

The Metzora and the Avel

The persona of the *metzora*, the leper, from a halakhic perspective, is most similar to that of an individual in mourning. Both sit alone, in silence, faces obscured and heads covered¹, isolated and bereft for a period of seven days. However, the question begs asking, for whom is the *metzora* mourning?

The answer is equally clear: himself or herself. Indeed, the Talmud actually considers a *metzora* to be one who has actually died, while he is still alive². What, exactly, is all this about?

As described in Sefer BaMidbar in the context of the incident involving Miriam's criticism of Moshe, tzara'at is associated with negative speech regarding another person, lashon hara. The Ramban actually understands the Torah's injunction in Sefer Devarim to actually refer to a positive commandment to remember the incident, so as not to lapse into lashon hara. The *metzora*, who has cast aspersion on someone else, is forced into social isolation, in an attempt to help the *metzora* appreciate the benefits and blessings of society. Moreover, the *metzora* must plead with anyone who passes by his solitary abode, in exile from the camp, to pray for his healing³. The Torah compels the *metzora* to internalize just how much he or she is in need of others.

In light of this understanding of the corrective measures which the Torah prescribes for the *metzora*, we can now readily appreciate what precisely the *metzora* was mourning in himself. As part of our broader free will, we can all choose how we wish to understand the world around us, the people around us, and the situations in which we find ourselves. We may be generous, conceptually speaking, and approach the world from the perspective described in Pirkei Avot, "judge each person favorably⁴." Alternatively, we can approach the world around us with negativity, with jaundiced criticisms, with a bitter sense of unforgiving judgment⁵. In a sense, we can choose one of two personas. When one opts for the latter approach, and abandons the former option, one has, in a sense, allowed his 'better self' to expire. The mourner must mourn the passing of this persona, and attempt to rediscover it.

It is fascinating to note that the tevilah, ritual immersion, which the *metzora* must undertake can itself be likened to the experience of birth, of emergence from the waters into, hopefully, a life suffused with a different perspective altogether.

¹ While this is no longer practiced contemporaneously, it is, in fact, the letter of the law. See Rambam Tumat Tzara'at 10:6.

² See Nedarim 64b.

³ Moed Kattan 5a.

⁴ Avot 1:6

⁵ R. Eliezer considers this trait the worst possible human characteristic. See Avot Chapter 2.