

Parshat Tazria Metzora 5778

More is Less-Many of us will find this week's double parasha particularly restful, as we mentally 'turn off' from the strange and ugly descriptions of tzoraas which dominate. But with an open mind and some application, we can gain many insights into general torah hashkafa, from the detailed diagnostics and purification rituals. The major commentators are at pains to convince us that tzoraas is not the condition commonly known as leprosy. Rav Hirsch provides a list of detailed distinctions between the Torah's description of tzoraas and the current (as in his time) symptoms of leprosy. In addition, the prescribed process for confirmation by a Kohen, involving 7-day lock-ups followed by inspection of the developing symptoms, suggests that something further than a simple medical diagnosis is at play. The subsequent isolation of the confirmed metzora might suggest that the condition is contagious, yet the Kohen is charged with close contact with a suspect metzora during the confirmation process. A further oddity is that tzoraas also appears to infect clothes and houses.

The story of Miriam being struck with tzoraas as a result of her criticism of Moshe, confirms to chazal that tzoraas is an affliction suffered in response to a behavioral shortcoming, rather than a contagious disease. The affliction and the subsequent isolation are intended to provide the metzora with cause and opportunity, for reflection, introspection and subsequent teshuva.

The Slonimer Rebbe in his classic work Nesivas Shalom, sees a beautiful remez to the spiritual cause of tzoraas, in a verse (Vayikra, 13, 3) which describes a characteristic of genuine tzoraas:- *....umar'eh hanega amok me'or besoro, nega tzaraas hoo..* "....and if the appearance of the affliction is deeper than the appearance of the flesh, it is tzoraas.." In genuine tzoraas, explains the Slonimer Rebbe, it is apparent to the examining Kohen that the affliction emanates from deep within the sufferer. It reflects an inner spiritual sickness, which manifests itself in outer physical symptoms. The metaphysical nature of tzoraas also means that usual rules of logic are not applicable to the prescribed diagnosis process. The most striking example of this is the rule stated in verse (13,13) :- *.....kulo hafach lavan, tahor hoo..* "....if all (his body's flesh) has turned white, then he is tahor...." This rule states that where the victim appears to be afflicted with tzoraas from head to foot, the Kohen may immediately discharge him; as such a condition is not genuine tzoraas. In other words, 'more is less', when it comes to tzoraas. This ironic ruling is explained by chazal in the light of the spiritual or behavioral cause which underlies a genuine tzoraas condition. Tzoraas reflects an inner spiritual sickness. But it is an accepted fact that no Jew is so totally morally depraved as to manifest in a full-body tzoraas affliction. Where a sufferer appears to show such symptoms, then this is a natural medical condition, for which medical treatment, rather than isolation, is the proper response.

I would like to bring two other interesting examples in Jewish thought, of the 'more is less' principle. The first is halachic and the second is hashkafic.

The first perek in mesechet Sanhedrin prescribes the constitution and operation of a beis-din charged with judging capital offenses. The beis-din should consist of 23 judges and a minimum majority of two is required to convict. In practice this means that at least 13 judges must vote for conviction, in order to affect a death sentence. But in an example of a 'more is less' halacha, the gemora (17a) states that where all 23 judges vote to convict, the accused is to be acquitted! This ironic ruling is explained by the Maharatz Chayos, who suggests that no real life case can be so 'black and white' that there are no possible grounds or factors to mitigate, or question, the guilt of the accused. Indeed, the gemora in the very next statement on 17a recommends that judges on a beis-din must be of such a calibre, that they can logically argue to be 'metaher a sheretz'. Hence, where all the judges in a beis-din can find no mitigating factors, this reflects badly on the competence of the judges and their verdict to convict cannot stand.

My second and controversial example comes from Rabbi Professor David Halivni Weiss, a holocaust survivor and prolific writer, who happens also to be my near neighbour in Yerushalayim and frequent Shabbos guest. In his philosophical writings, Rabbi Halivni argues strongly that the shoah was an event that stands outside the framework of any of the suffering and persecutions prefigured in the Tochechah sections of the Torah. The Tochecha certainly sets out for us the terrible and painful consequences to the Jewish people, of abandoning the Torah. But it contains a limitation clause, as we find in Parashat Bechkotai (26,44) :- *"ve'af gam zos beheyosam be'erezt oyevehem, lo me'astim velo ge'altim lechalosam lehafer brisi.."* "Thus, even when they are in their enemies' land, I will not grow so disgusted with them nor so tired of them that I would completely destroy them and break My covenant.."

The Torah guarantees in this verse, that the tragedies which will befall us, will never amount to 'lechalosam - to complete destruction. But, argues Rabbi Halivni, the shoah did amount to the complete destruction of the cream of European Jewry. It therefore exceeded the limits prescribed in the Tochechah. Since the Tochechah warns of the suffering that will be inflicted on our people if they abandon the Torah and since we have proven that the shoah was not a Tochechah event, it follows that the suffering of the shoah cannot be attributed to our aveirot. Again, 'more is less' and an overdose of suffering removes the shoah event from the categories predicted in the Tochecha. The shoah, in Rabbi Halivni's view, was a unique 'cosmic' event, in which Hashem distanced Himself completely from human events; the diametric counterpart of the hisgalut at Sinai, in which G-d manifested Himself most closely to mankind.