

Parshat Tazria-Metzora 5777

Shut Up, Twitter – a parasha for our times

For Artscroll, there is no translation for *tzara'at*, the affliction dealt with in this week's double sedra. And so the Stone Humash, on the English side of the page, just uses the transliteration *tzara'as*. But the Targum - a much older translator translated *tzara'at* into Aramaic as *segirut*, which appears to come from the Hebrew word for what was done to the *metzora* – the person afflicted by *tzara'at*: he was “hisgir” – shut away, or “shut up” in the older English translations – for seven days outside the camp (Vayikra 13, 4).

Of course, translating it this way is a bit of ‘sleight of hand’ by the Targum, as it uses a word describing the consequences of *tzara'at* rather than a word describing *tzara'at* itself. So perhaps Artscroll's approach is the more ‘intellectually honest’. But to translate *tzara'at* as *segirut* – the *shut up* affliction - as the Targum does, fits very nicely, at least in English translation, with the rabbis' understanding of the underlying cause of this condition – loose talk.

One of the few clues in the text of the Humash as to this underlying cause of *tzara'at* comes right at the beginning of the second of this week's sedras, Metzora. The subject matter is “*torat hametzora beyom tahorato*” – the laws of the *metzora* on the day when he becomes “*tahor*” again. The procedure goes like this. First, the Cohen leaves the camp to inspect the *metzora* and finds that the affliction is “*nirpa*” – healed. Then the Cohen commands that there shall be taken two birds (*tzipporim*) that are “*hayot*” and “*tehorot*” – living and pure (we shall come back to those words); Cedar wood; Crimson; and Hyssop.

The Cohen slaughters one of the birds and then takes the other bird and the items listed above, dips them in the blood of the slaughtered bird, and sprinkles the *metzora* (who is now referred to as the “*mitahev*” – the one undergoing purification) seven times – and then releases the bird into the open field.

The clue here as to the underlying cause of *tzara'at* is the animal selected by the Torah for this purification ritual. Picking up on the requirement that the birds be “*hayot*” (living) and “*tehorot*” (pure), Rashi comments that “*hayot*” excludes birds that are “*terefot*” in the sense of having some kind of disease; and “*tehorot*” excludes impure birds i.e. ones which cannot be eaten.

Rashi then adds: “Since these afflictions come about on account of slander (*lashon hara*), which is a matter of chattering, therefore birds were required to obtain purification from it, as they chatter continuously with a tweeting (*tziftzuf*) sound.” Rashi's source is a statement of Rabbi Yehuda ben Levi in the Gemara in Arachin 16b – that G-d said that just as the *metzora* was a chatterer (*oseh ma'aseh patit*), so the required sacrifice was of a “chatterer”.

The Ramban, in a lengthy piece on the same verse, unpicks the connection between birds that are pure and birds that tweet. In the course of this he considers the difference between birds (*tzipporim*) and fowl (*off*) – and finds that “*tzippor*” refers to smaller fowl that rise in the morning to chirp and to sing. He then introduces us to another requirement of the *tzippor* used for the purification rite – that it should be a “*tzippor deror*”- literally a “free” bird, but also used to denote a swallow or a sparrow. This indeed is the law found in the first mishna in Nega'im chapter 14. Kehati comments there that “*deror*” in this context connotes either a bird capable of living both in the house and the field, or a bird that is free in the sense of not accepting the authority of others.

There is an unmistakably 21st century ring to the symbolism here. We have a spiritual malady, *tzara'at* that is associated with “tweeting” in the sense of communication between people which is loose, insensitive and harmful. The source of this “tweeting” is a creature which we especially associate with *deror* – liberty. Purification from the spiritual harm of tweeting is achieved by taking two such creatures, slaughtering one, and releasing the other to the “open field” – again, a symbol of freedom. The message seems to be one of taking care in the way we use our *deror*, our precious liberty. When we use it to tweet mindlessly and harmfully, we can destroy our liberty and ultimately ourselves. The remedy for this kind of “tweeting” is *segirut* – being shut up – being taken out of society and deprived of our liberty. But that is not our natural or long term state. Our natural state is to be free again as the *tzippor deror*, but to use that freedom constructively, as the verse in psalms (Tehillim 84) says in praise of such creatures and the homes they build:

Gam tzippor matz'ah bayit, udror ken lah, asher shatah efroheycha, et mizbehotecha hashem tsevaot malki velohai. Even a bird has found a home, the swallow a nest for herself, where she sets her young by your altars, Hashem tsevaot, my king and my G-d.