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*Parashat HaShavuah Series*

**Parashat Tazria-Metzora**

Was *tzara'at* (leprosy) a good thing or a bad thing? Was it a punishment or could it have been a reward? For the most part we view *tzara'at* as a punishment. Granted, the Talmud states that *tzara'at* on a building could have been a good thing. The Talmud relates that the Canaanite population, fearful of the Israelite invasion, hid their wealth in the walls and foundations of their homes. When *tzara'at* infected the walls, the building would be demolished and the treasure discovered. However, for the most part, *tzara'at* was a form of punishment.

If we consider the amount of attention and detail given by the Torah to this "affliction," we have to wonder why? Were the Israelites of those earlier generations so bad that *tzara'at* was a constant norm in their lives? Assuming that *tzara'at* was a punishment for speaking *Lashon Harah* – slander – it would seem from this week's Sedra that they were speaking a lot of *Lashon Harah*! By contrast, other complex laws are contained in a single *Pasuk*! Why does the Torah spend so much time on this topic?

Perhaps the Torah spent the most time and detail on those occasions where God's presence is most manifest. God's presence was most manifest in the *Beit Mikdash* (Temple) and *Mishkan*; therefore, the laws concerning Kohanim, *Korbanot*, purity and impurity, and the workings of the *Beit Mikdash* must be presented in great detail. They are by far the most extensive of all sets of laws presented in the Torah. Social laws, such as *tzedaka*, marriage, or education, are by comparison far less extensive. Please keep in mind that I refer to the presentation of laws as they are recorded in the Torah itself. I am not comparing the extensiveness of any of the laws as they are elaborated upon in the Talmud.

Therefore, the extensive treatment of *tzara'at* as presented in Tazria and Metzora must mean that the laws of *tzara'at* were a special occasion of God's manifestation.

*Tzara'at* was an affliction that was unique to the Land of Israel. We are told that if a similar condition would occur outside of Land of Israel, it would be referred to a doctor, not the local Kohain. Only in Land of Israel, the holiest country on earth, the country where God's presence is felt "from the beginning of the year to its end," did the laws of *tzara'at* apply.

*Tzara'at* was intended to bring the individual and the nation back to God. It was intended to motivate *Teshuva* (repentance). According to the Talmud, *tzara'at* was a punishment for *Lashon Harah*. Slander is an anti-social and destructive act. It insidiously harms its victim as well as all those involved in the sharing of the slander. However, the aim of all punishments is

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 Rabbi Wiesenthal resides in Illinois and is currently editing a major new halakhic *siddur*.

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to rehabilitate. It is not to exact vengeance. Therefore, if it was possible for the same goal to be accomplished without the trauma and public shame, *tzara'at* was not necessary.

We know that the Kohanim would not diagnose *tzara'at* during the time of *Aliya L'regel* (going to the Temple on the three holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot). The diagnosis would wait until after the Yom Tov.

With Pesach a recent reality, it behooves us to imagine what we missed out on because *Mashiach* hasn't yet arrived. The power of the crowd is well documented. Large multitudes of people gathering for any purpose, good or bad, has a primal influence that moves individuals to do great good or, unfortunately, great evil. The hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Israelites who traveled to Jerusalem to be *Oleh Regel* cannot be described. The power of the moment cannot be calculated. It was the greatest public display of devotion to God and His Torah imaginable. It was the greatest *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God's name).

What effect did such a scene have on a sinner waiting to be declared a *metzora* (leper)? Most of us can recall the power of the most recent world-wide *Siyum Hashas* (completing the study of the Talmud, which takes seven years) or *Birkat Kohanim* (blessing of the priests). Multitudes of Jews gathering for the glory of God and His Torah are occasions that propel us to greater heights of commitment and devotion. They challenge our assumed understanding of power and purpose, and redirect, if only for the moment, our minds and hearts. That was the experience of *Aliya L'regel* that enveloped and embraced the potential *metzora*.

The Kohanim would not diagnose *tzara'at* during the Yamim Tovim because they hoped that the experience of the holiday would motivate the sinner, especially the slanderer, to repent and avoid being declared a *metzora*.

*Tzara'at* was a public display of God's presence. When the Israelites merited such an overt display of God's displeasure, *tzara'at* applied. When the Israelites became distant from God and were exiled from their land, *tzara'at* ended. Therefore, in this way *tzara'at* was more positive than negative. God's presence is manifest in how He rewards and equally manifest in how He punishes. The key is to recognize God's power in all its manifestations.

The daily events here and in Israel should be constant reminders that this truly is God's world. He suffers our presence and rewards or punishes accordingly. We just borrow time for the chance to glimpse the Creator.

For having the opportunity to behold God's presence, may we even merit *tzara'at*.

*Shabbat Shalom!*

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