

From the Ohr HaChayim

by Jacob Solomon

This is the law of the Metzora, on the day of his Tahara, purification... (12:2).

The K'li Yakar (on 13:2) divides the spiritual causes of tzaraat into three groups: gossip, arrogance, and greed (based on Bamidbar 12:10, Melachim II 5:1 and 5:27 respectively). The opening of the parasha details the procedures that a spiritually and physically recovering metzora needs to go through so that he may return to the community as a person who is tahor, pure.

The Ohr HaChayim derives the spiritual nature of tzaraat from the words "on the day of his purification". He observes that a metzora is not treated as a person who is physically unwell. There is no mitzvah of bikur cholim, visiting the sick, to cheer him up and raise his spirits to assist his recovery. On the contrary, the Torah commands piling yet more distress on to his distress: "The kohen shall declare him contaminated... his garments shall be torn, he hair shall be uncut and untidy... he must call out tameh, tameh to prevent others approaching him (Rashi)... he shall dwell in isolation, outside the camp..." (13:44-5).

Indeed, enforced isolation is severe punishment. The one form of torture permitted in civilized countries is solitary confinement, being totally cut-off from human contact. Psychologists strongly recommend that this punishment does not exceed 72 hours, as any excess can cause permanent damage to the human mind. For Man is not merely a sociable being. His very being is social; that is how Man is created. As G-d puts it: "It is not good for Man to be alone" (Bereishit 2:18). The company of other people is crucial for his own functioning and well-being.

The Ohr HaChayim explains that is entirely the point. Tzaraat, loosely but not accurately translated as leprosy, comes from a spiritual failing, not a physical source. It is that spiritual failing in the need of learning to respect others and not treat them as mere disposables that needs to be corrected. In days of old, G-d showed His displeasure on those whose mind-frame unjustly disrespected other people by making them suffer at first hand what their conduct was doing to others; letting them experience social isolation, so they might appreciate the consequence of their abuse of human communication through their gossip, their arrogance, and their greed.



Gossip (and especially where its content is practically untrue, in being understood out of context) unjustly lowers the esteem that a person is held amongst those he values. It can make it more difficult for the victim to communicate and have his words taken seriously. It ultimately impairs his connections with other people.

Arrogance tends to lower other people's feelings of self-worth. Many a good potential communicator was cut down because of a cynical and patronizing parent or teacher who in "cutting him or her down to size", gave the victim the notion of being unworthy of having anything to say or do that is of value; negative self-concepts which often persist throughout life. Those who suffer arrogance often feel they are unworthy to connect to others.

And finally greed. Because of bad experiences with the grasping and the avaricious, many tend to wrongly distrust people in general. "When he calls me, he's only doing it to see what he can get out of me". Such an outlook can create an atmosphere where people do not wish to reach out for fear that they do not want to be "used".

The Ohr HaChayim writes that the purpose of the metzora's social

isolation is indeed to encourage him to "think deeply about repenting, confess his sins to G-d in the knowledge that it is his evil speech that caused his present condition, resolve to speak in an acceptable manner, and take to mind that both his misfortune and his cure flowed from his misuse of words and a new awareness of its consequences".

That is how the Ohr HaChayim translates the opening words of the Parasha: zot tihyeh torat ha-metozora meaning this is the law of the person that had been "speaking bad" - motzi-ra, continuing with ki nirpa ha-nega hatzaraat min ha-tzarua, meaning that cause of plague; the gossip, arrogance, and greed, were indeed "cured"...