

Tazria Metzora, 5781  
Rabbi Zev Wiener

The Jewish mystical tradition teaches that at our root, we all share a single spiritual oneness. When we live in consonance with this truth, through a life of Torah, Mitzvot, and kindness, we feel whole and connected. When we delude ourselves of this truth, seeing ourselves as distinct, rival beings in cutthroat competition, we may bring pain and suffering into our lives, G-d forbid.

The affliction of Tzaraat represents the illness that can come from a false sense of disconnection. While the Torah presents the affliction without explanation or reason, our Sages identify Tzaraat as the consequence of several different sins, most notably Lashon HaRa -- slander. Beyond the specific destruction wrought by slander, the act of slander is more broadly symptomatic of a skewed world view, a perspective of "other"-ness, in which invisible walls exist between people. After all, one would never publicly spread slander about oneself or one's beloved family members; the impulse to malign another person inherently reflects a belief that the subject of my slander is somehow disconnected from me, and that by putting him or her down, I somehow bring myself up. Such a perspective creates a life full of jealousy, rivalry, and unrest, rendering one vulnerable to both spiritual and physical maladies.

The Metzora's rectification comes in the form of isolation. The Talmud teaches that during the Metzora's quarantine, he or she must notify the rare passers-by of his or her status by shouting, "טמא טמא" -- "[I am] impure, [I am] impure." The Talmud (Moed Kattan 5a) teaches that, as opposed to serving as a punitive degradation, this announcement actually served a therapeutic purpose:

"וטמא טמא יקרא" - צריך להודיע צערו לרבים ורבים מבקשין עליו רחמים  
*"And 'Tamei, Tamei' he should call out" -- He must notify his pain to others so that others can pray on his behalf*

At its core, the Metzora's declaration is a cry for help, beseeching others to pray for him or her. Through this practice, the Metzora learns the priceless gift of vulnerability -- the ability to admit that one is not self-sufficient, that we all need each other, and that everyone has to ask for help at some point or another. There is a tremendous spiritual blessing in learning to ask for help. The moment we can remove our

mask and honestly acknowledge that we are imperfect and not completely self-sufficient is the moment we see past our individual ego and experience our true shared essence. Small people, terrifiedly insecure, spend their lives feigning airs of unwavering confidence, complete self-sufficiency, and perfect capabilities. The thought of admitting an imperfection -- to themselves or to others -- equates to humiliation, and immediately triggers defensiveness and spite. Great people, however, feel comfortable to acknowledge doubts, failures, and their inability to solve everything by themselves. It is precisely through this acknowledgement that they are able to create real bonds with others, as true connection only comes through the breaks in our armor.

When a person relinquishes his or her illusion of self-sufficiency, the barriers of "other"-ness which underlie Tzaraat, come down. Arrogance is replaced with humility, and vitriol makes way for true love and concern for others. I have seen this truth particularly evident among people who overcome addictions of various kinds, as they emerge with a renewed perspective on life. Having hit rock bottom with humiliation and shame, such individuals are forced to acknowledge that their challenges are sometimes too great to solve on their own. They realize that for so many years, they tried to maintain a false front of omnipotence and self-sufficiency, which in reality distanced themselves from Hashem, others, and themselves. In learning to admit their dependence and ask for help, such people reveal a deeper part of themselves, and are filled with humility, compassion, and patience. Indeed, the camaraderie that develops between regular attendees of an intimate addiction recovery group is often far deeper than what may exist in more superficial, small-talk social settings.

A basic premise of all of Judaism is that none of us is truly self-sufficient. It's ok to mess up, it's ok to not have all the answers, and it's ok to ask for help. The more that we can allow ourselves to be comfortable with admitting vulnerability and accepting help from those we trust, the more we will feel a sense of oneness with others, and the less we will be driven to divisive practices like slander. And in doing so, we will recognize that everything -- even what we do accomplish "on our own" -- is in actuality, nothing other than a gift of love from the Almighty Himself.