

Parshiot Tazria-Metzora 5773, 2013:

*Kol Yisrael Chaverim (All the Jewish People are Friends)*

Rabbi David Etengoff

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, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the major focal points of our *parshiot* is the spiritual malady manifested in a physical fashion, known as *tzarat*. This disease is unidentifiable with any of the skin ailments that exist in our own time. As such, Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (Rashi's grandson known as the Rashbam 1080-1158), introduces our topic in the following manner:

All of the sections dealing with the afflictions (*negayim*) 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. 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 mater]. (Translation and brackets my own)

In a word, the only way to understand *tzarat* is from the Torah-spiritual viewpoint, rather than from a medical-dermatological perspective.

*Tzarat* is a major part of the general body of Jewish Law known as *Tumah* and *Taharah* (Laws of the Ritually Impure and Ritually Pure). An entire section of the Mishnah is entitled "*Taharot*" ("Purities"), and page after page of the Talmud discusses the intricacies of this fundamental area of *Halacha*. Unfortunately, however, very few people today, regardless of their level of intellectual acumen and scholarly achievement, have mastered this area of study. Likewise, the Rambam (1135-1204), in his paradigm-

changing work entitled *Commentary on the Mishnah*, noted this lacuna of knowledge in his own time:

And you know that today, because of the multiplication of our sins, that if you were to encounter the leaders of the yeshivot throughout the Jewish people, and all the more so, those of the various synagogues, you would find that this entire subject remains difficult for them. This is the case, [even though] there are many explicit Torah verses and Mishnaic passages [that deal explicitly with this area of Halacha] and sources that are even clearer and simpler than these works.

Maimonides attributed the ignorance of the Laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* to the lack of Torah scholars who devote their time to this study, and to the difficulty of this material:

You should not be amazed by this situation at this time of Exile and by the lack of concerted study of this material – since it is a direct result of too few scholars engaged in its study. [Moreover,] we have already found that at the time of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Holy Temple) and during the period of the Prophets, that they were in doubt regarding matters pertaining to *Tumah* and *Taharah*... Even the *kohanim* who served in the *Beit Hamikdash* who perforce needed to know these laws more than anyone else, because of the great effort needed to know [and master] the Laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* – since many of these laws pertain solely to the *Beit Hamikdash* and its holy items - [remained confused in this area of Halacha]. (*Introduction to Mishnah Kalim*, ed. Rabbi Yosef David Kapach, p. 22, translation and brackets my own)

Little wonder, then, that the Rambam made the study of this subject an essential part of his literary legacy. As such, he meticulously examined each and every detail of this category of *Halacha* – both in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and in his *magnum opus* of Jewish jurisprudence, the *Mishneh Torah*.

Given the complexities and concomitant stringencies that often accompany the Laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah*, one is nearly thunderstruck by the following Mishnaic/Talmudic passage found at the end of *Talmud Bavli Chagigah*, folio 26b:

**To Hallowed Things.** A Tanna taught: They [i.e. the unlettered and unschooled - *amei ha'aretz*] are trusted in regard to large [and certainly small] earthenware vessels for hallowed things. Why is this? – Because no furnaces were erected in Jerusalem {and, therefore, no vessels could be constructed}. **During a festival also in regard to Terumah** [the *amei ha'aretz* were believed regarding the Laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah*] Whence is this deduced? — R. Joshua b. Levi said: Scripture Says: So all the men of Israel were gathered against the city, associated as one man (*Sefer Shoftim* 20:11, entire

translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my brackets and emendations)

The phrase “During a festival also in regard to Terumah ” is nothing less than amazing. Suddenly, the unlettered and unschooled were granted the same level of credibility (*ne’emanut*) in regards to the complicated Laws of *Tumah* and *Taharah* as the greatest Torah scholars. This is the case even though, by definition, the *amei ha’aretz* were denied this self-same status during the entire remainder of the year! As noted, the Talmud bases this remarkable halachic shift upon a *pasuk* (verse) that appears in *Sefer Shoftim* 20:11: “And each person of Israel gathered to the city as one individual – as friends.” As Rav Pinchas Kehati *zatzal* (1910-1976) noted in his monumental commentary on the Mishnah: “The text [of *Sefer Shoftim*] at the time of the gathering together of all the people calls them all ‘*chaveirim*’ (‘friends’).” In addition, “... since the Festival is a time of gathering together, from here we can learn that even the *amei haaretz* were considered to be ritually pure at this time – no less than the sophisticatedly trained individuals.”

In my opinion, our Mishnah is teaching us far more than an essential and crucial point of Jewish jurisprudence pertaining to the Laws of Purities and Impurities. I believe it is also teaching us an approach as to how we should perceive and encounter our fellow Jews. Unfortunately, we live in an age of manifest *pirood* (split). Each one of us, even if we do not label ourselves, is labeled and defined by others as to what kind of Jew we are and where we stand on the religious/non-religious/not-yet-religious spectrum. The result of this kind of thinking is alienation and disaffection from our fellow Jews. Instead of banding together in love and tolerance, we are split by groundless hatred (*sinat chinam*) and distrust of one another. In stark contrast, the Mishnah and Talmud remind us of what

binds us together, and what is truly important: *Kol Yisrael Chaveirim* (All the Jewish People are Friends). If we can remember this message, and put it into everyday practice, we will be well on our way to building the kinds of bridges of understanding that are necessary to bring the *Mashiach* (the one and only Messiah). May this time come soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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