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### TRANSFORMING THE LEPER

**ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING FIGURES IN THE TORAH IS THE 'LEPER', the person whose skin has gone white, expressing a state of grave impurity. The Sedra last week described how the condition of the leper is identified, and what steps have to be taken. The leper has to dwell 'outside the camp', outside the city and normal society. This week's Sedra<sup>1</sup> describes his return to normal life.**

The Sages do not see these texts in the Torah as referring to the serious disease of leprosy which we know today as unfortunately prevalent in developing countries. By contrast, the Sages explain the theme of the leper in the Torah in spiritual and moral terms.

In a number of Torah texts the whiteness of skin of the 'leper' appears suddenly and dramatically and then disappears again. It is a spiritual warning light. An example is the account of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron. The wife of Moses, Tziporah, revealed to her sister-in-law Miriam that since Moses had been on Mount Sinai he had ceased to be intimate with her. At any moment G-d might speak with him so he had to maintain himself in a constant state of separation and sanctity.

Miriam was upset by this and told her brother Aaron about it<sup>2</sup>. Celibacy is not a normal mode in Jewish life. On the contrary, marital intimacy is seen as the peak of holiness. The two siblings discussed the unusual behaviour of their brother Moses. However, G-d was angry that they should criticise Moses, and Miriam was punished for speaking critically of him by being afflicted with 'leprosy', in the form

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of bright white skin. It took a week till she could return to normal life.

Miriam was a very saintly and wonderful person. Her comments about Moses could be seen as stemming from the most positive, spiritual motives. Yet they are seen as an example of ‘Leshon HaRa’, the evil tongue, which spreads division among people. Leprosy is thus understood as the result of Leshon HaRa, and the leper has to dwell ‘outside the camp’, away from people, as a symbol of his causing strife in society.

However, G-d does not leave the leper dwelling outside the camp for ever. Indeed, our Sages point out that “G-d does not drive anyone away”. Eventually, everyone comes back<sup>3</sup>. Our Sedra points out two stages in this: the first is as a result of inspiration from beyond oneself, the second is through one’s own effort.

The first step in the purification of the leper is that “he is brought to the Cohen”<sup>4</sup>, to the Priest who will eventually pronounce him pure. The words “he is brought” suggest that this is against his will. The Lubavitcher Rebbe describes this as the effect of a revelation of Divine radiance. Without knowing why, as if against his will, the ‘leper’ is drawn to return. But this is not enough. In order for him to be fully purified and transformed, there has to be his *own* spiritual effort, not just a revelation from beyond.

This is hinted in the next verse, which says that the Cohen goes out of the camp, to the afflicted person. This means that even though he is outside the camp, in a place of negative behaviour and impurity, the individual is ready to talk to the Cohen. He is making positive steps himself. Of course, G-d provides the Cohen to help him. But the effort is coming from the person himself, and this means he is being genuinely transformed and purified. He will return to the camp, on a higher spiritual level than ever before<sup>5</sup>. Instead of representing division and strife, he or she will help join hearts, in unity and love.

1. Leviticus chs.14-15. 2. Numbers 12:1-15. See Rashi on verse 1. 3. See *Tanya* end of ch.39, citing II Samuel 14:14. 4. Lev.14:2. 5. Based freely on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.7, pp.100-104.

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SEDRA METZORA

**GOING TO THE COHEN**

"AAAAH!!!" Rachel stood there staring at her broken pen. It had been given to her by her grandmother and now it lay there on her desk, a crack running through it. Someone had broken it and Rachel wanted to know who.

Sitting three desks away, Leah could feel her face burning, as though everyone was looking at her accusingly. When no one had been in the classroom, she had crept over to Rachel's desk to look at her beautiful new pen. Suddenly, as she looked at it in awe, it had dropped out of her hand onto the floor... and broken!

Quickly, she put it back on the desk and ran out the room as though pretending it didn't happen would somehow undo the action. She was filled with remorse, but she was also determined no one would find out it was her.

The next day, the form teacher asked that the girl who had broken it please own up. Looking at her desk in shame, Leah did not say a word. Then in the assembly, the headmaster said "In our school, we can own up if we did something wrong, like breaking a new, expensive pen belonging to another girl." He announced that whoever had done it should say so - the earlier the better.

Back in the classroom, Leah sat uneasily at her desk. "This week's Sedra is called metzora," began Mrs Levy. "Who knows what a metzora means?"

With her usual enthusiasm, Shira replied. "In the time of the Temple, someone who spoke lashon hara - bad about someone, would get leprosy which was a kind of white patch on the skin. The person would then have to go to the Cohen, the Priest, to check if it was leprosy or not. If it was, they would have to leave the camp or city where the Jewish people were, in order to get purified, and only then could they return."

"Excellent! And what if the person was too embarrassed to go to the Priest? What would happen? Would the leprosy just go away?"

"Nope. It would spread - first to their clothes and then to their house. Sometimes the people would have to knock down their houses!"

"So, everyone would eventually have to go to the Cohen, right?"

As Mrs Levy spoke, Leah suddenly realized her mistake.

She should have told Rachel immediately, even though it would have been really hard. Now that the whole school knew it would be far more difficult. And Rachel was bound to be upset she had not told her straight away. But, Leah realized, the longer she would push it off, the worse it would be. As soon as class is over, she decided, I'll go tell Rachel.

It was not easy. Rachel had been really upset, after all the pen was really precious to her, but eventually she said she forgave her. Leah would have to pay up a bit but she was glad she'd had the courage to admit her mistake.

And now walking home together, arm in arm with Rachel, Leah could not help thinking what a valuable lesson she had learnt today. When you realize you've made a mistake, don't pretend it never happened - try to fix it! And also, Leah thought, looking at Rachel beside her, she had actually made a good friend.

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