


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

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 Sedra Tazria-Metzora

KINDNESS IS THE KEY

WE LIVE IN A TROUBLED AGE CHARACTERISED BY MANY FALSE paths. It is sometimes tempting to look aversely at all those in ‘error’ around us, comforting ourselves with the belief that we ourselves are on the right road and feeling a hearty disdain for those who are not. This, however, can be a false and negative approach to life. A discussion of the Sedra¹ by the Lubavitcher Rebbe provides an interesting perspective on this issue.

The theme of the double Sedra concerns the case of someone who is a “Metzora”. The word is generally translated as ‘leper’. Let us use this translation but understand it not in medical terms but as a description of the person’s spiritual state. In a manner which we would consider supernatural, this becomes visibly apparent. Unfortunately the person has fallen so low that he deserves to be banished from society for a while: he has to dwell outside the city.

This is described in the Sedra, and the usual Haftorah (II Kings ch.7) provides an example of four ‘lepers’ who were living outside the city of Samaria. This Shabbat, however, is the New Moon, and a different Haftorah is read.

The Sages explain that the purpose of this banishment is so that he can reflect on his situation and change his direction in life. Then the ‘leprosy’ disappears and he returns to take his place in normal society².

How is the status of the ‘leper’ determined? The Sedra provides a

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very complex set of laws which are amplified and clarified in the Talmud and in Maimonides' teachings. Only a learned Sage would have a thorough grasp of these laws and know how they are to be applied. The person apparently manifesting this condition therefore has to be seen by a Sage.

However, the Sage alone cannot declare that the person is actually a 'leper'. He needs to discuss the matter with a Cohen (Priest). After this discussion it is the Cohen who pronounces the person to be a 'leper' or declares him to be free to return home.

The Rebbe asks - why involve a Cohen? If the Cohen anyway depends on the detailed knowledge of the Sage, isn't he redundant?

The answer is that the Cohen is distinguished by being *kind*. The Cohen (Priest) blesses the community and is described as representing the attribute of Kindness. Only a person distinguished by kindness, says the Rebbe, can make the statement that another person must unfortunately dwell for a time outside the city. For there is no doubt that in his discussion with the Sage he would have tried very hard to find extenuating circumstances and to suggest other, more positive ways of viewing the situation. And he will also be committed to bringing the person back into normal communal life at the very first opportunity.

The Rebbe applies this teaching to our own time. We live in a period of widespread assimilation and other spiritual problems. However, unless a person is distinguished for his kindness (and who can honestly claim that merit!) condemnation is not the path. Do not dare to pronounce any Jew to be a 'leper', whatever their situation. Instead the call of the hour is a boundless love. Help the other person to improve: yes. But do not condemn.

The Talmud³ tells us that the exile of the Jewish people came through causeless hatred. The Redemption will come, and is indeed coming, through causeless love⁴.

1. The double Sedra is Leviticus chapters 12-15.
2. The 'leprosy' of the Sedra is explained by the Sages as being a visible symptom of purely *spiritual* illness.
3. Yoma 9b.
4. Based freely on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.27, pp.88-91.

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SEDRA TAZRIA-METZORA

EXPERIENCE

"I'm a failure" Sammy said as he sat at the kitchen table, looking at his gloomy test results.

He felt dizzy and had a headache from all the stress of the past few days. He had been feverishly studying for his test and was hoping to get the pass mark of C.

"I never imagined I would get an A" he moaned "but how could I do so badly and not even get a C?"

"Hmm" his mother said, "will Mr. Benson give you another chance and let you retry the test?"

"I know I'll fail again" Sammy said. "I did so badly the first time, I am sure I'll do badly the second time".

"So you feel that you won't be able to pass the test if you take it again?" his Mother said softly. "You know," she continued, "sometimes people have negative experiences, like in this week's Sedra when it talks about someone who has leprosy. It's really something else, but we translate it 'leprosy'".

"Yes I remember" Sammy said, for a moment forgetting his misery. "The person has leprosy and needs to go to a Cohen who will either proclaim him pure or impure. If he is impure he has to go and live outside the city."

"Yes, you're right" his mother said. "Now tell me, was this leprosy a good thing or a bad thing?"

Funny question Sammy thought. “Well, of course it’s a bad thing. Who wants to have to live outside the city?”

“Well,” his mother said “can you tell me why people got this ‘leprosy’?”

“Oh, I remember. Because they spoke badly about other people; it’s called Loshon Hara. In fact, that’s why they have to live outside the city, to show them that they haven’t behaved well to other people. Then when they really repent and improve themselves they get better. The Cohen comes to see them and says they are pure, and then they come back into the city with everyone else”.

“You remember all that very well,” said his mother. “Tell me, is there any way you can apply that to your situation?”

“Mummy! I don’t speak badly about people! At least, not usually...”

“I don’t mean that!” his mother answered with a smile.

“Oh, you mean the test... It’s showing me I haven’t been working hard enough, so I don’t get a good mark... Then I work harder and I pass... I never thought of that.”

It was a few days later that Sammy realised that he had not really been trying. He had just been focusing on getting a C on the test, just a pass. So he didn’t even get a C. “I had the wrong attitude” he said to himself. He worked hard.

“Wow, it’s lucky I failed,” he told his mother. “Now I really focused on the material and got an A in the retake. I bet sometimes the person with leprosy felt pleased that G-d had shown him he should change his attitude to things.”

“Yes,” said his mother. “Things that seem bad, are often really good..”

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