his dreams from God Himself – "I and you and the son Yishai will stroll about in the Garden of Eden" – the only thing that interests him is "who will be on top." When he is told that David will lead, his answer is: "If so, I do not want it."

In other words, "all this is not worth it" to him, because he will not stand at the top, his name will not appear in the headlines, and he will not appear in the limelight.

This message was always important, but it is doubly important in the modern age in which we live. Today, it is much easier for a person to think that he is responsible for his own destiny, that he rules the world, and that God does not intervene in what is happening here on earth. In the past, the sense of dependency, which for us is reserved for places like hospitals, was felt in all areas of life. Diseases killed children left and right, medical complications had no resolution, and man felt much more dependent on God. We are given a much more difficult mission. Precisely in our world of ease, we are asked to remove ourselves from center stage and see the presence of God in the world.

In this context, the message of the *parasha* is even more complex. The *parasha* opens with: "If a woman has conceived and bore a man child" (*Vayikra* 12:2). We are all familiar with the question of why a birthing mother must bring a sin-offering. Even today, every Jewish woman who gives birth to a child sacrifices of herself for the continuation of the people of Israel. This was all the more true in earlier periods. Every pregnancy carried risks for complications, and childbirth had a significant mortality rate. Why, after all that self-sacrifice, must the mother bring a sin-offering?

In addition, one may ask why this passage immediately precedes the passage dealing with a *metzora*, and not the passages dealing with a *zava* and a menstruant woman, to whom the birthing mother is more naturally connected.

The answer to these questions seems to be that the Torah wishes to emphasize the fact that even in childbirth, a process that is not only natural but also highly desirable, a problematic imbalance may arise, which we must address. After the birth, the mother often feels that she and her child are at the center, and she ignores her environment. The sin-offering comes in response to this imbalance.

We must learn to see that world as a place in which the presence of the *Shekhina* is permanent, and thus each of us will understand that he is not the center.

(This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit on Shabbat Parashat Tazria-Metzora 5777 [2017].)