

Selichos Chizuk - The “Process”

The desperate, holy blasts of our shofar on Rosh Hashanah reflect the cries of the mother of one of the most barbaric Cananite generals in history, when she realized that he was killed in battle.

The prevalent custom is to blow one hundred blasts of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Tosafos (*Rosh Hashanah* 33b) quotes the *Aruch*, who bases this custom on a Midrash that draws a parallel between our one hundred blasts and the one hundred cries of the mother of Sisra, the Cananite general killed by Yael after he fled from the battle waged against him by Barak and Devorah (Shoftim chapter 5).

Rav Soloveitchik explained that her cries are the model for our teshuva. At first, she was nervous when Sisra did not return in a timely manner, and she groaned, fearing the worst. Despite the attempts of her family and friends to reassure her — “To the contrary, his delayed arrival is a sign that the spoils of war are so numerous,” they said — as time dragged on, she began to sob. Finally, word came back that he would not be coming home ever again. Upon hearing that news, she completely broke down in tears. Our shofar blasts are an external expression of our internal breakdown. At first, we groan (*tekiah*), but the yeitzer hara tries to convince us that there is really nothing wrong. If we are successful, we will begin to sob (*shevarim*), as we begin to internalize that there is work to be done. Finally, we break down (*teruah*), in a realization that we are so far from our potential connection to Hashem.

Not only does true change require a sincere process, the lowering of our



Rabbi Etan Berman

Rebbi, Stone Beit Midrash Program, YU
Rabbi, Kehillas Zichron Dovid of Pomona, NY

defense mechanisms does as well.

In a completely different area of Torah, Hakadosh Baruch Hu expresses how critical this process is to Him:

הַשְׁמֵר בְּנִגְעַת הַצִּרְעָתָה לְשִׁמּוֹר מְאֹד וְלַעֲשׂוֹת כָּלל
אֲשֶׁר יִירוּ אֶתְכֶם הַכְּהֹנִים הַלְוִיִּם כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתֶם
תִּשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת. זְכוֹר אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
לְמִרְיָם בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצִאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם.

In cases of a skin affliction be most careful to do exactly as the Levitical priests instruct you. Take care to do as I have commanded them. Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam on the journey after you left Egypt.

Devarim 24:8-9

In unusual fashion, the Torah warns us to be very careful to follow the rules of a *tzaraas* affliction. Apparently, there is a concern that the laws of *tzaraas* will not be properly observed.

The very next statement of the Torah (these two verses are a section in and of themselves as demonstrated by the *stumos* bookending them) is an instruction to remember what Hashem did to Miriam on the way, when Bnei Yisroel left Mitzrayim. How is that instruction related to the prior warning? Does remembering Miriam encourage the observance of the *tzaraas* laws, or is it a distinct idea?

Rashi explains (based on the Gemara, *Shabbos* 94b) that the first verse is a prohibition to remove any element of the *tzaraas* that would purify it.

In order to be problematic, a *tzaraas* affliction must possess two white hairs. If one were to remove a white hair (with tweezers, for example), the affliction would no longer be impure. Despite the fact that it would work to remove the *tzaraas* — or perhaps *because* it would work — its removal is prohibited. Rashi then quotes the *Sifrei* that the next verse adds that if one wants to avoid having *tzaraas* altogether, he should remember what Hashem did to Miriam — He gave her *tzaraas* for speaking lashon hara. If one wants to avoid *tzaraas*, rather than plucking out white hairs after he already has it, he should avoid speaking lashon hara in the first place.

The Netziv however, in *Haamek Davar* Devarim 24:9, sees another message here. It is not clear that Miriam had the status of a *metzora* at all. When Moshe discovered that Miriam had a *tzaraas* affliction, he davened to Hashem to heal her, which was an unusual response to *tzaraas*. Did her *tzaraas* go away as soon as Moshe davened? Why did Aharon not examine her affliction and deal with her as a *metzora*? Hashem told Moshe that because of her actions she should spend seven days outside of the camp. If she was being sent out of the camp for seven days as a technical “*hesger*,” (required isolation), why did Hashem make a specific instruction both to send her out and to bring her back in

after seven days? It seems that she was merely exiled from the camp for seven days and then brought back, without going through the remainder of the *metzora* process. How do we explain this? (See Bamidbar chapter 12)

The Talmud (*Zevachim* 102a) seems to be bothered by this when it asks who dealt with the *tzaraas* of Miriam (who sent her out)? A Kohen has to pronounce a *tzaraas* affliction impure, but all of the Kohanim were Miriam's relatives, and a relative cannot rule on a relative's *tzaraas* affliction. So who, in fact, dealt with her *tzaraas*? The Talmud answers that Hashem did it Himself. Tosafos asks: if no one can rule on her affliction, then it remains pure and she is not a *metzora*. If so, what is the point of the Gemara and what is Aharon so upset and nervous about (see Bamidbar 12:11-12)? Tosafos have no answer.

The Netziv answers the question. While it is true that sometimes the pain of a *tzaraas* affliction is sufficient to atone for the *metzora*, when *motzi shem ra* (lashon hara that is not true) is involved, the sin is worse, and requires one to go through the entire *metzora* process in order for the individual to atone (being exiled from the camp, having to shave all of his hair, bringing a sacrifice etc.). The fact that no one could deal with her *tzaraas* technically meant that she would never be able to go through the purification process and that she would not be able to achieve the necessary atonement! That would be a disaster.

What did Hashem do for Miriam? He created a unique purification process that normally did not exist, in order to allow her to atone for her sin.

“Remember what Hashem did to Miriam” — Hashem did two things to

Miriam. He gave her *tzaraas*, but He also gave her a way to rectify the sin that caused it.

When a person finds himself in a situation in which he has more than just the pain of a *tzaraas* affliction, he is told by the Kohen that his *tzaraas* is impure and he must go through the entire process. While the easy way out would be to pluck out a hair, to remove the affliction, that is prohibited, because the Torah wants him to go through a process of change. If he has difficulty inspiring himself to go through the process, he should remind himself what Hashem did to Miriam. Remember how critical the process is!

Growth or change, in any respect, physical or spiritual, takes place in steps and stages. Skipping a step developmentally results in failure at best and regression or degeneration at worst.

This time of year, it is important to remember what Hashem did to Miriam. He performed a miracle, so that she could have a pathway to atone for her wrongdoing. He created a process for her.

Selichos is a similar process. In the same manner that Sisra's mother cried, we need to peel away layers of defense mechanisms to expose our feeling heart. Unfortunately, if we are not careful, we may feel their power the first night of Selichos and after that, we might read through them without feeling. In reality, the Selichos should be more and more meaningful and urgent as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur approach. We cannot simply make our blemishes disappear — remember what Hashem did to Miriam.

Tzara'at Imagery in the Admission of Guilt

The *tzara'at* imagery is used in Tehillim to symbolize sin. Tehillim chapter 51 is the prayer that King David offered after he was confronted by Natan the prophet regarding the incident with Batsheva. The verse (Tehillim 51:9) states:

תְּחַטְּאֵנִי בְּאִזְבִּיחַ וְאֶטְהַר וְתִכְבְּסֵנִי וּמִשְׁלֵג אֶלְבִּין.

Purge me with hyssop till I am pure; wash me till I am whiter than snow.

Radak explains why the hyssop is mentioned:

כי העון בנפש כמו הכתם בבגד או נגע צרעת בגוף. ואמר תחטאני, כמו שמחטאים באזוב שהוא סוף הטהרה שמוזין עליו באזוב, כן תחטאני מעוני. והחיתוי הוא הסרת החטא.

The sin is to the soul like the stain is to a garment or tzara'at is to the body.

It states "purge me" just as purging is done with the hyssop, which is the end of the purification [of the metzora], when the waters are sprinkled with the hyssop. Similarly, purge me of my sins. The purging is the removal of the sin.

Malbim adds that the hyssop specifically represents humility. This imagery fits nicely with the comment of R. Azariah Figo, *Binah L'Ittim* derush no. 40, who contrasts King David's admission of guilt with King Shaul's. When King Shaul is confronted by Shmuel, he admits he is wrong, but makes an excuse (Shmuel I 15:32). When King David is confronted by Natan, he states, "I have sinned to HaShem" (Shmuel II 12:13), without making any excuses. King Shaul's sin and his lack of proper admission led to the end of his reign, whereas King David's humility in admitting wrongdoing became a hallmark trait of his leadership of the Jewish people.

Torah To Go Editors