



# The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

## Metzora 5784

### The Sabbath of Greatness

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered April 14, 1962)

Many reasons have been offered as to why this Sabbath before the holiday of Passover is known by the name Shabbat Ha-gadol. Allow me to commend to your attention one such reason which I find particularly significant. The author of the Tur, one of the greatest legal codes of Judaism, maintains that our Sabbath is known as Shabbat Ha-gadol, *lefi she'naaseh bo nes gadol*- because a great miracle was performed on this day. It was on this day of the year the Jews were liberated from Egypt, that they summoned up the courage to take the lambs that were tied to their doorposts and slaughter them as sacrifices to Almighty G-d. This act outraged the Egyptians, for whom the lamb was a divinity. They were stunned by the effrontery of these miserable Hebrew slaves who dared, in the presence of their masters, to exert their own religious independence. And yet, *ve'lo hayu rashain lo'mar la-hem davar*-the Egyptians could not and did not say a word in an attempt to stop the Israelites. Because of this *nes gadol*, this great miracle, the Sabbath was called Shabbat Ha-gadol, or the great Sabbath.

This is, indeed, a beautiful explanation. But there is something troubling about it. Granted that the silence of the Egyptians, their sudden paralysis, was a true miracle. But what makes this a "great" miracle? Why *gadol*? This was an era which saw the miracles of the Exodus from Egypt, the ten plagues, and the splitting of the Red Sea. Were these miracles not at least equally great? How does one measure the size or significance of miracles?

I believe the answer can be most instructive. For *nes gadol* refers not to the silence of the Egyptians, but to the miracle of Jewish character. What we celebrate is not a great miracle, but the miracle of greatness. And I refer not only to the courageous defiance exercised by the Jews in Egypt, but to an even more significant fact. The other miracles of which we read and which we celebrate, allowed the Israelites to escape and survive, but in the process the Egyptians' enemy

was hurt, injured, or killed. The plague caused a great deal of pain for the Egyptians, and the splitting of the Red Sea was followed by the drawing of the hordes of Pharaoh. This miracle, however, involved no injury to the enemy. The Jews grew and rose in stature, but no one was hurt. It was not the kind of bravado or courage that is expressed in doing violence to one's neighbor. Shabbat Ha-gadol celebrates *nes gadol*, the magic and the miracle of genuine greatness achieved by our people. This was real *gadlut*: greatness from within, not at someone else's expense.

The story is told of the great saint and sage, Rabbi Israel Salanter, who was walking in the street one day and encountered two boys who had been fighting with each other. The stronger had thrown the weaker into a ditch at the side of the road. What is going on?, asked the rabbi. The stronger boy answered, "we had an argument as to which of us is taller. So I threw him into a ditch to prove to him that I am taller than he." "Foolish boy," replied the rabbi, "could you not have achieved the same purpose by standing on a chair rather than throwing him into a ditch?"

What the rabbi was teaching was a secret of true greatness. *Gadlut* consists of achieving eminence without crushing another human being.

And O how rare is that quality of *nes gadol*, the miracle of greatness. Everyone wants to be great, and so few know the Jewish secret of greatness. The big powers all want to appear great and acceptable in the eyes of the uncommitted bloc of the Afro-Asian nations. It is a national policy of our government to try to gain in popularity amongst the new nations. It is not for us here to decide the validity of this principle. But I know that many Americans were saddened when the American Ambassador to the U.N. this past week chastised the State of Israel for defending itself against Syrian attacks. He seems to be afflicted with what has become a traditional liberal blindness- the inability or unwillingness to discriminate between the hooligan's

attack and the victims defense. It is one piece with a popular liberal attitude that expends much more energy and sentiments in defending the murderer from punishment, than in preventing the victim from having suffered in the first place. We were saddened and disappointed when Ambassador Stevenson-who, according to the British press, acted without authorization of and to the chagrin of the State Department- attempted to act big in the eyes of the Arabs and their friends by reproaching the loneliest of all nations. No eloquence and no humor can disguise the *katnut*, the smallness of spirit, of a man who rather than standing on a chair will throw Israel into a diplomatic ditch.

And the same lesson holds true for all of us. It is true for the State of Israel, which also often finds that it suffers from over-politicization, with the partisanship of its political parties of ten exceeding all bounds. Political consciousness of the citizenry is good, but when each individual party- and this holds true for all of them- tries to gain in prestige and power at the expense of all others, by belittling and scandalizing others, then the State itself begins to suffer.

It holds true for American Jewish organizations, where the progress of American Jewry is all too often stifled because of the unwillingness of the various organizations to unify or at least cooperate, not so much to protect their own autonomy as to make sure that the other organizations do not receive credit and power.

As individuals, Shabbat Ha-gadol reminds us that the way to greatness in business should never come by crushing competitors. In our professions we should not attempt to achieve prestige by hurting colleagues. The concept of *nes gadol* teaches each of us not only how to act but also how to think: in our innermost hearts we should measure our own success or failure not relative to our neighbors, but by absolute standards; we must, each of us, attempt to grow by ourselves, not only by comparison to the smallness of others.

But granted the negative aspects of this definition of *gadlut* or greatness, that it must not come at the expense of others, what is the positive or affirmative definition? What do we mean when we say that one must grow big by himself and through himself?

Perhaps the Talmud can help us here. In discussing the laws of *metzitzah*, or finds, Talmudic law is that if one finds an object which has no distinguishing marks and is unclaimed, he may keep it. If he is a child, a *katan* or minor the *metzitzah* belongs to his father or guardian. If he is a *gadol*, an adult, then it belongs to himself. And yet, the Talmud maintains *lo katan katan mamash ve'lo gadol gadol*

*mamash*- whereas "child" and "adult" normally referred to chronology or physical development, i.e. before or after the age of 13, that does not hold true in this context. *Katan* or *ketanim* with regard to finds is not a question of age but a question of independence. A minor or *katan* is one *ha-somekh al shulchan aviv o shulchan shel acherim*- who, literally, relies or leans on the table of his father or on the table of others. A *gadol* or adult is one who has his own table, who supports himself.

I believe this is more than an economic definition in Jewish financial law. It is a lesson for all of life. To be a *gadol*, great, means: to be yourself, to draw upon your own spiritual resources, to live true to your own destiny and character. A spiritual minor *katan* will beg for crumbs from the tables of others; one who has achieved *gadlut* will repair to his own table, no matter how sparse the food may be.

In Egypt, throughout their servitude, our ancestors were in the category of those who "rely on the table of others." They had assimilated Egyptian life and values, Egyptians culture and religion. They had sunk to spiritual minority or *Katnut*, and this kind of *katnut* cannot be redeemed or healed by plagues or the splitting of seas or political independence. What was needed was nothing less than a miracle: The *nes* or *gadol*, the miracle of genuine greatness by an act which affirms the spiritual self, a rallying to unique Jewish destiny and image and character, a courageous cutting of the cultural umbilical cord which tied the Jewish victims to their Egyptian persecutors. This was achieved through *shechitat elohehem*, through the slaughtering of the Egyptians gods and the rejection of the idolatry which until that time had been accepted by the Israelites as well. This was the miracle of Jewish greatness. No one else was hurt, and it was an act of spiritual independence.

This is a teaching which holds true universally. He who lives by level of another, he who satisfies his cultural hunger by crumbs from strange tables, he who seeks esteem by alien standards- he is a *katan*. The abject conformist, the survival status-seeker, the eternal *Mah Yafis'nik*- these are *ketanim* in long trousers. Jews whose life long ambition it is to imitate non-Jews; Jewish movements and doctrines which pine for crumbs from the tables of secularism or unitarianism, from Deweyism or Marxisim- and there are such movements here and overseas- are minors with big vocabularies. Those who are willing to settle for Jewish statehood, but are ready to abandon all attempts at the greater aspiration for Jewish selfhood- they suffer from stunted spiritual growth.

The first promise that god gave to the first Jew, Abraham,

was: *Ve'e'esekha le'goy gadol*, "and I shall make thee into a great nation." God did not mean *goy gadol* insofar as numbers or power is concerned: we Jews have never had much of either. He meant a nation of genuine greatness. And that is why later when God tells him of the future bitter exile of his descendants in Egypt, he gives Abraham the greatest consolation: *v'acharei ken yetz'u bi-rekhus gadol*. This is usually translated, "and afterwards they will leave with great wealth." I believe the real translation is: "and afterwards they will leave with a wealth of greatness." Great wealth is an ordinary ambition; a wealth of greatness is the extraordinary Jewish aspiration.

Our Haftorah for today conclude with a promise of the Almighty, *hinei anokhi shole'ach la-khem et Eliyahu ha-navi lifnei bo yom ha-Shem ha-gadol ve'ha-nora*, "behold I shall send to you the prophet Elijah before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." We have the choice: *gadol* or *nora*, great or terrible. We live in a word where

## Who Am I?

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In this week's parsha, the Torah presents the purification process for a person afflicted with tzora'as, as well as the laws of tzora'as that appears on the walls of a house. The Talmud (Arachin, 16a) lists seven sins for which one is afflicted with tzora'as, but the best-known reason for it is for transgressing the prohibition against speaking *leshon hora*, or evil talk. Rashi on our parsha writes that this is the reason that birds are used in the purification process, since birds are typified by their chirping. He also mentions another reason for tzora'as, which is 'gasus horuach,' or arrogance. Rav Dovid Feinstein explained that the other five sins are all a result of one or the other of these two sins, while Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, author of the commentary *Keli Yakar*, wrote in his *Olelos Ephraim*, that *leshon hora* is, in reality, a result of arrogance (see *Netvort to parshas Metzora*, 5763, available at [Torahheights.com](http://Torahheights.com)). The Midrash Rabbah on our parsha, however, focuses specifically on the prohibition of *leshon hora*, and relates a very interesting story regarding it, that helps shed light on the mind-set of the person who is addicted to *leshon hora*, and who is, as a result, afflicted with tzora'as.

The midrash, in *Vayikra Rabbah* (16:2), relates that a certain merchant went around asking, "who wants to buy a medicine that gives life?" Rav Yannai came over to the merchant and asked to see the medicine, but the merchant said it is not for him. However, after repeated requests, the

decisions must be made. We live in a world where the figure of Elijah calls out to us as it did to the Jews gathered about him at Mt. Carmel, saying, "How long will you waver?"

In our world there can be no wavering and no indecisiveness. It is either/or: either be Jewish and great, or cringe at the tables of others and *nora*, terrible. The world we live in will not permit leisurely smallness. Judaism cannot survive with pettiness of the spirit and the immaturity of Jewish mindlessness. If we return to Torah and tradition - we can ourselves forge the *nes* of *gadol*. If, heaven forbid, we do not - we must face and expect the terrible failure of *katnut*.

On Shabbat Ha-gadol we strive for the experience of *yom ha-Shem ha-gadol*, and by once again becoming a *goy gadol*, we will be able to bequeath to our children and children's children a *rekhus gadol*, a heritage of authentic greatness.

*Ve'heshiv lev avot al banim al avotam.*

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merchant finally gave in to Rav Yannai, and cited the verses in *Tehillim* (34:13-14), "who is the person who wants life, who loves days of seeing good? Guard your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceitfully." Rav Yannai responded that King Shlomo made a similar remark when he said "He who guards his mouth and tongue from evil guard his soul from troubles" (*Mishlei* 21:23). However, continued Rav Yannai, he had never understood this verse until this merchant came and announced, "who wants life?" Therefore, he said, Moshe told the Jews, "This will be the law of the *metzora*" (*Vayikra* 14:2) - the law of the 'motzi shem ra,' or the one who 'brings out a bad name,' i.e., a slanderer. We need to understand why the merchant felt that Rav Yannai did not need his advice, and what it is that Rav Yannai actually did learn from it.

Rabbi Reuven Katz, in his *Dudaei Reuven*, explains that Rav Yannai already understood that one can attain life in the world to come through guarding one's tongue from speaking evil. What he didn't understand was that one can attain life in our present world in this way, as well, and this is what he learned from the merchant. As Rabbi Katz explains, a person who engages in *leshon hora* alienates himself from other people, is considered as a person who cannot be trusted, and eventually loses his livelihood because no one wants to associate with him. Thus, he really does not have a life. Part of the purification process for

the metzora - the person afflicted with tzora'as - is to live outside all three camps, alone. By doing so, he will have an opportunity to contemplate his loss of status within society, which came as a result of his uncontrolled gossip and slander. If he hasn't yet come to that point in his life, the tzora'as serves as a warning to him of where his current life-style will eventually lead him. I would like to expand on this explanation, through an understanding of the root causes behind the practice of leshon hora, and show that there is a further dimension of the negative results of this practice, not touched upon by Rabbi Katz.

A primary reason for people engaging in leshon hora is, actually, a sense of low self-esteem, and a feeling that in order to build oneself up, he must bring others down. Viewing leshon hora as the primary cause for tzora'as, with all the other sins coming as a result, perhaps we can then view arrogance as an outgrowth of leshon hora. As a result of the leshon hora one speaks, bringing other people down, the one who speaks becomes arrogant, building his self-esteem atop the edifice of other people's shame. In both cases, the offender is not evaluating himself accurately,

## Reasonable Doubt

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed by TurboScribe.ai and adapted by a talmid from a YUTorah shiur recorded at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on April 20, 2023)

In Parshas Metzora, we learn the halachos of Tzara'as ha-Bayis. The pasuk says: *U-va asher lo ha-bayis ve-higid la-kohen leimor: ke-negah nirah lee ba-bayis*. And Rashi comments: Why does it say **ke-negah** nirah lee ba-bayis and not a more certain sounding *negah nirah lee ba-bayis*? And Rashi answers, quoting the midrash: *She-afilu hu chacham ve-yode'ah she-hu negah vadai, lo yifsok davar barur, lomar negah nirah lee, ela ke-negah nirah lee*. Even a Talmid Chacham who knows Hilchos Nega'im—and knows what is really a negah and what is not—must say *ke-negah* and can't declare a *davar barur*. Only the Kohen can give a psak.

And the Acharonim wonder: Why can't a Talmid Chacham, if he is not a Kohen, at least make a definitive statement about the facts? The Gemara says that if the Kohen is an am ha'aretz, a Talmid Chacham just tells him what to say, and the Kohen am ha'aretz just says the word *tamei* or the word *tahor*. So, if the Talmid Chacham knows enough to decide the halacha, why can't he say *negah nirah lee*? Some Acharonim say it's just *derech erez*—that it's good to be humble and defer to others.

But I heard a great Mussar vort based on the fundamental yesod of tzara'as. Chazal explain that nego'im

but basing his assessment on his view of others. Thus, he never truly understands his inner self, who he really is, because he is always defining himself in terms of other people. Perhaps it is for this reason that the rabbis tell us (Nedarim, 64b) that the metzora is one of four people who are considered dead even during their lifetime. The person who is addicted to leshon hora never develops his true self, and, thus, is, in a sense, dead, and draws those who listen to him into his web of deceit and self-alienation. By slandering others, he robs them of their identity, as well. It is, perhaps, this process that is reflected in the statement of the rabbis that leshon hora kills three people - the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one of whom it is told. To paraphrase, albeit in a different context, Fast Eddie Felson (aka Paul Newman), the main character in the classic 1961 film, *The Hustler*, the metzora is dead inside, and, so, he makes everyone around him dead, as well. Therefore, he must remove himself from the company of others, for a time, so that he can reconsider his role in life, unrelated to the success or failure of others, and try to understand who he really is.

come because of Lashon Hara—because the person talked badly about someone. And all of Parshiyos Tazria-Metzora is really about metzora—*me-lashon motzi shem ra*—someone who talks badly about other people. What happens? This fellow talked badly about other people and therefore got a negah on his house. And when he comes, the Torah tells him, don't say I saw a negah—don't say there's something wrong with the house. Say *ke-negah*. Say it seems to me there is a negah on my house, but I'm not sure. And maybe that's exactly the Mussar here.

Why do we sometimes say Lashon Hara about other people? Because we jump to conclusions. Sometimes we see something. We think we understand the **whole** situation. We think we know what someone did, and they didn't really do it. Or we **think** we know the circumstances, yet we don't really understand. Sometimes, it could be we're 100% right, and nonetheless we should have refrained because the Torah prohibits Lashon Hara. But the other 99.9% of the time, we think we can judge someone for doing something bad, but you can't really judge them *ad she-tagiya le-mekomo*. We don't really know the circumstances, we don't really know what was going

on, we don't really know that we would have been any better. We just jump to conclusions. From my comfortable perch, I could say: I would never do anything like that. You're a rasha. There must be a problem with you, and I can talk badly about you because I judge you to be much worse than I am. And it's not true. How do we know? We don't know the circumstances. *Al tadin es chavercha ad she-tagiya le-mekomo*. So maybe that's why, as Rashi explains, first the negah comes on your bayis, then on your beged, and only then on your guf. The first message it sends is that when there's something here that looks bad, the

## Holy Haughtiness

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

**P**arshat Metzora continues to detail the intricate laws of the skin, cloth, and house affliction, tzara'at. While tzara'at is often considered a punishment for evil speech in rabbinic literature, the Talmud relates six other possible causes, one of which is arrogance (Arachin 16a). Psalms connects these two sins in one verse, "He who slanders his friend in secret I will cut off; I cannot endure the haughty and proud man" (Psalms 101:5). There is a conceptual similarity between slander and hubris. Evil speech is often an external manifestation of the internal trait of arrogance. People who are humble and internally self-confident, do not need to talk badly about others to lift their own egos.

The ritual process of purification reflects this moral message. One of the sacrifices offered by the priest on behalf of the metzora is an asham, a guilt offering. Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno explains that this type of offering atones for me'ila, a misuse of the sacred domain. Evil speech and haughtiness are both considered a misappropriation of the Holy. Often done in private, those who slander others presume that nobody else will hear or take note. This is a direct insult to God, ignoring Divine omniscience. As the Talmud comments, "Whoever commits a transgression in private, it is as though he pushed away the feet of the Divine Presence" (Hagiga 16a).

Arrogance is also an exploitation of the Divine. Sforno quotes a stark statement from the Talmud, "Any person who has arrogance within him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said: He and I cannot dwell together in the world" (Sotah 5a). In his commentary on the Sforno, Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz explains that someone who is arrogant "misappropriates God's exclusive right to gei'ut, majesty, which is related to ga'ava, pride. Here again, he intrudes on

Torah tells you that you must report it—but only *ke-negah*. Don't be sure that it's bad before you investigate further and ask someone else for help—before you have a neutral observer. Say: It seems bad to me, but I am not 100% sure. And maybe that will be enough of a lesson that from now on when he sees something bad in the world, he will say: It seems bad to me, but you know what, I'm not 100% sure—it's *ke-negah* and not necessarily the thing itself. And therefore, instead of going around telling everyone else the juicy gossip, I'll refrain because I don't really know all the facts and all the circumstances. Shabbat Shalom.

God's domain." As the verse in Psalms contends, only "God is King, He is clothed in majesty (gei'ut)" (Psalms 93:1).

Taking the Sforno's model of me'ila further, perhaps the metzora's misuse of the holy goes even deeper. Both evil speech and arrogance not only disregard God's presence, but they also diminish the fact that humans are created in God's image. The metzora attempts to denigrate, degrade, and deprecate the holiness of his victim through the defamation. Moreover, these sins dismiss the holiness of body and soul endowed by God to the metzora. He, like all of us, is tasked to use his power of speech for kind and sacred purposes. He is encouraged to cultivate his character, skills, and talents for redemptive acts. Misinterpreting these gifts as his own - "My own power and the might of my own hand" (Deut. 8:17) - and distorting them to defame others, is me'ila, a mishandling of Divine blessings.

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Alter, in his Chidushei HaRim, identifies one more perversion of the sacred: misplaced humility. Rashi, quoting a midrash, describes the symbolism of the purification process, which included cedar wood and hyssop. Cedar, the tallest of trees, was included because tzara'at was a manifestation of the arrogant personality. Hyssop, a shrub whose leaves are tiny, is used because the metzora necessarily lowered himself through the purification process. Rabbi Alter argues that it only makes sense to include symbolic objects in the purification process that reflect the aspirational goals of the metzora. Since the cedar represents haughtiness, why would it be singled out and have a place of prominence in the process of purification?

Rabbi Alter suggests that there are times that the cause of our sins is not arrogance but erroneous humility. The Talmud, after a dozen or so serious denigrations of

arrogance, writes in the name of Rav, that a Torah scholar needs to embody at least a small measure of arrogance (Sotah 5a). In Hasidic texts, this nuanced notion is referred to as “holy haughtiness.” When there is a need to be morally and spiritually proactive, a false sense of “Who am I?” can lead to misinformed complacency and inaction.

How does one find the balance between holy

haughtiness and desecrating the holiness of God, self, and others with arrogance? When we focus on ourselves to the exclusion or displacement of God or others, then we are inappropriately arrogant. In contrast, when we recognize and utilize our talents and aptitudes to look beyond ourselves to serve God and help others, we demonstrate a true appreciation of the value of the holy.

## Four Pesach Conversations With Hashem

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

**S**eder Bereishit, provides scant information about Hashem and creation. Instead, the narrative is dominated by reports about the family life of our ancestors, including the friction between wives, sibling tensions, and strained parent-child relationships. The familial relations of Bereishit serve as a model for our covenant with Hashem which is forged in the book of Shemot.

Our annual Pesach seder affirms our commitment to Jewish family, a value which preserved us through an extended exile when we lacked national identity or political experience. The story we tell our family on Pesach is about the concept of family in Judaism. Jewish history is a story of faith and family.

### Four Pesach Voices

The Torah outlines four different conversations about the yetziat Mitzrayim. Based on these four outlines Chazal envisioned a dialogue with four different types of children: the wise chacham, the wicked rasha, the simple tam, and the confused she'eino yodei'a lish'ol. Of course, no child, or for that matter no adult, neatly fits these profiles. We all possess characteristics of each child and during Pesach we conduct each of these four conversations in parallel.

### A New Chapter

This year our story will include not only the events of 3300 years ago, but also the struggle of the past six months. We are currently authoring a fateful chapter in the book of Jewish history and this year our Pesach conversations will probe the connections between the ancient sections and the contemporary chapters of our story.

That “updated” Pesach conversation will also be conducted through the classic four voices of Pesach: the voice of the wise child, the voice of the rebellious child, the voice of the simple child and voice of the confused child.

### Our Conversation with Hashem

Alongside our dialogue with our children, we will also dialogue with our Hashem our collective Father, about

the attacks of October 7th. In truth, we have all conducted these conversations in numerous different voices with Hashem over the past six months. We have been speaking with Hashem, praying to Him, and wondering about His decisions. Pesach will only amplify those conversations, but they have been ongoing since October 7th.

What are the four voices of this year's Pesach conversation with Hashem about the tragedy and its aftermath? How have we spoken with Him in the past about this critical chapter of Jewish history? How will we continue this conversation over the next month? What are the four voices of Pesach 2024?

### The Conversation of Wisdom

Much of our conversation with Hashem has been centered upon analyzing this overwhelming tragedy. We have asked Him: how could this happen in our homeland? Didn't persecution of Jews end with our return to Israel? What messages was He sending us by allowing this pogrom? What are the long-term ramifications for our people and for our sense of peoplehood?

For months we have ruminated over these questions, sharing our questions with Hashem, and seeking His wisdom to decipher this perplexing mystery.

We have also employed wisdom about the future to help stabilize the present. The gemara (Tamid 32a) asserts that a wise person “sees into the future”. While we can't precisely predict the future we do hold on to divine prophecies and promises which assure us of a better future. This type of wisdom provides solace during trying periods and this wisdom helps offset the frustrations of the present.

In our conversation with Hashem about wisdom, we also have wondered if, in the past, we were too confident or too wise. Militarily, we certainly were overconfident about our security measures and the intelligence reports which made us feel invulnerable to this type of attack. Were we similarly too confident that life in Israel was divinely charmed and

immune to this type of tragedy? Were we too smart for our own good? Did our national success go to our heads?

### **The Conversation of Evil**

During this war we often spoke with Hashem about evil. On this dark day we faced the type of pure evil we never imagined existed. As Jews, we harbor a positive outlook of humanity, coupled with a deep belief in the dignity of man. Our minds simply could not fathom the type of brutality and barbarism which was perpetrated against us. The monstrosities we faced made us realize that our war isn't just about land and security but is a battle between a culture which venerates life and one which celebrates death. Between those who respect the dignity of the human condition and those who disgrace humanity. We have repeatedly asked Hashem to help us eliminate evilness from our world.

But, in our conversation with Hashem about evil people we also acknowledged our own past misconduct in labeling the wrong people as wicked. In the leadup to October 7th we allowed social and political divisions to divide us to the point that we villainized fellow members of our own nation. We labeled the wrong people wicked. We must take accountability for our crimes of misidentifying evil in our world.

The Hagaddah's responds to the evil child's aggressive questioning: "since he has excluded himself from the overall Jewish community, his teeth should be shattered". Unfortunately, we were all guilty of excluding, but not of excluding ourselves. We excluded too many other Jews from our broader vision of the Jewish family. None of us was immune to that evil voice and we all must take responsibility for behaving in part, like the evil child.

### **The Unpretentious Conversation**

Though much of our conversation with Hashem was analytical and investigative, there were numerous tense

## **Marror & Charoses, Bitter-Sweet**

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

**A**nd it is this that has stood for our forefathers and us, for not one alone rises up to destroy us, but in each and every generation they arise to destroy us, and HKB"Y saves us from their hands (V'hi She'amdah, recited in Maggid on Leil ha'Seder).

It is seven months since Shmini Atzeres-Simchas Torah 5784 (this was an ibur shana, a Jewish leap year, with two Adars, hence it is seven months from Simchas

moments during which we suspended our thinking and prayed in a more desperate and straightforward tone. Facing the real possibility of death, we bargained with Hashem for life. Knowing that our children were in the line of fire, we desperately screamed out to Him from the abyss, without sophistication and without analysis of our situation or of our future. We just begged Him for life, for our children, our soldiers, and our hostages.

We awoke every morning and, prior to reading political analysis, we wished that there would not be any announcements of fallen soldiers. Sometimes our wishes were answered while other times our hearts fell, and we lost our breath even before we rose from bed. These raw feelings of pain, fear, and anguish provided moments of deep and raw conversations with Hashem. Far deeper than the conversations based on wisdom or analysis.

### **The Conversation of Bewilderment**

For much of the past six months we have just been simply bewildered. There are just too many layers to process. The brutality of October 7th. The casualty numbers of that one day. The hostages who are still living through hell. The mounting death toll of the ground invasion. The rabid antisemitism which this war has incited. The swirling moral confusion which had muddled public opinion about our just war. The unknown future, especially in the North.

There is so much to process that we often find ourselves paralyzed or overwhelmed, or both. It is precisely at these moments that we suspend our inquiry and turn completely to Hashem, as the child who is "unable to question". Helpless and hapless, we fall back upon our faith to keep us standing. Faith allows us to live even when we can't even articulate the questions.

This month let us continue to speak with Hashem in each of these four Pesach voices.

Torah till Pesach). Seven months since a brutal, savage and terrible war was launched against Am Yisrael, Eretz Yisrael and Medinat Yisrael. Seven months of bereavement for thousands of our brothers and sisters in Eretz Yisrael. Seven months of longing, waiting, wondering, hoping and praying for redemption, shalom, ahava and the Presence of Hashem to manifest in all Its Glory once again in Tzion and Yerushalayim.

This year, the highchair of Kfir Bibas, the chair of his brother, Ariel, and the seats of their parents, Shir and Yarden, will remain empty at the Seder table.

The family patriarch, Shlomo Manzour, who turned 86 in captivity a few weeks ago, will not be at his Seder table, unable to tell his family the story of the Exodus from Egypt, nor the story of his personal exodus from Baghdad, Iraq, after surviving the Farhoud of 1941, to the land of Israel.

Romi Gonen, 23 years old, kidnapped from the site of the Rei'im music festival, remains in captivity. I met her parents, and spoke personally with her mother, at the site of the Nova Music Festival when we visited this past January. I told her mother (in Ivrit), I would like to say something to you, but I have nothing to say. She replied, "*ba'makom she'ein milim, chibuk yachol*, in a place where there are no words, a hug will do." And so we hugged. Two Jewish women, one orthodox and one secular. One living in America, the other in Israel. One who speaks English, and the other Ivrit. Two women, two mothers, two Jews, one heart.

This year, while we yet await and pray for miracles of redemption, it seems that the Bibas Family, Shlomo Manzour, Romi Gonen and the other hostages, will not be at their Seder tables.

I did not know what dvar Torah to share with you this erev chag. There are so many thoughts we all have, so much pain we share, so many tefillos we all offer, so much confusion and darkness in the world at large, yet so much hope and faith we maintain in the coming of the Redemption, and so much pride and beauty in our nation and our Land.

It is the symbolism of the marror, the bitter herbs, dipped in charoses, the sweet paste, that reminds us of the destiny and journey, of our nation.

So I chose to share the following words of Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, which he penned before Pesach, 1967. They are as relevant today as they were when penned decades ago. Perhaps, even more so.

Rabbi Dr. Lamm z'l teaches, "The marror that we eat at the Seder is more than just a vegetable recalling the hard times inflicted upon our remote ancestors in ancient Egypt. It is the very symbol of human anguish through all the ages, and what we do with it is an expression of the Jewish philosophy of suffering as it issues out of the historical experience of the Jewish people.

"Consider how astounding is our attitude toward this piece of food and how it speaks volumes about us as a nation. We do not weep when we eat it. We take this marror, this morsel of misery itself, and we recite a bracha

over it! It is as it we are saying, 'Thank You G-d for this miserable memory!' We then take this bitter herb and dip it into the charoses, the sweet paste of wine and nuts and fruit. Life, we say in effect, is neither all bitter nor all sweet. With rare exceptions, it is bitter-sweet, and we ought not to bemoan our fate but to bless G-d for it.

"Ever since Adam and Chava ate of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, our kabbalists teach us, good and evil have been co-mingled, and life offers us neither pure, unadulterated goodness, nor pure, unredeemable wickedness. The pessimist deplors the bitter and the bad that corrupts the sweet and the good. The optimist is delighted that the sharp edge of bitterness is softened with sweetness, that there is so good everywhere.

"That is why when the Jew, the eternal optimist, dips his marror into the charoses he makes a bracha. That is why, when we celebrate the zeman cheiroseinu, the festival of our freedom, the Jew at this time reclines while he eats. He plays the role of nobleman even while the gentile majority persecutes and oppresses and embitters him. Let others laugh at the comic Jew who tells himself he is a melech, a king, while he is being tormented. We know it is true. Life is bitter, but we have dipped it into the sweetness of charoses.

"Hence, as we come to Pesach this year and every year, we relearn our lesson. Many of us enter the holiday burdened with a secret sigh, with the heavy heart, the mind distracted, and the soul sorely troubled. Yet, as Jews, we shall look for the sweet, we shall perform the tibbon marror b'charoses (dipping the bitter herbs in charoses), and experience by sheer will the simchas yomtov, the happiness and joy of the festival... A people that dips marror into charoses and makes a bracha over it is never defeated by fate or foe. A folk that can find the mellow in a morsel of misery can drive away the darkness with its own light, the outer sorrow with the inner joy" (Festivals of Faith, p.243-244,247).

As we sit down to leil ha'Seder this year, a night when we will ask 'why is this night, this year, this Pesach, different than all others?'; a night when so many chairs remain empty; a night of almost ten years since Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul were captured and whose remains are still held by Hamas y's; a night of reflecting upon the slavery of Egypt and the turmoil of the past seven months, we will yet reaffirm our faith, recommit ourselves to Hashem, reconnect with our nation and our Land, we will remind ourselves, and declare to all those with whom we share the night of Redemption, that though they arise to destroy us, it is truly the greatest truth in the history of the world, that HKB"H saves us from their hands.



And though galus is dark, exile is bitter, and the marmor is great, the sweet charoses reminds us of the blessings of Hashem, the goodness in our lives, the gift that is Torah,

the miracle of our Land, and the redemption that is Medinat Yisrael.

## Rav Soloveitchik on Metzora: To Love Like a Kohen

Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider (Excerpted from *Torah United, Teachings on The Weekly Parashah From Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and The Chassidic Masters* (Ktav, 2023))

One of the more challenging sections of Torah law concerns the special skin condition known as tzara'at. The one afflicted with this malady, the metzora, is sent out of the camp into quarantine. While this appears insensitive to the plight of the afflicted, with his characteristic brilliance the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik showed how the protocols governing the metzora were intended to compassionately restore the metzora's mental and physical health.

### Compassion for the Sick

The unfortunate reality in antiquity (and even today in some places) was that an individual who suddenly exhibited symptoms of illness was isolated. People would be afraid to associate, or even greet, the infirm out of fear of catching the illness.<sup>1</sup> The Rav claimed that the afflicted "was often killed or, at the very least, driven out of town. From time to time he was offered a meager supply of food, thrown to him like food thrown to a dog. He was treated harshly for the sin of having contracted the disease."<sup>2</sup> The first step of Jewish treatment, on the other hand, displayed concern for the afflicted. The Kohen left the camp with the metzora as an expression of solidarity and friendship.

*The leper was thus instantly removed from the mob psychoses. The Kohen diagnosed and pronounced the tumah (ritual impurity) as tzara'at, but the leper was not subsequently cut off from society. He was in communication with the Kohen as one of the heads of the community. In fact, the metzora could request being seen by the Kohen gadol himself—a man who was not permitted to attend the funeral of his own closest relatives. Yet, if summoned, the kohen gadol had to go to the leper.*<sup>3</sup>

Even in quarantine, the metzora's dignity was maintained—or restored, as the case might have been—by the humane and merciful laws of the Torah.<sup>4</sup>

The Rav's description of the Kohen visiting the metzora brings to mind a modern-day religious leader visiting lepers. Rabbi Aryeh Levin, known as "the Tzaddik of Jerusalem," had an extraordinary love for every single

Jew. Among the countless acts of kindness that filled his days was his frequent visiting of the sick, including lepers in a lepers' hospital in the Talbieh neighborhood of Yerushalayim, whose patients were mostly Arabs. He began visiting those afflicted with Hansen's disease after finding a woman weeping bitterly at the Western Wall. When he inquired about her intense crying, she responded that her child had no cure and was locked up in the lepers' hospital. He immediately decided to visit the young child. When he arrived, all of the patients streamed tears of joy, as they had seen nary an outside visitor, an unfamiliar face, in years. His pious wife Chana cooked regularly for them, and he would take the prepared food on Friday, prior to Shabbat, to the hospital.<sup>5</sup>

### From the Kohen with Love

Why is the Kohen the one who diagnoses tzara'at, when normally the Kohen goes to great lengths to avoid contracting ritual impurity? The Rav revealed that we are under a misimpression as to the Kohen's role in Jewish society, perhaps owing to the fact that the bulk of the priestly law in the Torah surrounds the Temple. We generally associate the Kohen with the special service in the Temple, but in actuality any given Kohen would only serve once every twenty-four weeks, according to the cycle of mishmarot (watches). The defining role of the Kohen was as a spiritual leader and teacher of Torah.<sup>6</sup> And if the Kohen does not love the people, the Rav emphasized, then he cannot bless them nor can he teach them. The disciple listens to his teacher not as a result of coercion, but out of a relationship rooted in love and reverence.<sup>7</sup>

The Rav taught that "a single spirit underlies each of his roles: a strong sense of love, friendship, and concern for every person."<sup>8</sup> He marshalled sources showing that the Kohen's obligation to have only compassion and love for his fellow Jew finds expression in birkat kohanim, the priestly benediction, which is still pronounced today.

**1. Ongoing obligation:** The obligation is not exhausted with recitation of the formal text once a day. Rashi noted that when the verse commands the Kohanim to

“say to them” the blessing, it uses the infinitive absolute form (אָמַר) instead of the imperative form (אָמַרְ), which can indicate continuous action.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the Kohen is continuously engaged in bestowing blessing to the people. The heart of the Kohen overflows with tenderness for others and a desire to help them.<sup>10</sup>

- 2. With love:** For birkat kohanim to be valid, it must be performed out of love. Before the Kohen pronounces the blessing, he himself must make a blessing over the mitzvah, in which he declares: “Blessed are You... who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us to bless His people Israel with love.” The Zohar states that a Kohen who feels enmity toward any member of the congregation may not participate in birkat kohanim, and there is a danger if he does so.<sup>11</sup> The Chafetz Chayim ruled in his Mishnah Berurah that a Kohen unable to purge such emotions must leave the synagogue before the chazzan reaches the blessing of retzeh in his repetition of the Amidah.<sup>12</sup>
- 3. Outspread fingers:** In the same vein, the Rav cited the Rambam who instructs that the Kohen holds his fingers closed until he begins the benediction, at which points he spreads them.<sup>13</sup> During birkat kohanim, one must be openhanded to serve as a conduit for the divine blessing. The opposite is to be closefisted, which the Torah proscribes when it comes to giving to the destitute (Deuteronomy 15:7).<sup>14</sup>

Rabbi Aryeh Levin once asked why the congregation thanks the Kohanim when they descend from the platform after birkat kohanim. It is indeed strange—are they not commanded by the Torah to pronounce the blessing? He answered that they have the mitzvah to do so, but to get to the degree of love necessary requires much work and deep devotion. For that they deserve our thanks.<sup>15</sup>

### Exploring the Rav’s Insight

## The Lesson of שַׁעַר נִקְנוֹר

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

The final stage of the metzora’s purification involves his offering a series of korbanos. The Torah commands that the kohen overseeing the process has the metzora stand מוֹעֵד מוֹעֵד אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד – “before God, by the entrance to the Tent of Meeting” (14:11). Rashi, based on the Mishna (Sota 7), explains that the metzora stands at שַׁעַר נִקְנוֹר, one of the gates leading to the azara

“We have become specialists in criticism,” said the Rav. “We search out the blemishes of others. However, we have overlooked one significant point: the priest who declares a person unclean must go outside the camp to the afflicted individual in order to purify him.”<sup>16</sup>

The message of Parashat Metzora is that we are all, in an extended sense, Kohanim. The Kohen’s main duty is to teach and care for others, and so it should be for all of us. To be a member of the mamlechet kohanim, the kingdom of Kohanim, requires that every Jew emulate the Kohen.<sup>17</sup> As the Mishnah formulates it: “Be among the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people, and drawing them closer to Torah.”<sup>18</sup> Note how “loving” appears twice in this maxim. Love is the key.

1. After our present experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, we can easily imagine what the isolation and social shunning felt like.
2. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 3:95.
3. Ibid. The Rav refers to the metzora using the conventional translation of “leper,” but tzara’at was not identical with Hansen’s disease.
4. See further David, Darosh Darash Yosef, 238–239.
5. Raz, Tzaddik in Our Time, 130–131.
6. Schachter, Divrei ha-Rav, 293.
7. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 4:47.
8. Ibid., 3:97.
9. Rashi on Numbers 6:23, s.v. אָמַר.
10. Schachter, Divrei ha-Rav, 298. The Rav thought this accounts for the restriction of birkat kohanim to holidays among Ashkenazim outside Israel. Only on Yom Tov can the Kohen’s heart overflow with love and kindness. The rest of the time the Kohen is so burdened that he cannot fulfill this aspect of the obligation.
11. Zohar, III:147b.
12. Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chayim, 128:37.
13. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah u-Nesi’at Kapayim, 14:3.
14. Chumash Mesoras Harav, 4:47.
15. Raz, Tzaddik for Eternity, 427–428.
16. Soloveitchik, Fate and Destiny, 40.
17. See further Parashat Emor, “Impervious to Impurity.”
18. Pirkei Avot, 1:12.

(courtyard of the Beis Ha’mikdash, where the korbanos were sacrificed). The Gemara in Maseches Pesachim (85) explains that the area of this gate was intentionally excluded from the halachic sanctity of the azara, for the sake of the metzora and others like him who must offer sacrifices to attain purification. The metzora is not permitted to enter the area of the Beis Ha’mikdash until he

completes his purification process through the offering of his korbanos, but on the other hand, a person who offers a korban is to be present when the sacrifice is offered. To resolve this dilemma, the area of שער נקנור was not sanctified, so that the metzora may stand there during the offering of his korban.

Tosfos in Maseches Yevamos (7b) raise the question of why the metzora couldn't simply stand on the other side of the gate. Why was it necessary for the שער נקנור to be excluded from the halachic sanctity of the azara, if the metzora could stand outside the gate and watch as his korbanos are being offered?

Tosfos cites Rabbeinu Tam as answering that the area of the gate was not sanctified so that the metzora would not have to stand in the sun or in the rain. In order that he be protected from the elements, the area of the gate was excluded from the kedusha of the Beis Ha'mikdash, such that the metzora could stand underneath the gate during the offering of his sacrifices.

Rav Shaul Alter points out the remarkable lesson that emerges from Rabbeinu Tam's answer. The Gemara in Maseches Arachin lists seven grievous sins for which a person would be stricken with tzara'as, including lashon ha'ra, murder, false oaths, theft, and sexual immorality. This individual seeking to regain his status of tahara was guilty of repeatedly violating very serious transgressions. Intuitively, we would have thought that he deserved to

get wet standing in the rain, or get baked by the harsh Jerusalem sun. But this is not the Torah's approach. The Torah requires us to concern ourselves with the wellbeing and comfort of all, even those who have made terrible mistakes. Despite all that he had done in the past, this metzora, who now seeks purification, must be lovingly cared for – to the extent that we must not let him get wet or be exposed to the hot sun.

Rav Shaul Alter adds that the Gemara in Maseches Yoma tells of the immense mesirus nefesh (selfless devotion) displayed by Niknor, a wealthy donor, to bring exquisite doors from Egypt to be used as the gate to the azara, which then named after him – שער נקנור. The area of שער נקנור, then, symbolizes mesirus nefesh, the willingness to sacrifice and give of oneself. Rav Shaul Alter explains that appropriately, this is the area where the kohen has the metzora stand during the offering of his korbanos. This process teaches us of the selflessness that is required for the sake of reaching out and assisting those who have strayed afar. It is much easier for a kohen to remain in the pristine, sacred domain of the Beis Ha'mikdash, than to go out and involve himself with the metzora, with people who are very distant from the kedusha presented by the Beis Ha'mikdash. But the Torah here teaches us that even the metzora deserves our love and concern, and we must be prepared to sacrifice for their sake, to help them make their way back to a Torah way of life.

## And You Think that Tzara'at is Weird?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

**T**his week's parasha, parashat Metzora, continues the theme of last week's parasha, Tazria, regarding the "treatment" for the person who contracts the spiritual dermatological disease צָרַעַת—Tzara'at, for speaking לְשׁוֹן הָרָע—l'shon hara—evil.

In a previous analysis, parashat Tazria 5763-2003, I attempted to present the case that the spiritual disease Tzara'at was not as "way out" as many rationalists and scientific thinkers assume. To prove my point, I cited the world-famous scientist, the late Dr. Lewis Thomas, former President of the prestigious Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. This renowned scientist wrote in his book *The Medusa and the Snail* (1979, Viking Press) that the most effective method for treating warts is hypnosis. In his essay, entitled *On Warts* (pp. 76-81), Thomas maintains that, through the power of suggestion (hypnosis), warts can be made to disappear, apparently by cutting off their blood

supply which leads to their demise. Obviously, if one can get rid of a skin disease through the power of thought, it is not preposterous to conclude that a person could also contract a skin disease by inappropriate thoughts or speech.

Most rational people and, of course, most scientists, find the concept of a spiritual disease such as Tzara'at difficult to accept. And yet, we live in a world where almost every day we are surprised by revolutionary scientific data that often goes against conventional scientific thinking.

Because of the challenging assumptions of this week's parasha, I thought it might be intriguing to share with our readers some of the unconventional scientific "facts" that I've come across over the years, that have helped me to be more open to accepting the Torah's unusual contention that Tzara'at may indeed be contracted by speaking evil.

Many years ago, one of my students introduced me to the strange concept of "Pyramid Power." The proponents

of Pyramid Power maintain that the size, shape and proportions of pyramids (especially the ancient Egyptian pyramids of Giza), apparently have extraordinary powers that can impact positively on people's ability to focus, keep food fresh, cause plants to thrive and even sharpen pencils and razor blades. Skeptic that I am, I quickly dismissed this claim until I was shown an article that appeared in the August 29, 1976 issue of the NY Times Magazine, written by the famed correspondent/commentator and NBC News broadcaster, Edwin Newman.

Although he remains rather skeptical about the efficacy of Pyramid Power, Newman reported the tale of the unusual discovery of Antoine Bovis, a Frenchman, who was walking through the famed Cheops pyramid of Giza overlooking the Nile. Finding the inside of the Cheops terribly humid, he also noticed that discarded in the garbage cans throughout the chambers were a number of dead cats and other stray animals who, after wandering into the pyramid, had lost their way and had died. He immediately noticed that there was no smell of decay. Apparently, despite the humidity, the animals had rapidly dehydrated and mummified. After many experiments, it was concluded that it was not the inside atmosphere of the pyramid, but rather the shape and proportions of the pyramid that create an atmosphere that stops decay and causes quick dehydration.

To explain this phenomenon, there are those who hypothesize that the pyramids have the ability to focus energy, pushing cellular material together, which keeps things from decomposing. So, for instance, a pencil may be sharpened by inserting it into a hole in a makeshift pyramid. The theory is that the cells at the tip of the pencil are pushed together by the pyramid's energy forces and become sharp again. In some countries, like Czechoslovakia, where double-edged razors were very expensive, men would insert their dull razor blades into a small cardboard pyramid at night, and the blades would emerge sharpened the next morning.

Other uses of Pyramid Power range from preserving food (similar to refrigeration), to taking the bitterness out of stale coffee. The coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team surrounded his players with pyramids in order to improve their play during hockey games. Despite the team's inspired play, they lost in the Stanley Cup playoffs. Of course, all of this sounds preposterous and, had not a distinguished reporter and the New York Times reported it, I would have simply dismissed it as gibberish as well.

A long-time friend, Rabbi Daniel Lapin (former head

of Toward Tradition), told me many years ago that he had come across a series of extensive scientific experiments conducted by a prestigious Russian institute that set out to find a scientific basis for water divining. Apparently, water divining works so effectively, that the Department of Geology of the United States still retains on its payroll a number of water diviners, men and woman, who go around with "Y" shaped sticks in order to discover underground sources of water.

While the Russians were not able to determine a reasonable scientific explanation, they did produce an extensive list of substances that work for water divining and those that do not. Rabbi Lapin noted, to his astonishment, that the list exactly parallels the Talmud's definition of substances that can become ritually impure and those that cannot become ritually impure. Now remember, Jewish law requires that those things that become ritually impure must be brought to a source of "living" water—like a Mikveh, in order to be purified.

Who would have imagined 200 years ago that people would one day be able to "speak" over radio waves, let alone speak to, and even see, one another over small cellular phones? Today we regularly transmit live audio and video broadcasts from New York that are immediately received by residents in Sydney, Australia. Who would have believed that music would be transmitted around the world through electrical pulses? But this happens now every day.

The Mishnah in Avot 5:7, relates, that ten miracles were performed for our ancestors in the Great Temple in Jerusalem. Among the miracles listed are that no woman ever miscarried because of the smell of the burning sacrificial meat, and that the meat never spoiled or became putrid. In fact, a fly was never seen in the Temple areas where the meat was butchered.

Could it be that the structural dimensions of the Temple had powers similar to those of the pyramids, rendering it capable of focusing energy and keeping cellular material together? Or was it perhaps the Divine Presence that didn't allow the cellular material to deteriorate, so that there was no spoilage, no flies, and no bad odors?

I humbly report these very strange scientific claims. While I cannot verify them, I believe that they certainly serve as powerful "ammunition," encouraging us not to summarily dismiss the seemingly strange claims of Tzara'at found in parashiot Tazria and Metzarah.

Hypnosis? Warts? Water divining? Pyramid Power? Tzara'at? Sounds incredible. But, maybe it's just another of the many miraculous facets of the Al-mighty's Divine creation.

## Ma Nishtana

Rabbi Johnny Solomon

If you were talking with someone and they were to say the phrase ‘Ma Nishtana’, it is quite likely that you would continue with the words ‘Halayla Hazeh Mikot Haleylot.’ This is because these words are learnt by Jewish children and sung in Jewish homes around the world on Seder night, and because they are the words of THE Ma Nishtana.

But what if you were to be told that there was not just ONE Ma Nishtana but many, and that while the Ma Nishtana that you know relates to Seder night, the other Ma Nishtana’s which exist relate to an assortment of other areas of Jewish practice?

A survey of the classic rabbinic sources (Mishna, Tosefta, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash) quickly leads us to discover that the expression Ma Nishtana is - actually - a frequently employed literary device which is used by our Sages to compare and contrast different realms of Jewish practice. For example, it is used in Sotah 17a/Menachot 43b/Chullin 89a when considering the unique properties of Techelet in comparison with all other colours, while it is used in Kiddushin 22b when considering the unique properties of the ear in comparison with all other limbs.

And why do I mention this?

Because this Shabbat we read Parshat Metzora, and the expression ‘Ma Nishtana’ is twice used in Arachin 16b when considering the unique properties of the Metzora punishment & offering in comparison to all other punishments & offerings. As we read there:

‘Rabbi Shmuel bar Nadav asked Rabbi Chanina, and some say that it was Rabbi Shmuel bar Nadav the son-in-law of Rabbi Chanina who asked of Rabbi Chanina, while some say that he asked it of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, “What is the difference (Ma Nishtana) between a Metzora about whom the Torah says, ‘He shall dwell alone; outside of the camp shall be his dwelling’ (Vayikra 13:46) [and other sinners mentioned in the Torah]? It is because [by slandering and speaking Lashon HaRa], the Metzora caused husbands to separate from wives, and people to separate from one another. Consequently, the Torah says, ‘He shall dwell alone.’ Rabbi Yehuda ben Levi says, “What is the difference (Ma Nishtana) between a Metzora about whom the Torah says, ‘he is to bring two birds for his purification’ (Vayikra 14:4) [and other sinners mentioned

in the Torah]?’ The Holy One, Blessed be He says that it is because he performed an act of chatter; therefore the Torah says that he is to bring an offering [of birds, who chirp and] chatter.”

As should be clear, the phrase ‘Ma Nishtana’ that is used in Arachin 16b has no obvious connection with Pesach. Still, just like its parallel in the Haggadah Shel Pesach, it is being used here as a literary device to compare & contrast different realms of Jewish practice while also teaching us a greater lesson - namely the value of asking questions when we notice something unexpected or unusual.

Returning back to the Metzora, they are punished for gossiping, for prattling, and for causing disagreement and division between people. And how are they punished? They are sent away from the Israelite camp (to reflect the impact that their words have had on others), and they are then required to bring a bird offering for their purification (which symbolizes the kind of chattering gossip that they have uttered). Overall, the Metzora is someone who has used the power of speech to do harm.

In contrast, when we sit around the Seder table with others and hear the Ma Nishtana being recited, then we positively harness the power of speech to tell the story of the Exodus.

Our Sages inform us that one of the four things that the Israelites did not do while enslaved in Egypt was speak Lashon HaRa about each other (see Vayikra Rabbah 32:5). This itself is worthy of much praise and it teaches us a deeper lesson - that even during tough times, Bnei Yisrael did not weaponize their power of speech.

Accordingly, on Seder night, when we recount the Exodus from Egypt, we try and replicate this exemplary behaviour and we therefore positively harness the power of speech by telling the story of how we came out of Egypt.

What this comes to tell us is that Seder night is the inverse of Metzora. The Metzora creates division with their unkind words which sow disunity, while Seder night is when we come together and, with warm and generous words, we do what we can to strengthen the unity of the Jewish people.

Wishing you Shabbat Shalom & Pesach Sameach!

# The Paradox of the Pesach Symbols: The Jewish Dance for Eternity

Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander

In just a matter of days, we will all sit at the festive Seder table, in commemoration and celebration of the foundational story of our people. We will read the Haggadah, our guidebook through the evening, as we tell our story with the help of the various symbolic foods that grace the Seder table.

And yet, this year the joy of the holiday is colored with grief, sorrow and anxiety. There are so many empty chairs at so many Seders – some for reservists back on the frontlines, some for the remaining hostages, some for those who remain in hospital for their injuries or in hotels as their displacement continues, and yet more for all whose lives have been taken from us on and since October 7th.

The weight grew even heavier on Saturday night, as Iranian cruise missiles and drones rained down on our cities, striking fear into the hearts of Israelis across the country. This latest escalation in Iran's campaign to destroy our nation threatens our very existence and instills even greater anguish in the minds of our already overburdened children. How are we meant to focus on the festival's messages of freedom, peoplehood and redemption in the face of the overwhelmingly tragic and terrifying events of the last six months?

Perhaps the answer lies in the duality of the Seder's narrative and of its symbols themselves.

The Mishna in Masechet Pesachim (10:4) presents the framing through which we are commanded to read the Exodus narrative: *Matchil bignut, umisayem bishevach*, 'opening with shame and servitude, and ending with praise.' In order to fulfill the mitzva of sippur yetziat Mitzrayim, of telling the story of our release from bondage in Egypt, we must begin our retelling by recounting the servitude itself, and only then make our way towards redemption.

This framing, making space for both the servitude and the redemption, plays out in the symbolic items on the Seder table as well. The Matza we eat is presented twice in Maggid – first in the Ha Lachma Anya, seeing in the Matza the bread of affliction eaten while our ancestors were enslaved in Egypt, and then again at the closing of the Maggid section, where the Matza celebrates redemption, reminding us of the hurried departure from Egypt, which left the Jews with no time to allow their dough to rise.

The same goes for the Maror, the bitter herbs. The Mishna (Pesachim 10:5), cited in the Haggadah, attributes the Maror to the bitterness of slavery (Shemot 1:14), yet Rav

Chaim ibn Attar, in his masterful commentary Or Hachayim (Shemot 12:8), sees Maror as a way to accentuate the taste of the Korban Pesach eaten with it. Even the Maror has a dual purpose, focusing on both dimensions of Pesach: the enslavement and the redemption.

So, too, for the four cups of wine. On the one hand, they are traditionally associated with the four redemptions from Egypt (Shemot 6:6-7; Yerushalmi Pesachim 10:1). On the other hand, the Shulchan Arukh (Orach Chayim 472:11) notes a preference for red wine for it recalls the blood of the Jewish children spilled by Pharaoh as he had them cast into the Nile.

Even the sweet Charoset, according to the Gemara (Pesachim 116a), holds within it a duality of meaning, directing our memory both to the fragrant apple orchards in which Jewish women would secretly birth their children, as well as to the thick mortar the Jewish slaves would prepare and use during their backbreaking labor.

Each one of these symbols has two layers of meaning, one of Genut/Avdut (denigration and slavery) and one of Shevach/Geula (praise and redemption). Yet unlike the telling of the story, which follows a clear chronological trajectory, the symbols on our Seder table are denied the luxury of beginning with sadness and journeying into joy. On the contrary, our Matza, Maror, wine, and Charoset are left to hold the whole story together – simultaneously the tragedy and the relief, all the pain and all the healing, all the grief and all the hope – in a single instant.

This intermixing of suffering and redemption speaks to us so clearly this year. We will celebrate our people, our State, and our bright future, without losing sight of all that remains broken, the empty chairs, the unbearable sacrifices, and the ongoing challenges facing our people. We will bring all this grief with us into Pesach this year, as we reminisce about marching out of Egypt and dream ahead to our ultimate redemption.

These feelings are not in opposition to one another, but complementary – the story of our people, throughout history and in this moment, holds within it both of these poles.

We are both a redeemed people and a people in a state of challenge, with both Eliyahu the prophet and the angel of destruction simultaneously knocking on our door on Seder night. For this is the Jewish dance towards eternity.

Our challenge for this Passover is not to lose sight of

either, making space for both our heartbreak and our hope, praying that it won't be long before we 'sing a new song

upon our salvation, and upon the redemption of our souls.' (Haggadah).

## From the Haftarah of Shabbos Hagadol

Rabbi Immanuel Bernstein

וְעִרְבָהּ לָהּ מִנְחַת יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם כִּימֵי עוֹלָם וְכִשְׁנַיִם קִדְמֹנִית.

*The minchah-offering of Yehudah and Yerushalayim will be pleasing to Hashem as in the days of old and in previous years (Malachi 3:4)*

This pasuk which opens the Haftarah of Shabbos HaGadol, and which is well known to us from the conclusion of the Shemoneh Esrei, describes how, in the future, the korbanos of Am Yisrael will once again be pleasing to Hashem as in days of old.

### Some Questions

There are a number of basic questions regarding this pasuk which are worthwhile considering:

1. What is the specific connotation of the word וערבה as opposed to other similar terms?
2. Why does the pasuk specify the minchah offering? Will not all offerings be pleasing to Hashem in the future?
3. Are the phrases “days of old” and “early years” referring to any specific time when korbanos were pleasing to Hashem?

With regards to the third question, the Midrash (Eichah Rabasi 5:21) identifies the time to which the pasuk is referring as the time of Kayin and Hevel, which was a time when avodah zarah did not yet exist in the world. The Meshech Chochmah discusses how this identification may help us answer the first two questions as well.

### Matok and Arev

The term “arev – pleasant” is often used synonymously with the term “matok – sweet”.

However, there is a significant difference in connotation between them.

- “Matok” refers to a single entity which is sweet.
- “Arev” relates to the term “eiruv,” a mixture or combination. It refers to something whose pleasant effect is specifically the result of combining different components, each of which contributes to – and brings out the best from – the other ingredients.

A classic example of the concept of “arev” is the Ketores, which consists of eleven different spices. In fact, as Chazal (Kerisos 6b) point out, one of these spices, the chelbenah, actually has a foul odor. Nevertheless, when combined

with the other spices, not only is the smell of the chelbenah itself tempered, it further serves to enhance the smell of the other ten spices! The composite effect of this “eiruv” of different spices is called “arev”.

### “When a soul brings a Mincha-offering”

The Halachah states that most of the korbanos which are offered by an individual can also be jointly offered by two people. A notable exception is the minchah, which can only be offered by a single individual. (See Menachos 104b) The source for this rule is the pasuk which introduces the korban minchah:

וְנִפֵּשׁ כִּי־תִקְרִיב קֶרְבַּן מִנְחָה לָהּ.

*When a person offers a minchah offering to Hashem. (Vayikra 2:1)*

The term used by the pasuk to describe the person bringing the minchah is נפש, from which the Gemara derives that a minchah must be brought specifically by a single soul and not by two or more people.

Having said this, we do encounter minchah offerings which are brought by the entire Jewish People! For example, the Omer offering on Pesach and the Shte Halechem on Shavuos are both communal minchah offerings. How does this fit in with the stipulation that a minchah cannot be brought by more than one person?

### Nefesh and Nefashos

The answer to this question lies in a comment of Chazal (Vayikra Rabbah 4:6) regarding the way the Torah describes the families of Yaakov and Esav:

*Concerning Esav, the Torah only mentions six members of his family, yet still refers to them as “souls” in the plural, as it says (Bereishis 36:6) וַיִּקַּח עֵשָׂו אֶת־נִשְׁוָיו וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וְאֶת־בְּנוֹתָיו וְאֶת־ כָּל־נַפְשׁוֹת בֵּיתוֹ, Esav took his wives, sons and daughters and all the souls of his household.” With regards to Yaakov, however, the pasuk mentions seventy people and yet still refers to them as “one soul,” as it says (Shemos 1:5) וְיָהִי כָל־נַפְשׁ יִצְחָק יִרְדֵי־עֵקֶב וְיָצְאוּ מִצְרַיִם כָּל־נַפְשׁוֹת, All the souls (lit. soul) who emerged from Yaakov were seventy souls (lit. soul)!” Rather, since Esav’s family worshiped many deities, the Torah refers to them as “many souls.” Yaakov’s family, however, worships One God, therefore, it is referred to as “one soul.”*

We see that the entire Jewish people are themselves

considered “one soul” and, as such, are able to bring a korban minchah. Moreover, such a minchah is especially “arev – pleasing” to Hashem, since it is the product of the composite “soul” that is comprised of the unification and integration (“eiruv”) of the Jewish People!

However, it is important to take note of this statement of the Midrash, as well as its implications; for the Midrash states that the reason Yaakov’s family are referred to as “a soul”, while Esav’s family are called “souls” is specifically because Yaakov’s family worships the One God while Esav’s family serve multiple deities.

We may tend to consider the concept of “Jewish unity” purely in terms of the Jewish People’s relationship with each other, and perhaps as not so connected to the question of their relationship with Hashem. The Midrash is informing us that the ultimate unity of the Jewish People to each other is based on the fact that they serve One God. Should the unity of their connection with Hashem ever be compromised, then their unified status as “one soul” would likewise be diminished. Among the many expressions of such a decline, this would express itself in the korban minchah. If Bnei Yisrael should cease being a single “nefesh,” they could no longer bring a minchah; as soon as they are no longer a unified and integrated entity (“eiruv”) their minchah would no longer be pleasing (“arev”) before Hashem.

### **Korban Minchah and the Sword of Gideon**

Indeed, the Jewish People experienced just such an un-unified state in the days of Gideon, when they were subject to oppression from Midian. The pasuk (Shoftim 6:6) relates: *וידל ישראל מאד מפני מדין, Yisrael became exceedingly impoverished before Midian.*

Commenting on these words, the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni Shoftim sec. 60) states that “they were so impoverished they did not even have the means with which to offer a korban minchah.” On a simple level the Midrash is describing the dire poverty which the Jewish people endured as a result of the oppression from Midian. However, the Meshech Chochmah explains that, on a deeper level, this Midrash is expressing the “poverty” which made them susceptible to that oppression!

As the pesukim in Sefer Shoftim there describe, the Jewish People at that time were involved in different forms of avodah zarah, including Ba’al and Asheirahs. In this state, having lost their unified connection with Hashem, they were no longer fully connected to each other and lost their status as “one soul”. This fragmented state is what the Midrash is referring to when it says they were so poor that, as a people, they could no longer bring a korban minchah!

This understanding of the Jewish People’s “impoverished” state will shed new light on Gideon’s first step in the war against Midian, destroying the statue of Ba’al and cutting down an Asheirah tree. This represented the beginning of the recovery of the People, not only in terms of their connection with Hashem, but also their unification with each other.

Indeed, this will give us a completely new insight into a part of that chapter where Hashem instructs Gideon to descend towards the Midianite camp on the eve of battle, telling him that he will hear something which will be the source of much encouragement regarding the battle to come. The pasuk relates that when Gideon approached the camp, he overheard one of the Midianite soldiers telling his fellow about a dream that he had had the preceding night (Shoftim 7:13-14):

וְהָנָה צָלִיל לֶחֶם שְׁעָרִים מִתְהַפֵּף בְּמַחְנֵה מִדְיָן וַיָּבֵא עַד-הָאֵהָל וַיִּפֹּל וַיִּהְיֶה כְּחֶרֶב גִּדְעוֹן... וַיִּעַן רֵעֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵין זֹאת בְּלָתִי אִם-חֶרֶב גִּדְעוֹן.

*Behold, a roasted barley bread was rolling in the Midianite camp. It came to the tent and struck it and it fell... His fellow answered and said, “This is none other than the sword of Gideon”*

What was the significance of this “roasted barley bread” rolling into the Midianite camp?

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 28:6) informs us that this was a reference to the korban omer, which is an offering of barley. Indeed, the night Gideon attacked the Midianite camp was the sixteenth of Nisan, the date on which the omer is offered. Based on our discussion, we can appreciate the significance of this allusion in an entirely new light. Once Bnei Yisrael had abandoned the avodah zarah which had disconnected them from Hashem, they were once again able to connect with each other, which thereby enabled them to offer – as “one soul” – the communal minchah offering of the omer. In this reunited state, their victory was ensured!

### **Future Times**

Coming back to our Haftarah, the Navi prophesizes concerning a time when all barriers between us and Hashem – and hence with each other – will be removed. The result of this unified and integrated state will be that our minchah, which can only be offered by “one soul,” will once again be “arev” before Hashem. The paradigm for this absolute connection, referred to in the pasuk as “the early years,” is the time of Hevel, whose minchah was offered at a time when there was no avodah zarah in the world that could disrupt his connection with Hashem. In the future, with Bnei Yisrael in a full state of “eiruv,” our mincha will likewise be “arev.”<sup>1</sup>



May it happen speedily in our days!

1. Perhaps this idea can give us further insight as to the connection between this Haftarah and the festival of Pesach (which it ushers in.) Moshe's introductory words to Bnei Yisrael regarding the korban Pesach were (Shemos 12:21) *מִשְׁכֹּר וְקַח לָכֶם*, Draw and take for yourselves. Chazal (Midrash Rabbah ibid.) interpret the word

משכור as saying "withdraw your hands from avodah zarah." Pesach is the time when we became a nation. As such, Moshe is informing the people that withdrawing from avodah zarah is critical not only in order to connect them to Hashem, but also to fully connect them with each other and leave Mitzrayim as a unified nation.

## Haftarat Metzora: The Salvation of Shomron: An Unorthodox Redemption

Rabbi Menachem Penner (From *From Within the Tent: The Haftarot, Essays on the Weekly Haftarah from the Rabbis and Professors of Yeshiva University*, YU Press, 2011)

**T**he selection of Navi chosen as the haftarah for Parashat Metzora (Melakhim Bet 7:3–20) is a powerful and exciting story filled with poignant and timely messages.

The incident described in the haftarah takes place in Shomron, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, during the reign of King Yehoram. The Kingdom finds itself under constant attack from the people of Aram, and the chapters leading up to our story detail several attempts by Aram to wreak havoc on the Kingdom.

On the surface, the Northern Kingdom of Israel seems like easy prey for the Arameans. But Divine protection, seemingly controlled by the prophet Elisha, has rebuffed the enemy, often embarrassing the Arameans in the process. In chapter 6 of Melakhim Bet, the Arameans lay an ambush for the Israelites, only to have Elisha advise Yehoram of the danger. When the King of Aram sends an army to kill Elisha, the army is made to look like fools in the face of Elisha's miraculous abilities.

However, as chapter 6 comes to a close, the Arameans seem to be on the road to victory. They have laid siege to the capital city, and the siege, along with a severe extended drought, has brought the city to the point of desperation. As the king walks the city walls to survey the military situation, he is accosted by two women starving to the point of having to devour their children. The king is broken, and publically rends his garments, revealing that his body is covered in sackcloth for the fate of his people. He is, at the same time, repentant and defiant. He understands that the suffering of Shomron is a Divine punishment, but blames Elisha, the prophet, for its pain. Yehoram insists that were God, so to speak, left to His own devices, He might show mercy to His people. Certainly, the people were not free of sin, but the king's sackcloth attested to at least a personal attempt at change. God alone, felt Yehoram, would be willing to accept the peoples' meager

repentance. So what was holding the Almighty back? It must be that it was the wicked and judgmental pleas of the prophet, Elisha. Just as Elisha's mentor, Eliyahu, stood firm with his demands that the people earn their protection and bounty from God, so too, Eliyahu's student Elisha was most certainly serving as a prosecuting attorney against Shomron. Yehoram, therefore, in an act that expresses profound concern for his people, and profound faith in God, yet an inability to truly accept responsibility for the situation, swears by the name of God that Elisha will pay for the people's suffering and must die that day.

The messenger whom the king sent to kill Elisha, however, is met by several surprises when he reaches the prophet's home, as Elisha had taken precautions against the threat to his life. When the messenger (or the king, himself, for the king walks behind his messenger and might be the speaker) cries out that the people have lost all faith in God's help, Elisha makes a startling prediction: the famine will end in a day's time. More precisely, food prices will drop dramatically because of a surplus of food.

The messenger, representing a king and a people so desperate for help, is unwilling to believe such an absurd prediction. And with seemingly good reason! "Even if God were to open up the heavens," he exclaims, "could this truly occur" by tomorrow? For the siege to end alone would be simply unbelievable! But a surplus of food? Where would that come from?

Elisha assures him that it will, in fact, occur. However, he informs the messenger that because he doubted the power of God, he would but witness God's salvation; he would not merit to benefit from it.

The commentators struggle to understand this change of heart. What had the people done to earn this salvation? If they were unworthy a day before, what tilted the Divine hand to mercy?

Could the king's cry have aroused the middat ha-

rachamim? Although the king had cried out against God's prophet, in doing so he had shown his sincere dedication to the people, and possibly thereby aroused God's mercy. On the other hand, perhaps Yehoram's assassination attempt against Elisha had marked his nadir. Maybe there was no longer a purpose in punishing Shomron, for it had already reached its low point, and that is why Hashem had to act. A final possibility is that perhaps the time had not truly come for redemption, but the messenger's brazen denial of God's power required a miraculous rebuttal.

The passage selected for the haftarah opens not inside, but outside the besieged city. The scene shifts as evening sets in. Four lepers stand just outside the city walls looking back to the city that has expelled them, and forward to the Aramean camp besieging the city. The lepers deem their situation to be hopeless, and choose to put their fate in the hands of the foreign enemy. "And now," they proclaim, "let us fall into the hands of the camp of Aram! If they let us live – we will live, and if they kill us – we will die."

What they find in the Aramean camp is hard to comprehend. The camp is fully stocked. There are horses and tents and weapons and provisions. But there are no soldiers. The camp has been abandoned. It seems impossible, too good to be true.

The narrator explains to us what happened to the army. God performed a miracle, causing the besieging army to hear "the sound of chariots, the sound of horses, the sound of a large army" approaching. The Arameans assumed the worst: Yehoram had hired an army to free the city. They were so alarmed that they ran from Shomron, leaving all of their belongings behind.

All of this had occurred before the lepers arrived at the Aramean camp. That fact should not be lost in the narrative. It means that the salvation had been provided just a few hours after Elisha's prediction. It means that as the lepers stood bemoaning their fate and their limited options, that God had already saved them. As we are promised in Yeshayahu 65:24 "ve-haya terem yikre'u va-ani e'eneh" – "and it will be, [even] before they call me, I will answer." Moreover, the residents of Shomron continued to starve and cry out in desperation – not knowing that the crisis has already been averted. A most intriguing situation ... but we must get back to our story.

The lepers are caught in a bind. They find themselves surrounded by more wealth and more food than they can handle! In a moment – a heref ayin – they go from desperation to ecstatic joy. They eat, they drink, and they devise a plan for pocketing their massive, newfound

wealth. All the while the people continue to die in the city behind them.

A rabbinic tradition identifies these four men with Gechazi and his three sons. Gechazi was once the faithful student of Elisha the prophet, but allowed an opportunity for personal gain to come before his dedication to the prophet and his mission. It is certainly reasonable to assume, therefore, that these four lepers were Gechazi and his family. After all, this group was acting well within their character – choosing to line their pockets at the expense of others.

But this time, their guilt – and their fear of reprisals – gets the better of them. They return to the city to share the wonderful news – and the spoils and the food – with the city that had recently expelled them. They cannot get inside the city, but they relate the facts to the gatekeeper who takes word to the king. The king, however, is convinced that the Arameans had merely set up a trap and that they were lying in wait for the Israelites to leave their city.

The king's fears, however, seem rather misplaced given Elisha's prediction! Hadn't the prophet just alerted him the day before that something miraculous would occur? Hadn't this massive "find" of provisions been foretold? As a reader of the tale, it is easy to make this assumption; however, that may not be fair to do. After all, Elisha had spoken of food prices dropping – not armies dropping! And yet, there is a lesson to be learned here. We have already pointed out the irony of a people losing hope, unaware that their redemption had already arrived. King Yehoram now takes this disbelief to a new level. The salvation, predicted by a prophet, has come. He has even been told so. And yet he still will not believe! Is he so suspicious of the Arameans? Has the report come from an unreliable source? Does he refuse to believe the prophet? Or, perhaps, is Yehoram hoping for a miracle, even praying for one, but incapable of recognizing one when it comes? Perhaps Elisha had raised his hopes, maybe there would be food on the morrow... but what does that have to do with a military surprise?

King Yehoram is therefore convinced to send out a small search party to verify the report. The two horsemen confirm that Aram has fled, and the people run quickly from the city to collect the spoils and gather some much-needed food. The market is soon flooded and Elisha's prophecy is fulfilled. But there was one more thing that had to happen.

Yehoram, perhaps trying to assert some control over the situation, and perhaps trying to take some credit for what happened, asks his trusted messenger to stand by the gate to manage the crowds. This messenger, the same one who had been sent to kill Elisha, witnesses the wondrous turn

of fortune and certainly imagines what he will bring home for himself. And then, he is promptly trampled to death. As Elisha had promised, the king's messenger does indeed see the salvation, but because of his blasphemous words, he is not able to partake in it.

The disbelief of King Yehoram and his people stands in stark contrast to the calm, resolute faith of Elisha. Throughout the wars with Aram, Elisha seems in total control, confident that God's silence was not to be confused with His disinterest or impotence. The people, on the other hand, seem slow to believe, even in face of open miracles.

Perhaps the most interesting group in the story, however, is the group of lepers. Much of the narrative focuses on them. We are introduced to them, we follow their escapades, and we get their perspective more than any other on the events as they unfold.

Why do they play such a central role? Why does it matter who brings the news of the miracle and the redemption? And does the way the news is brought affect its basic message?

R. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz, in his commentary Da'at Sofrim, explains that attention needed to be diverted from the Israelite army. Had the army uncovered the miracle they might, in some way, have been able to take some of the credit. For some reason, God does not want the people to feel that they earned this gift. To make this clear, four people from outside the community are given the privilege of stumbling across the booty. The lepers are not important in and of themselves. In fact they are so unimportant that they make the perfect messengers.

R. Yigal Ariel develops this point further:

*It is specifically the impure, despised lepers who have been cast out of the community who open up the eyes of the people and bring the news of the redemption.*

*The Four Lepers, pushed away from the camp and the city, were downcast bitter and hopeless. Even when word comes of the redemption of the people, they know that they will truly have no part in it. At the end of the day, they will still be outcasts. The lepers were outside of the city not only in a geographical sense – but in a spiritual sense as well. They stood between the camp of the enemy and the city of Shomron and the war took place around them. They were willing to give themselves over to the Aramean side – anything to just stay alive. It is specifically these lowly people who first merit to see the miracle and to recognize it... They are the ones who bring the tidings of the redemption to the people.*

In a perfect scenario, the redemption is heralded by the righteous. It is heralded by those in the "center" of the city

and the heart of the community. The redemption comes with the participation of the people in partnership with God. But this was not a "perfect" redemption. As R. Ariel explains:

*The rescue of Shomron comes to a people who are not worthy of rescue and who don't believe that the rescue will come. This is not an ordinary redemption that is based on reward and punishment; instead it is built on a model that is not based in merit...*

*Redemption that comes to those who do not want it, those who push it away, will not be straight and simple; it will, perforce, be twisted and filled with obstacles. This is not a redemption fit for those of a fragile nature; it is wrapped up with much suffering and anguish. Those who are too delicate or too righteous will mock such redemption. What is the value of a partial redemption? Of a redemption that does not fulfill all of our dreams? Of a redemption that may not be permanent?*

Not only is redemption preceded by much hardship; it unfolds in the most unexpected of ways. The average observer – and even the individual who has truly yearned for redemption – doesn't know what to make of the situation. After all this time could these be our messengers of redemption? And could a temporary reprieve from suffering be the redemption for which we hoped? R. Ariel concludes:

*In truth, there is value in redemption even if it is not a complete or final redemption and even if it is just the rescue of a people. Jewish continuity in the present is what allows for the ultimate redemption in the future and a partial rescue and salvation is important even if it is bound up temporarily with religious defects and challenges. The rejection of the significance of this miracle, even if done for lofty reasons and with good intentions, represents a rejection of the will of God and the adoption of an overly close-minded approach to religion.*

R. Yehuda Amital, zt"l, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, would often quote this story to the same effect – especially around Yom Ha-Atzma'ut. Could there be Divine significance in a state conceived by, fought for, and governed by mostly irreligious representatives of our people? Could redemption in Israel be heralded by those "outside" the traditional camp? And could that group recognize the redemption even before some who are, in so many other ways, more aware of God?

Biblical leprosy challenges us to see the hand of God in the everyday – even within impurity. It reminds us that, even as miracles surround us, God may communicate with us in a muffled voice or a "kol demamah dakah." It is up to us, mired in our imperfect world, to hear Him talking.