

Parshat Metzora 5779

The beginning of parshat Metzora describes the purification ceremony of the metzora. The pasuk states: *'The Kohen shall look, and behold! - the tzaraas affliction has been healed from the metzora. The Kohen shall command; and for the person being purified shall be taken two live clean birds, cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop... and shall dip them and the live bird into the blood of the bird that was slaughtered....'*

What is the imagery of the cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop which were dipped into the slaughtered birds blood? Rashi notes that the metzora's repentance involves a resolution to change himself, a change that is symbolised by the following three items that accompany the offering:-

- 1) Cedar wood - is tall, imposing, strong and wide and therefore symbolises haughtiness
- 2) Crimson thread – the thread is wool, dyed with a pigment from a lowly creature, a type of insect or a snail. This symbolises the sinner's new found humility
- 3) Hyssop – comes from a lowly bush which also symbolises humility.

The Shem Mishmuel asks a question on Rashi. Rashi considers these offerings of the metzora to be symbolic of his new healed state. As such, the metzora brings red-dyed wool and hyssop to show his new found humility; but why bring the cedar wood? This harks back to his old, arrogant mind-set. Surely, it would be best that this is completely forgotten in his endeavour for rehabilitation? Moreover, we see that even before the purification ceremony takes place, the Kohen has already proclaimed the person has been healed from tzaraas, so why does he need to bring these three items?

The gemarah in Shavuot tells us that the tzaraas stimulates the metzora's atonement and the offerings prepare him for being re-admitted into the community. It is clear that the thread and hyssop allow him to reach a state of humility needed to enter the community, but why does he need the cedarwood, why does he need haughtiness?

The Iban Ezra notes that the metzora and someone who is tamei meis, both require cedarwood and hyssop as ingredients for purification. This is similar to Pesach

Mitzrayim where the hyssop was used to sprinkle the blood of the korban pesach on the lintel and two side posts. Thus, there must be an intrinsic connection between the state of the Jewish people at the time of the korban Pesach and the purification process of the metzora and someone who is tamei meis.

The Iban Ezra explains that from the beginning of time, mankind tried to identify with Hashem through animal sacrifice. Adam, Kayin, Hevel and others brought sacrifices which were completely consumed by fire and not eaten by the individuals themselves. However, at the time of the first Korban Pesach the b'nei yisrael were instructed to eat the flesh of the Korban, which was the first time that a human shared with G-d His sacrifices. The Korban Pesach created a state where the Jewish people could 'partner' with Hashem by partaking in the Korban (keviyachel) with Hashem. This sacrificial offering at the time of Pesach elevated b'nei Yisrael and enhanced our status as tzelem elokim - 'in the image of G-d.' The uniqueness of b'nei yisrael was emphasised at the moment of Pesach.

Thus, when the metzora spoke loshan horah, he seeks to destroy and break down the inherent tzelem elokim of a person. Thus, as part of his purification he must return to basics and is reintroduced to the hyssop which was used during Pesach, to remind the metzora of the nobility of each individual member of b'nei yisrael. He must relearn the lesson of Pesach Mitzrayim.

This is the message of the cedar wood, thread and hyssop. Now that the metzora wants to be introduced into society he must understand what the cause of the problem was in the first place. The reason why someone comes to speak negatively about another person is because they failed to appreciate the special qualities of each individual. The cedar wood, a sign of strength and importance, symbolises the greatness of the Jewish people, the aspect of tzelem elokim inside each individual. The hyssop (and thread) represents the humility of a Jew and allows the haughtiness not to become arrogance.

Rav Soloveichik notes that this also relates to someone who is tamei meis. With the death of every individual we who remain in this world realise that each being is irreplaceable, each individual is a little world, and when that person dies this little world comes to an end. This awareness should prevent one from speaking negatively about other people.

