



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Tazria-Metzora: Have You Ever Been Excluded?

To discuss at the table:

- Have you ever been excluded? How did it feel?
- Do you ever look askance at anyone in your community, in your school, your summer camp? Have you ever excluded someone from your group of friends, showing them the cold shoulder in a conversation, or not inviting them for an evening out?
- When we exclude people, how do they feel?
- In a social, communal or religious setting, why do we sometimes feel superior to others? When do we feel inferior? What makes us act in these ways?

Our parsha speaks of a mysterious disease – Tzaraat. It may affect skin, clothing or the walls of a home. If clothing is afflicted, it is burnt; if a home is affected, the stones or wood are replaced and in the extreme situation, the house is destroyed. But how is a person treated when his skin is afflicted?

⁴⁵As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, "Unclean! Unclean!" ⁴⁶He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Why should the individual tear his or her clothes?

Why should they live alone, outside the camp?

Rav Yoseph Bechor Shor suggests that the person is quarantined so as not to infect other people. This treats the affliction like a normal illness.

But most commentators suggest otherwise. They treat Tzaraat not as a contagion, but rather as a divine punishment, a physical manifestation of a spiritual and behavioral defect. In this context, the tearing of clothes and the head left bare are signs of mourning (Rashi), and that the dwelling outside the camp in solitude is viewed as a social corrective rather than a medical precaution:

Why does it say by the leper "He shall sit alone outside the camp"? Since he brought division between a man and wife, between one person and another, let him sit alone... (*Arakhin 16a*)

What is the basis of this statement?

Commonly in rabbinic literature, Tzaraat is seen as a punishment for social offences. The most famous among these are "bad talk – lashon hara", slander, gossip and the like (on the basis of a midrashic pun: metzora = motzi shem ra) but the Rabbis list a far larger set of sins including arrogance, theft and selfishness (*ibid*). If the afflicted person is to mourn, and is sent into solitary confinement, we might imagine that this is a "Time Out", a period in which to feel what it is like to be isolated. This individual who has felt superior to others, harmed others, slandered them or gossiped about them will now feel what it is like to be lonely, outside the social mainstream.

Frequently, when we stand outside a group or a society (think about when you are a tourist, or a visitor to another community) you have the opportunity to observe the dynamics in a society in a sharpened manner. Moreover, this person is getting a taste of his or her own medicine. If Tzaraat is not an illness but rather a divine punishment, the laws of Tzaraat serve as a corrective and rehabilitative measure. Our assumption is that as the outcast begins to repair himself, the ailment subsides until he or she is readmitted into society, remorseful, repaired and healed.

The Haftara tells a story about a group of lepers. The city of Samaria is under siege. Food is scarce and people are dying; things are so desperate that mothers are eating their dead children. The lepers who live outside the city - outside the "camp" – discover that the enemy, the siege camp is empty. The attackers have fled! At first they think of themselves alone:

⁸When those lepers came to the edge of the camp, they went into one of the tents and ate and drank; then they carried off silver and gold and clothing from there and buried it. They came back and went into another tent, and they carried off what was there and buried it.

But then:

⁹Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. This is a day of good news, and we are keeping silent! If we wait until the light of morning, we shall incur guilt. Come, let us go and inform the king's palace."

At first the lepers act selfishly. But suddenly they remember their responsibility to society.

Tzaraat doesn't exist today. And yet, as we study the dynamic of its laws, Parshat Tazria-Metzora affords us a chance to think about our social dynamics, who we exclude, who we include, and gives a chance to consider whether we can create a more welcoming and non-judgmental social environment.

Shabbat Shalom!