
2. The connection between the topics in the *parasha*

The topics and the detailed discussion in the *parasha* evoke many questions. However, these many questions regarding the details and the topics can distract the reader from two very basic issues. First, what is the connection between the two topics discussed in the *parasha*? Does the juxtaposition of the laws related to a woman who has given birth and those related to the person afflicted with *tzara'at* suggest some connection between these two topics? If there is a connection, what is it? The second issue is directly related to the first issue. Is there a shared factor that causes these two individuals to be deemed impure? If there is, what is it?

If a person has a white blotch, discoloration, or spot, on the skin of his flesh, and there is on skin of his flesh an affliction of tzara'at, then he should be brought to the Aharon the Kohen or to one of his sons the Kohanim. (Sefer VaYikra 13:2)

And the cloud departed from on the Tent and Miryam was afflicted with tzara'at as white as snow. And Aharon turned to Miryam and she was afflicted with tzara'at. (Sefer BaMidbar 12:10)

Remember that which Hashem did to Miriam on the way, on your exodus from Egypt. (Sefer Devarim 24:9)

3. The Torah disjointed treatment of *tzara'at*

The Torah deals with *tzara'at* on three occasions. The first is in the sections of Tazria and Metzora. The second discussion is in Sefer BaMidbar. In that instance, the Torah recounts an incident which resulted in Miryam becoming afflicted with the condition. The narrative described Miryam criticizing her brother Moshe. Hashem rebukes Miryam for her ill-considered comments and she is afflicted with *tzara'at*. In the final instance – in Sefer Devarim – the Torah merely admonishes us to recall that Miryam spoke inappropriately about Moshe and was afflicted with *tzara'at*.

These three references deal with two different aspects of *tzara'at*. The discussion in the sections of Tazria and Metzora deals exclusively with the laws of *tzara'at* and the purification process. Nowhere in this discussion is there any reference to the causes of the affliction. In other words, the discussion deals with the consequences of *tzara'at* and not its causes. However, the discussion in Sefer BaMidbar focuses on the causes. The narrative explains that Miryam spoke inappropriately and she was stricken with the affliction. The message is that *tzara'at* is a punishment for improper speech and specifically for tale-bearing or slander. This message is reinforced by the passage in Sefer Devarim. We are admonished to remember Miryam's sin and the consequence she suffered. In these references, there is no discussion of the laws regarding *tzara'at*. The discussion is limited to its causes. In short, the Torah has divided its treatment of *tzara'at* into two distinct topics. It has separated the discussion of the consequences of the affliction from the discussion regarding its causes.

4. Problems engendered by this treatment

The entire discussion of *tzara'at* in the sections of Tazria and Metzora evokes a sense of the surreal. The Torah describes unfamiliar afflictions that can extend to clothing. In Parshat Metzora, the Torah reveals that *tzara'at* can even afflict the walls of a home. The afflictions are treated like contagious diseases. The afflicted person is subjected to isolation. The cloth or home is destroyed. The reader cannot help but wonder what is the strange disease described by the Torah? What are its causes? Why does the affliction evoke such an intense and extreme response? But the Torah does not provide any indication during this discussion of the essential fact needed to make sense of these laws. No mention is made of the cause of the affliction. This omission leaves the reader with a sense of

confusion and bafflement. Of course, when the patient reader discovers the cause of the affliction, the laws become intelligible. The affliction is a Divine punishment. The punishment begins by striking the house. If the person repents, then the afflictions proceeds no further. If the person persists in the sin of slandering others or tale-bearing, the affliction persists – moving from the person’s clothing to his body. The consequence of isolation makes complete sense. As our Sages explain, the tale-bearer has caused others to be ostracized by the community. He deserves to experience the same isolation that he has brought upon his victim. But all of this becomes clear only after the reader learn about Miryam and her punishment. Why does the Torah not reveal the causes of *tzara’at* from the outset rather than leaving the reader mystified until learning about Miryam?

5. The message in the Torah’s treatment of *tzara’at*

The implication is that the Torah is intentionally concealing the cause of *tzara’at* in order to draw our attention to some other issue. In other words, we are not to understand *tzara’at* only in the framework of a punishment. Instead, the Torah is directing us to consider the body of law governing *tzara’at* independent of its causes. The body of law is, in-itself, worthy of our attention! It has its own lesson for the reader and this lesson is not dependant upon the reader knowing the cause of *tzara’at* or even knowing that it is a Divine punishment. What is this lesson?

Rabaynu Yona suggests that this message can best be identified by considering the sections of Tazria and Metzora as part of a lengthier discussion beginning in the previous *parasha*. Parshat Shmini contained a discussion of those species that we may eat and those that are prohibited. This was followed by a brief discussion of methods by which food can become defiled or impure. Tazria describes forms of impurity that apply to one’s person. It begins with the laws relating to a woman who has given birth and then continues with the laws of *tzara’at*. Parshat Metzora continues this discussion with a description of other physical conditions that render a person impure. Rabbaynu Yona observes that this series of discussions is applying *halachah* – Torah law – to our food, our houses, our clothing, and even our bodies. It is treating each as a focus of law and subjecting each to *halachah’s* jurisdiction. It is communicating to us that even the most personal and intimate aspects of our lives are to be perceived by us through *halachah* and regulated through its laws. Another way to express this is that the Torah is demanding that we learn to objectify the most personal elements of our existence. Rabbaynu Yona argues that the subjugation of the personal to the rule of *halachah* is a fundamental expression of service to Hashem. Through this process we embrace His authority over the most intimate elements of our lives.¹

Now, the two questions raised earlier can be answered. The juxtaposition of the laws governing the women bearing a child and those of *tzara’at* is appropriate. The Torah is explaining that *halachah* has authority over our very bodies. The Torah is not suggesting a shared cause for the impurity experienced by these women. In fact, the Torah may be juxtaposing these two people to stress that the message of the discussion has nothing to do with the diverse factors that cause their respective impurities. Instead, the discussion is about the authority of *halachah* over even the most personal aspects of our lives.

¹ Rabbaynu Yona ben Avraham of Gerona, *Lectures and Commentary on the Chumash*, pp176-178.

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