



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Tazria-Metzora 5780

Psyched for Torah: Searching for Meaning

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Viktor Frankl was a famous Jewish psychiatrist and a Holocaust survivor. In his 1946 book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, he chronicles his experiences in Auschwitz and the tenets of his psychotherapeutic method, logotherapy, which he argues is what helped him cope through the traumatic and horrific experiences of the Holocaust. Three of his essential and related messages are that (1) we all have free will to choose our mental responses, even amidst suffering; (2) our mission in life should be to seek meaning, not to merely gain pleasure or to avoid pain; and (3) we obtain meaning by living a life that focuses on values and ideals.

In describing the wisdom, internal structure, and depth of the Hebrew alphabet, the mystical work *Sefer Yetzira* highlights the connection between the word *nega* (affliction; spelled nun-gimmel-ayin) and the word *oneg* (pleasure; spelled ayin-nun-gimmel): “There is no good higher than *oneg* and no evil lower than *nega*.” The word *nega* is used often in *Parshiyot Tazria* and *Metzora* to describe the disease of *tzara'at*. Building off of the *Sefer Yetzira*, several commentators reflect on the relationship of the *nega* of *tzara'at* to the inverse concept of *oneg*.

For example, the *Chidushei HaRim* points out that the only difference between *oneg* and *nega* is the place of the *ayin* within the word. In *oneg* the *ayin* is in the front of the word and in *nega* it is at the end. When explaining the laws pertaining to *tzara'at* of clothing, the *pasuk* states that if after washing, “the affliction has not changed its appearance (*ha-nega lo hafach et eyno*)... it is contaminated... (*Vayikra 12:55*). The *Chidushei HaRim* suggests a homiletic reading. The term “*et eyno*,” translated as “its appearance” can be read

as “its *ayin*,” referencing the letter *ayin*, with an additional layer of meaning, namely, its eye, or vision. The difference between a *nega* and *oneg* is a matter of *ayin*, or perspective.

To be clear, *oneg* in this context does not mean physical pleasure, nor does it necessarily mean a surreal, detached, obliviousness to pain. *Oneg* is a spiritual pleasure, which doesn't completely negate pain, but alleviates it by infusing meaning. It is the pleasure that comes when despite pain, one can change one's perspective and still commit oneself to living a life steeped in values and ideals.

Perhaps this is why, as the *Sefat Emet* explains, the impurity of the *metzora* lasts seven days, as it ensures that he or she experiences *Shabbat* as part of the process. The pleasure and meaning one derives from *Shabbat* are reparative. *Sefat Emet* also points out that the word *tzara'at* (*tzadi-reish-ayin-tav*) has the same letters as the word *atzeret* (*ayin-tzadi-reish-tav*), which is a reference to the holiday of *Shavuot*. *Shavuot*, representing the acceptance and study of Torah, provides the antidote for the pain and suffering of *tzara'at*.

While we generally hope to avoid pain and suffering, in cases where it is out of our control, the only thing in our control, is our response. While it is incredibly challenging, we can work on shifting our perspective and investing our lives with value and meaning, despite the pain. By suffusing our lives with the meaning that permeates a Torah lifestyle, we can hopefully change any *nega* we may experience to one of *oneg*.

Internalizing a Torah Ideal

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

The fifteenth chapter of the book of Vayikra deals primarily with laws of ritual purity. Looking at the latter part of the chapter, we see focus on the area of niddah, concerning “purity/uncleanness”, or tahara and tuma, as they apply to women. At the end of this section, the Torah presents what would appear to be a strict warning (Vayikra 15:31):

“And you shall separate (vehezartem) the children of Israel from their uncleanness, so that they will not die on account of their uncleanness, if they defile My Sanctuary (mishkani) which is in their midst”

The term “vehezartem” sounds very much like a warning (azhara), and some of the commentaries note the similarity. Rashi and Ibn Ezra understand the meaning to be one of separation, similarly found with the nazir, the individual who takes a vow to abstain from wine (among other things). Therefore, the verse is warning the Jewish people to ensure they remain separate from the state of tuma.

The Sages, as quoted in the Talmud, carved out a specific prohibition regarding this verse. The above chapter is clear about the prohibition concerning a husband and wife having relations when she is in a state of tuma. Engaging in such actions are a heinous sin. Due to the above additional warning, the Sages derived a prohibition for a husband and wife to have relations prior to the onset of her becoming a niddah. Of course, on a practical level, this makes perfect sense. The mandate of the Sages concerns protecting the Torah law, and there is no reason to “take a chance” and end up with both husband and wife violating a severe Torah prohibition. There is a philosophical aspect to the Rabbinical decree here as well. The Torah Temimah notes the use of the term as it relates to the nazir, who abstains from that which is 100% permitted to him. Before he took upon himself the status of a nazir, he could enjoy wine; now, the wine is forbidden. In a similar fashion, there is some benefit for the husband and wife to abstain from relations, even though technically it is permitted. The Sages see some ideological benefit to the prohibition, beyond the “mere” technical aspect. What exactly is this benefit?

There is another part of the above verse that seems odd. The literal understanding of the term “mishkani” would be “My Sanctuary”, ostensibly referring to the Tabernacle/

Temple. However, this is a difficult interpretation, as the violation of the prohibition does not seem to be tied to the Tabernacle/Temple (unlike, say, an error in the sacrificial process). Many commentators therefore understand the term “mishkani” as a more general expression of the Divine presence. The Torah Temimah cites another idea of the Sages found in the Talmud, where the Divine presence is located between a man and his wife. He thus deduces that the issue of violating the laws of tuma would be a desecration of that presence. Others, such as Rav Hirsch, reframe the problem in the context of the nation as a whole. When the Jewish people disregard the laws of tuma, it has a detrimental effect on the status of the Divine presence among the people.

One of the bedrocks of Jewish law is the concept of control over our instinctual needs and desires. Humans are created with an abundance of these needs, manifested in areas such as food and sexuality. These forces are quite powerful, pulling us in a direction more in line with a carefree hedonism. Of course this does not mean, by definition, that someone who rejects the Torah approach becomes a hedonist. Nor does it mean the Torah seeks out a system of repression and ascetism; contrary to some, we should enjoy the world around us. Rather, the Torah provides guidelines to help balance the gratification of these desires with a focus on control over them. Ultimately, such an approach helps guide man to separate himself from the surrounding animal world. Such a focus ensures our minds are freed up to engage in the study of God and the Torah. Understanding this vehicle to perfection is a fundamental aspect in our advancement as humans.

When we turn to the laws of family purity, we see that violation of these laws leads to extremely harsh consequences. There is a powerful deterrent in place, a natural obstacle to the individual’s choice in adherence. As well, the idea of the authority of the Torah being the source of the prohibition lends another significant aspect to the decision to adhere. We cannot violate because we are subservient to God’s will. The actions are forbidden, and therefore there is nothing more to speak about. This is the very point the Sages are focusing on with their additional commandment. It is critical we can concentrate primarily on the objective of this entire system of prohibitions.

The idea of self-control in the context of balance should be apparent in our thinking, a “pure” form where no Torah deterrent exists. The individuals act in a manner to separate themselves, to express an act of self-control, to bring to mind the very objective of this entire system of commandments. The Sages maintained that while one can experience this reality during the time when relations are forbidden, a preparatory moment where this idea is crystallized would be extremely beneficial.

The centrality of self-control is evident in the admonition offered concerning the Divine presence. There is a twofold objective in any relationship between husband and wife. On a halachic level, there is the goal of fulfilling the commandment of procreation. The other objective concerns the two working together to improve each other. Both husband and wife join to create a foundation of Torah, relying on each other to constantly progress. The success of the relationship can be seen in the greater ideological growth and perfection of traits. The idea of the Divine presence refers to the attachment of the couple to the path laid out by God. According to the

Torah Temimah, rejecting this path, expressed through the violation of the commandments of tuma, would upend the core values of the relationship. The other opinions emphasize the individual and his relationship to the nation as a whole. The violation of these commandments is an outright rebuff of one of the defining features of being a Jew. To abandon the idea of self-control, indulging in one’s instincts, undermines the very basic identity of the Jew. This is the reference to the Divine presence being defiled, where the core relationship between the nation and God is threatened.

What we can glean from the above verse is a window into one of the fundamental aspects of Judaism. The concept of creating an ideal balance between humanity and the physical world is a constant theme in Jewish law and philosophy. We can enjoy that which we are surrounded by, but must engage everything with our minds. Ensuring we exhibit control leads to us using the world around us a vehicle to growth. The area of family purity exemplifies this objective, spelled out in the additional warning, and subsequent opportunity, found in the above verse.

Creating Clouds of Glory in Our Times

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s double parshios, Tazria-Metzora, we once again read of the affliction of tzara’as, which perhaps is aptly defined as a spiritual malady with a physical manifestation. According to his sin, and the degree of sin, a person may notice an eruption of tzara’as on his clothing, the walls of his home, or his body, with varying degrees of color and severity. According to the diagnosis of the kohen, the individual may be declared impure with negah tzara’as.

His punishment? בודד ישב מחוץ למחנה מושבו - He is to sit alone, in solitude, outside of all three camps, pondering his sin, and calling out to all passerby, טמא טמא יקרא - “impure, impure!” so that others shall stay away from him, his impurity and his sin (see Vayikra 13:45-46 w/ Rashi).

What are the underlying causes of tzara’as?

R’ Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R’ Yochanan: על שבעה דברים נגעים באין - Tzaraas afflictions come upon a person for any one of seven sinful things: על לשון הרע ועל שפיכות דמים ועל שבועת שוא ועל גילוי עריות ועל גסות הרוח ועל הגזל ועל צרות העין - for the sins of: (1) lashon

harah (2) murder (3) vain oaths (4) illicit relations (5) haughtiness (6) theft and (7) stinginess (Arachin 16a).

Rashi (to Vayikra 14:4) quotes both the sins of lashon harah and ga’sus ha’ruach/gay’vah (haughtiness) as the causes for the tzara’as malady.

It is fitting, therefore, that since the Metzora - the one who was motzi shem rah (spoke badly about others) - caused a divide between people with his poisonous attitude, and venomous words, he is to be separated from society, to dwell alone (Rashi to 13:46), all the days that the affliction plagues him.

As we read these parshios once again (halavay that we would merit to return to Beis Knesses and hear them read from our holy Sifrei Torah), it is an opportune time to remind ourselves of the power, blessing, and danger of the spoken word.

R’ Yaakov Edelstein zt’l (1924-2017 - chief rabbi of Ramat HaSharon, Israel) teaches, “There is a terrible illness - tongue disease. A person gets used to talking, and he

can't feel the words coming out of his mouth. Speech is automatic. In Chovos Ha'Levavos (Duties of the Heart), it is written that a person has to get into the habit of thinking that the hardest thing for him to move is his tongue.

“Before a person walks anywhere, he thinks about where he is going. He needs to make a decision. His hands and feet don't move automatically without his thinking about it. When a person picks up a hammer to pound in a nail, he thinks about what exactly he needs to do. But speech emerges from a person's mouth. He needs to make it a habit of thinking that moving the tongue is harder than moving a hand or leg. This way he will think before he speaks, before he says a word” (Reaching for Heaven, Artscroll, p.145-146).

How powerful is the spoken word, which can create worlds; and how dangerous is the very same tool, which can destroy worlds. As the holy Chafetz Chaim zt'l wrote in his hakdamah (introduction) to his Sefer Kuntres Chovas Ha'Shemirah: ככל הדברים בדבורו של אדם יכול לברוא עולמות - ולהחריבן - the sum of the matter is, that with words, man can create worlds, and with words, man can destroy worlds.

The Sages teach (Taanis 9a) that the Clouds of Glory that protected the Israelites in the desert for forty years were in the merit of Aharon Ha'Kohen, the man of peace. R' Yitzchok Zilberstein offers a fascinating chiddush as to why Aharon, the lover and pursuer of peace, merited to create these special Clouds.

R' Zilberstein writes, “A person has the power to sow discord, but he also has great power to create a protective shield through love and unity towards his fellow Jews.

“During the forty years that the Jewish people were in the Wilderness, they were protected by the Clouds of

Glory, which came in the merit of Aharon. We generally think of these clouds as a miraculous spiritual entity that existed only during the time that the Jews were in the desert. But the truth is that we can recreate these protective clouds even today. How?

“The Sifsei Tzaddik (d.1920, Poland) teaches, “The laws of science confirm that the vapor that leaves the mouth of two people who love each other join together in the air. Aharon ha'Kohen loved peace and pursued peace, and because of him, all of the Jewish people loved one another. In Aharon's merit, the vapor that emerged from the mouths of the 600,000 Jews combined to create the Clouds of Glory.”

“We see from here that when two friends speak to each other with love and camaraderie, the invisible spiritual ‘vapors’ that leave their mouths combine to form ‘Clouds of Glory’ that have the power to protect the Jewish people from harm.

“What a profound insight that ought to inspire each of us to strengthen our friendships (with one another)” (Aleinu L'Shabei'ach, Vayikra, p.182-183).

Let us learn from the sins of the metzora has we ought not to behave, and let us learn from Aharon, our great leader, how we must behave. As we read in Pirkei Avos this past Shabbos: הָלַל אֹמֶרָה, הָיִי מִתְלַמְּדֵי שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם, הִלֵּל אֹמֶרָה - וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמִקְרָבָן לַתּוֹרָה - Hillel used to say: Be of the students of Aharon, love peace, pursue peace, love people and bring them close to Torah (Avos 1:12).

Perhaps, if we can think before we speak (halavay!), thereby creating worlds, we too will merit to create (proverbial) Clouds of Glory, where all of Israel can reside within, together as one - כאיש אחד בלב אחד - basking in Divine Protection and blessing.

Expansive Eye

Mrs. Shira Smiles (Adapted by Channie Koplowitz Stein)

These two parshiot of Tazria and Metzora deal extensively with the laws of tzoraas, liberally but incorrectly translated as leprosy. When a person is suspected of being afflicted with tzoraas, he is brought not to a medical doctor, but to Aharon or another kohein for a proper diagnosis and treatment. The tzoraas can be detected in the skin, the hair, the clothing, or the housing of the individual. If the kohein declares him contaminated,

the afflicted one is sent outside of the camp into social isolation until the appearance, literally the eye, of the affliction has changed, and he is declared purified and “healed.”

Long before modern medicine theorized the connections between psychological, spiritual and physical wellness, the Torah proclaimed that these were linked, that man was in fact a holistic entity. Therefore, writes

Rabbi Munk, healing will be achieved by reestablishing the balance and harmony between the varying aspects of man's being. The laws surrounding the diagnosis and cure for tzoraas bear witness to the Torah's wisdom.

If we are to look for a cure for tzoraas, we must search for its source. Our Sages find several sources in the Tanach that point to spiritual and psychological "viruses" that had infected the individual so afflicted. Among the seven causes listed in the Gemara, three are actually blemishes of the personality more than sinful acts. These are *loshon horo*/evil, negative speech, *gasus ruach*/arrogance/haughtiness and *tzoras iyin*/envy/miserliness/narrowness of the eye.

Since only a *kohein* can diagnose this affliction, one must ask why a *kohain* is best suited to this task as opposed to any other person or doctor. Rabbi Druck shows how Aharon and his descendents the *kohanim* exhibit the exact negation of these three traits. Aharon was known for his love of others, a trait that belies the underlying cause of *loshon horo*. Further, when Bnei Yisroel complained to Moshe and Aharon about having only manna to eat, both Moshe, also known for his humility, and Aharon completely minimized their own importance, saying, "Who are we? We are nothing." Finally, when Hashem appointed Moshe to lead Bnei Yisroel out of Mitzrayim, Aharon was truly happy in his heart at Moshe's appointment to this leadership position even though he himself had been the leader of Bnei Yisroel the entire time Moshe was away in Midyan. Aharon did not resent being passed over the leadership ladder. These personal characteristics made Aharon and his descendents perfect mentors for those who may suffer from these character flaws. The antidote for such anti social behavior, as well as the other sins that cause tzoraas, is social isolation.

Loshon horo, the best known cause of tzoraas, has its roots in envy and in *tzoras iyin*, writes Rabbi Grosbard in *Daas Schrage*. It comes from a faulty perspective of one's purpose generated by a lack of *emunah*/faith. As such, it is not generated by external factors, but by one's inner faulty vision. When one realizes that we are all beloved by Hashem Who has given each of us everything we need to serve Him to our fullest potential, creating our own happiness, we will not be jealous of others, and we will not speak badly of them. Reaching this perspective takes introspection, and requires time away from the hectic rat race of our daily lives. The isolation imposed

on the *metzora* helps him go through this process of internalization and self analysis. Perhaps this is also the message and the opportunity the current mandated self isolation provides for us to reach a better appreciation of ourselves, of our purpose, and of our relationship with Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

When Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai asked his students what is the proper path one should follow in life, he accepted as best the path recommended by Rav Elazar ben Hyrkanos, the path of an *iyin tova*/a good, expansive eye. Its opposite, the *iyin raah*/negative eye leads to many sins, especially to *loshon horo*, explains Rabbi Reiss in *Meirosh Tzurim*. If one has a good, benevolent eye, one escapes the trap of jealousy, for he recognizes that what his friend has which he does not have would do him no good, much like a pair of glasses with your friend's prescription. When the *kohein* goes out to see you in your isolation, writes Rabbi Yosef Fogel in *Siach Yosef*, we are reminded of Aharon himself who went joyously to greet his brother albeit Moshe was just appointed to take over the reins of leadership from Aharon himself.

Every aspect of the purification process is equally symbolic. For example, through immersion in water and through shaving his entire body, the *metzora* is symbolically being reborn and beginning the new growth process, writes Rabbi Munk. Shaving offers a very specific lesson, notes Letitcha Elyon. Just as no two hairs can grow from one follicle, so too can there be no two people exactly alike with the same mission. Each person has his own unique place, and is beloved for it.

Since creation, Hashem has set boundaries for every element of creation, including man., adds Rabbi Grosbard. The boundaries allow everything to function in sync with each other rather than destroy each other. Fire and water can work together if the water is contained in a kettle or a pot and doesn't want to take the place of the fire. Similarly, each person must live and work within the "boundaries" Hashem has set for him, within the assets and talents Hashem has provided for him. All that is meant to be his has already been decided on Rosh Hashanah. To assume that you are more deserving of what your friend has demonstrates a lack of *emunah*. Therefore, Rabbi Lugassi points out, every morning we bless Hashem Who has given me all that I need, both physically and spiritually.

Instead of comparing yourself to others, instructs us Rabbi Wolbe, look inside yourself, examine your personal

potential and strive to reach that potential. When you realize you have everything you need to achieve that goal, you will be happy for what others have and for their successes.

In this context, Rabbi Fogel brings a beautiful and novel perspective to Yaakov Avinu's blessings to his sons before his death. Before he blesses them, he asks them to gather all together. His purpose, according to Rabbi Fogel citing the Brisker Rav, was for each to hear the blessings of the others, so each would understand his unique role and the gifts he has with which to accomplish it. That way there would be no jealousy of what the other has, for it serves no purpose in his own mission. As we recite at the end of every Shemoneh Esreh, "Bless us all together, our Father, as one, with the light of Your countenance..." The lesson of the tzoraas is that we become happy for the other, not just refrain from jealousy. When you look with a "good eye," you are looking not only at what they have, but also at what they are. You are searching for all their positive attributes rather than at their faults. When you look at others with a negative eye, you do more harm to yourself than to them. [It is these people that we hear referred to as "farbissen/ embittered", and few people want to socialize with them. Isolation, even without tzoraas is being imposed upon them by their own negative perspective. CKS]

Not everything can become contaminated with tzoraas. The Torah lists among fabrics only wool and linen that can be thus contaminated. Rabbi Kasbah in Vayomer Yehudah suggests that these two materials are meant to remind us of the first case of jealousy and its results, the jealousy between Cain and Abel whose disparate offerings to Hashem and Hashem's response brought Cain to kill Abel his brother. It may also be the reason, as some of our commentators explain, for the prohibition of shatnez.

Not only a person's body and his clothing may be afflicted with tzoraas, but also the walls of his home may be afflicted as well. In that case, everything is removed from the home before the kohein declares it contaminated. If the contamination persists, the wall is broken and the contaminated bricks are removed. An interesting medrash tells us that breaking the walls would reveal treasures that the original Amorites had hidden in the walls, not wanting anyone to benefit from these riches, especially the conquering Israelites, if they themselves could not do so. However, if tzoraas was meant as a punishment, how could

inheriting these riches serve an instructional purpose?

Rabbi Zev Leff in Shiurei Binah tries to reconcile this problem. First, one must understand that the underlying cause of all the sins incurring the punishment of tzoraas stem from one's tzoras iyin, his selfish, narrow vision, his feeling that everything belongs to him, his sense of entitlement and unwillingness to share. Someone like this will often lie and say he doesn't have what his neighbor has asked to borrow. When all his possessions are now brought out of the house into the open, his lie is revealed and he undoubtedly feels embarrassed. This embarrassment becomes a corrective measure, and he may now enjoy the new found riches and, hopefully, share with others.

Rabbi Leff offers an additional, completely different perspective on this question. He notes that the only vessels that would actually become contaminated from the tzoraas without the possibility of purification are earthenware vessels of relatively insignificant value. Their value lies not in an expensive material from which they may be formed such as gold or silver vessels, but in their function in what they contain. Their value lies in their functionality. Therefore, earthenware vessels do not become impure from external contact, but from the inside out. The lesson driven home here is that all one's possessions, including one's very self, are meant to serve a function and to be shared in service to Hashem and to others, not merely to be hoarded. Knowing that all one has can be elevated in service, a tzadik values even something of little financial worth. That's why Yaakov put himself in danger to retrieve some small earthenware jugs, and then had to fight the angel for their possession. Only after the metzora has learned this lesson can he enjoy the treasures behind his walls.

The Torah uses an interesting turn of phrase for the kohein's reexamination of the contaminated clothing and vessels to determine if they have been "cured." The Torah commands the kohein to examine the contamination to see if it has changed its appearance. Appropriate words would be color, depth, or the Hebrew mareihu/appearance. Instead, the Torah writes that the affliction has not changed eineihu/its eye. The Aish Tamid cites the Sefas Emes in explaining this homiletically. If the person being afflicted has not changed his "eye," his perspective, he remains contaminated.

Rabbi Schorr in Halekach Vehalebuv further develops

this idea. The affliction of tzoraas appears initially on a person's skin, on his ohr. This ohr is spelled with the letter iyin. However, its homonym ohr, spelled with an aleph is light. Man's inner essence, his soul, is the light of God surrounded by its outer garment of skin. The metzora must change his perspective from the iyin of skin/ohr to see the inner light/ohr with an aleph within each individual.

In Hebrew, oneg/pleasure and nega/affliction are written with exactly the same letters in reverse order. The difference lies only in where you put your iyin/eye. It is our attitude and perspective which determines whether

we experience pleasure or affliction, whether we are happy or sad. Changing where our eye, our iyin rests can even change a heavenly decree, The ohni/poor man can be rich (at least in his own eye) by rearranging the three identical letters of both words.

The correct "eye" is understanding that we are all servants of Hashem, With that perspective, we can look at each other with a positive eye and positive mindset, and transform our current nega/affliction to oneg/pleasure IY" H in the very near future.

The Torah's Deafening Silence About Tzaraat

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

A central project of Chazal and Rishonim was to understand the rationale for mitzvot. Sometimes, however, the gap between the Torah's silence as to the rationale, and the rabbinic expansion upon that rationale, is jarring. To illustrate a similar sentiment by narratives: the Torah tells of the anonymous wood cutter who violated Shabbat in the desert. (Bamidbar 15) Rabbi Akiva (Shabbat 96b) identifies him as Tzelofchad. In that same Talmudic passage, Rabbi Akiva is taken to task for this identification; Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteirah says, "If you are correct, the Torah concealed his identity, and you reveal it. If you are incorrect, you are unjustly slandering that righteous man. (Shabbat 96b)

Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteirah contends that if the Torah left him anonymous, there must have been a reason. Thus, even if Rabbi Akiva was correct, he should have allowed the Torah to hide the identity of the wood cutter.

When contrasting the biblical and rabbinic presentation of tzaraat, one feels the same dynamic at play. The Torah devotes two parshiyot to discussing one who suffers from the malady of tzaraat, whether that which affects his or her body, garments, or home. It describes in detail how the disease is diagnosed by a kohen, treated, and purity restored. Yet, in all that space, there is not a single word as to why one contracts the disease.

The silence is so absolute, that some commentaries suggest that it is merely a natural disease! Rav Yochanan in the Talmud (Ketubot 77b), for example, writes, "For what

reason are there no lepers in Babylonia? Because they eat beets, drink beer, and bathe in the waters of the Euphrates." (Koren translation) As noted on AlHatorah.org, this seems to indicate that it is a sickness that can be avoided by a healthy lifestyle. Even if one rejects this implication, several commentaries indeed took this position, such as Ralbag. (Vayikra 11:47, 13)

The majority view of Chazal and the commentaries is that it is caused by sin – whether it be lashon hara (gossip and/ or breaching confidentiality) and arrogance, which are most often cited, or a host of other sins such as theft, murder, and pointless vows (Arachin 15b-16a and elsewhere). However, in the spirit of Rabbi Yehudah ben Beteirah's challenge to Rabbi Akiva – if tzaraat was a punishment, why was this never said explicitly in the Torah?

Perhaps the message is that tzaraat, like many other tragedies, is meant to cause general introspection. Shlomo

HaMelech, for example, writes that it is good to attend a house of mourning because "the living will take it to heart." (Kohelet 7:2) As Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik developed in several places, halachah cares less about why suffering happens than it does that human beings react productively in response.

This approach is in consonance with that of Shadal and Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Hofman. Shadal (Vayikra 12:2) contends that in the ancient world, people reacted to tzaraat as if it indicated that the person had been rejected

by G-d, and thus they eschewed contact with him. The Torah took advantage of this natural reaction, as it encouraged people to think about providence and reward and punishment, and incorporated it into halachah. Rabbi Hoffman, on the other hand, argues that impurity is symbolic, though not the consequence of sin. “Tzara’at does not generate tum’a because it results from the sin [for this is not always the case; other illnesses also result from various sins but do not generate tum’a]. Rather, tzara’at generates tum’a because the outward appearance of the disease is the symbolic image of the sinner.” (translation from <https://bit.ly/2FRUWd5>).

Considering an Israel-less World

Rabbi Yosie Levine

Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of having lunch with Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, the Chief Rabbi of Moscow. And when the conversation turned to the topic of anti-Semitism, he made a fascinating observation. “The mindset of the European Jew,” he said, “is totally different from that of the American. In the back of his mind, the European Jew always knows that in any given week, the day may come when he has to abandon his life in Europe and seek safety in the land of Israel.”

For so many Jews around the world, Yom Haatzmaut celebrates this aspect of Israel: The land of refuge – the safe haven of last resort should terror or violence make Jewish life untenable elsewhere.

And perhaps somewhere way at the back of our consciousness, we American Jews share this sentiment; but it’s certainly not top of mind. What, then, should be on our minds as we celebrate the anniversary of Israel’s independence? With the passage of the years – now that Israel has been so woven into the fabric of our Jewish vocabulary – how can we properly appreciate the value of Israel in our lives?

Of all the characters in the Torah, the one that seems to get the most disproportionate amount of attention is the Metzora. We have chapters and chapters about his diagnosis and his treatment – the process by which he reintegrates into the community. And the question is why?

And I think Chazal answer the question when they tell us about the nature of sin writ large:

A lot people violate – in some form or fashion – the

By representing sin, and forcing one to enter a purification process, halachah ensures that tzaraat educates people about the results of sin in general.

Even if this view is incorrect, and the dominant view, that tzaraat is indeed a punishment, is correct, the point still stands. The Torah’s silence should remind us that even more important than identifying the specific sin that results in a punishment, is the message that all tragedy and difficulties in life should be taken as reminders that we must constantly examine our lives and seek ways to improve how we act religiously and ethically.

prohibition against theft; A few people violate the prohibition against sexual misconduct. But all of us are guilty of speaking

The Torah spills so much ink on the Metzora because the Metzora is every man. It’s each of us. None of us goes through life without falling into the trap of misusing our words. These chapters aren’t some obscure relic of an ancient time. They’re a gift whose message is relevant to each and every one of us.

It’s with this premise in mind that I want to share an observation about this person we call the Metzora and a part of the process by which he rehabilitates himself.

At the beginning of the second parsha we read this morning, the Torah tells us how the Kohen facilitates the Metzora’s return. He takes two birds. The first is slaughtered; the second is set free.

And the question is why: Why two birds?

It’s really quite anomalous. We don’t find this anywhere else in the Torah. If someone is bringing a sacrifice to the temple, it’s a sacrifice. Nobody brings a pair of oxen and then lets one go.

There’s only one analog and that’s the se’ir l’azazel on Yom Kippur. But even in that case, the animal that’s removed from the Temple is ultimately sent to his death.

So what does it mean for the Metzora’s birds to be released into the field?

What I’d like to suggest is that the two birds are intended to symbolize the two paths that were open to the Metzora: One path leads to decay and demise; the other to liberty and life.

Before he can come back into the community of Israel, the Torah insists that he stops to consider the road not taken. What would have happened if instead of resorting to some debased comment at a dinner party, I chose instead to elevate the conversation? What would have happened if instead of piling on to a heap of insults, I chose instead to pivot away from all that negativity? What would have happened if instead of grumbling about all the things that were wrong with the evening, I chose instead to harp on everything that went right?

Here are two identical birds, the Torah says. Both paths are open because both fates are open. And so it is for all of us all of the time.

It's one of the most ancient and most profound means by which we can elevate our decisionmaking. Imagine if we really carved out the time to consider the counterfactuals in our lives – imagine if we created the space to think about what could have been had we only made a slightly different choice.

It's an exercise that throws into relief the consequences of the decisions we make all the time. It's not just the process of taking stock; it's much more sophisticated. It's the process of examining the significance of our decisions by actively comparing our reality to an alternate reality in which we've made an alternate decision.

And we don't have to wait until Yom Kippur. I think the Torah is telling us that – just like the Metzora – any of us can benefit from this process at any time. And it doesn't have to be unidirectional. It's not just about decisions we question or regret. It's also the way to deepen our appreciation for the choices about which we're proud.

There's a whole genre of books and movies that take up this project.

- What if Lincoln had never been assassinated?
- What if the Cuban Missile Crisis had escalated further?
- What if Einstein had never discovered relativity?

When it comes out of Hollywood, the product is fodder for fanciful entertainment. When it comes out of a desire for self-betterment, the product can be transformative. And so as we prepare to celebrate Yom Haatzmaut this week, perhaps it's worth engaging for just a moment in the project of the Metzora – the project of holding up our reality and comparing it to what could have been:

What if we had no state of Israel? How would our world be different? A number of answers come to mind:

- There would be no safe haven for Jews seeking asylum or fleeing persecution.
- There would be no visits to the Kotel or the Old City.
- There would be no renaissance of Torah learning and Jewish education.
- There would be no outpost for democracy and civil liberty in the Middle East.
- There would be no start-up nation leading the world of innovation.
- There would be no little children growing up speaking Hebrew.
- There would be no dot on the map that we couldn't point to and say, "That's the sovereign homeland of the Jewish people."

But I would encourage thinking about the question more personally, too. What would be different about our own lives if we lived in an Israel-less world? Many people in this room remember such a world. And so perhaps for them the wonder of Israel is wrapped up in its very existence. But for those of us born into a world in which Israel was already a state, something more is required.

To paraphrase the Ramban: They may be harder to notice, but the real miracles in this world are the ones we experience every day.

And so once a year is assuredly not too often to simply stop and marvel at the reality of a Jewish state called Israel – a Jewish state about which our forebears could only dream.