

Parashat Tazria, 5779, 2019:

## *The Disease of Arrogance*

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The primary focus of our *parasha* is the illness known as *tzaraat*. The unique nature of this class of disease is emphasized by the Rashbam (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080-1158) in his introduction to our topic:

All of the sections dealing with the *negayim* (afflictions) affecting people, garments, houses and the manner in which they appear as well as the number of days requiring sequestering, the white, black, and golden identifying hairs — may not in any way be understood by following the simple and direct meaning of the text. Neither may we rely upon standard human knowledge and expertise [i.e. current medical information]. Instead, we must follow the analysis (*midrash*) of the Sages, their decrees, and the inherited body of knowledge that they received from the earliest sages. This is the essence [of this matter]. (*Commentary on the Torah*, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to the Rashbam, *tzaraat* can only be understood from the Torah's standpoint, rather than from a physiological or medical perspective. This is because its etiology does not follow the normative laws of biology. Instead, it is a spiritually-based ailment that manifests in a physical fashion.

The Torah presents us with three types of *tzaraat*: “If a man has a *se'et*, a *sapahat*, or a *baheret* on the skin of his flesh, and it forms a lesion of *tzaraat* on the skin of his flesh, he shall be brought to Aaron the kohen, or to one of his sons, the kohanim.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 13:1, this and all Bible translations, with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah*, *Tazria* 15:9, identifies each of these categories as metaphorically representing one of the

ancient nations who either violently injured, or sought to harm, our people. Thus, “*Se’et* [a rising] is Babylonia... *Sapahat* [a scab] is [the kingdom of the] Medes... and *baharet* [a bright spot] is Greece.” (This and the following translation, *Darosh Darash Yosef*: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, pages 227-228)

Our Midrash notes that Haman, who attempted to eradicate our people, was the most infamous member of the ancient Medes: “[The kingdom of the] Medes raised Haman the wicked, who crawled like a snake, as it is written, ‘On your belly you shall go.’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 3:4) My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, builds upon our Midrash, and describes Haman in the following fashion:

...[he] slithered like a snake but was puffed up with arrogance. A fawning personality, he lacked dignity. His sycophantic behavior resulted in his becoming prime minister to King Ahashverosh. Yet, Haman was no leader. A weak and spineless man, he used flattery to get ahead. Thinking that it would save his life, he behaved in a servile manner toward Esther even after she exposed him. Like other haughty people, he did not realize how base he was, that *he* was actually a form of *sapahat*. (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231, underlining and italics my own)

In the Rav’s view, the haughty and arrogant Haman emerges as a base and slithering being who lacked all manner of dignity — to the extent that “*he* was actually a form of *sapahat*.” What does it mean for a person to be a form of *sapahat*, to be a scab on the body of humanity in general, and an enemy of the Jewish people in particular? The Rav indirectly addresses this question in his analysis of those who demonstrate *ga’avah* (arrogant pretentiousness) and pursue *kavode* (in this case, false honor):

If, however, one pursues these qualities, then they are false and reprehensible. This is particularly the case if one actively deceives himself and pretends to be someone other than who he really is...The greatest falsehood takes place when a person lies to himself. (Rabbi Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, *Yimei HaZikaron*, page 208, Sifriyat Elinor, editor, translation and brackets my own)

Haman is the ultimate example of an individual who “actively deceives himself and pretends to be someone other than who he really is.” He convinced himself that he had *geut* — grandeur, when

in fact, he was merely “puffed up with arrogance” born of self-delusion and grandiose visions. Moreover, the Rav asserts, Haman’s *ga’avah* was nothing other than “a negative character trait, a form of spiritual *tzaraat*...Therefore, we must avoid *ga’avah* and be careful not to behave like Haman, who thought that only *he* was worthy of honor.” (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231) Clearly, for the Rav, Haman epitomized the notion that “the greatest falsehood takes place when a person lies to himself.”

The Rav continues his presentation and emphasizes that, in stark contrast to the spiritual *tzaraat* of *ga’avah* demonstrated by Haman and others of his ilk, Hashem has true *geut* and, therefore, must be recognized as He Who acts with grandeur. As King David and Yeshayahu the prophet taught us so long ago:

The L-rd has reigned; He has attired Himself with majesty (*geut*)... (*Sefer Tehillim* 93:1)

In the land of uprightness, he [the evil one] deals unjustly, and he does not see the majesty (*geut*) of the L-rd. (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 26:10)

Sing to the L-rd for He has performed majestic deeds (*geut*); this is known throughout the land. (*Sefer Yeshayahu*, 12:5)

As the Rav underscores many times, “The principle of *imitatio dei* [imitating Hashem’s behaviors] demands that we emulate G-d’s attributes.” (*Darosh Darash Yosef*, page 231) Therefore, may we always reject *ga’avah* and the spiritual *tzaraat* it represents, and embrace the authentic majesty of Hashem and follow in His noble ways. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: [\*\*http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd\*\*](http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd)

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.