

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Metzora)

Is there a point past which a person can no longer change; can no longer be forgiven?

On the one hand, Jewish law clearly teaches that for some transgressions, such as murder, a person is put to death, suggesting that such a person can no longer redeem him or herself in this world.

On the other hand our tradition also teaches us in the name of Rabbi Eliezer (Avot 2:10) “repent the day before you die “ and in the Talmud (Shabbat 153) he explains this to mean that a person should always repent as he never knows when he might die, the clear implication being everyone can repent.

*Rav Ephraim Oshry one of the last rabbis of the Kovno Ghetto, in his powerful responsum from the holocaust, **Mima’amakim**, shares that a fellow came over to him in the DP camp, after the war, with an intense question. He had been a Chazan (cantor) before the war, and some of his fellow former inmates wanted him to lead the services for Rosh Hashanah. But he had been appointed a Kapo by the Nazis and felt he had had to do terrible things and was unsure if he could or should lead the services.*

When Rav Oshry asked some of the former Jewish prisoners why they would want him to lead the services, they replied that he had done many more good deeds than bad and had also saved lives, and they longed to hear the haunting melodies of the days of Awe from a Chazan who could call up the power of prayer from before the war....

Should such a person who may have saved some, but most certainly had harmed others, be allowed to lead the services? Who could determine if he had repented and can one ever really repent from such actions?

There is a fascinating detail worth noting in this week’s portion of *Metzora*.

The portion continues to expound on the laws of ritual impurity and opens with the case of the *Metzora* afflicted with *Tzara’at* (a malady afflicting a person’s skin, clothing or home but not contagious and thus fundamentally different from leprosy with which it is often confused).

Interestingly, although the topic is discussed quite extensively in last week’s portion of *Tazria*, only now is the person afflicted named as a *Metzora*; a person afflicted with *Tzara’at*. Until now the Torah has defined the conditions for *Tzara’at*, discussed the process whereby a *Kohein* (Priest) identifies the *Tzara’at* and even declared it as *Tzara’at* describing the afflicted person as someone who has *Tzara’at*, without actually defining him as a *Metzora*. Only now do we find the person named to be a *Metzora*.

And even more interesting is that the person is only named a *Metzora* on the day he becomes purified!

“And this shall be the Torah (i.e. the laws) of the Metzora on the day he is purified...”

(Vayikra (Lev.) 14:2)

Upon further reflection it is interesting to note that this is actually rarer than one might think: a person in the Torah is not usually *defined* by their malady, or impurity or transgression. As an example a woman experiencing her monthly menstrual flow thus rendered impure, is described as ‘*Be’Niddata*’ (ibid 15:19-20) literally: *in her flow*, and the man with a seminal emission (also rendered impure) is described not as a *Ba’al Keri*, but rather as “*Teitzeh mimenu shichvat zera...*”, literally: *he from whom a seminal emission flows*.

In other words, the Torah does not allow the impurity to *define* the person but rather simply describes a process or state a person is experiencing.

How easy it is, for us to see an experience or characteristic, and presume to label it as the totality of the person. We live in an age that loves to label. So people are black or white, left or right, Chareidim (ultra-Orthodox) or Reform, liberal or conservative. We see people as blind or deaf, learning disabled or with special needs; but these labels do not *define* the person, they merely *describe* a small part of the person.

Without getting into politics, a fascinating example of this is occurring during Israel’s current pre-election season. It has been fascinating to watch the media struggle to define the *Zehut* party and its leader, Moshe Feiglin, who has always been defined as a very traditional hard-right politician, and yet whose platform supports legalizing cannabis. The assumption behind their struggle is that his being religious should in our stereo-typed label-happy perceptions, mean he is against Cannabis yet it is not so easy to explain why that should be

It should be so obvious that a person’s skin color or cultural background is only a small part of who they really are, and it should be equally obvious that a person’s cultural background is only a very small part of their potential skill-set, intelligence, success or failure.

Perhaps we use these labels because they are just easier. After all, we could just as easily label people as blue, brown, or green eyed, as we do white, black or yellow. In fact Jewish tradition does this as well; even though the Torah does not call a woman a *Niddah* or a man a *Ba’al Keri*, the *Mishna* clearly does, maybe because it makes the conversation too laborious to have to explain or describe a person in truer fashion.

But the Torah is clearly suggesting and perhaps we are meant to infer, that such labelling is problematic to say the least.

Indeed, Jewish tradition wants us to differentiate between the person, and their actions. A great example of this appears in *Pirkei Avot* (1:6-7) in the teachings of Rabbis Yehoshua ben Perachia, and Nittai Ha’Arbeli, who clearly lived at the same time. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia says we should judge every person meritoriously; always assume the best about every person. And Nittai Ha’Arbeli says we should distance ourselves from a wicked neighbor.

But if we are meant to assume the best about every person, how would one ever have a wicked neighbor? Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that we should not judge **the person**; we should only judge **their actions**. An action can be wicked, but who are we to even attempt to determine the totality of *a person* as wicked? Only Hashem (G-d) can make such judgments. And by labelling the

person's *process* as impure, rather than defining *them* as impure, we are meant to be more careful in labeling people.

All of which returns us to our original question: so why here, on the day he becomes purified, is the person struggling to leave his Tzara'at behind labelled and defined as a Metzora?

It is interesting that there are actually two types of instances a person becomes tameh or impure. In one type of event, and external factor renders a person impure, but the source of impurity is actually external to themselves. The best example of this is of course contact with death. A person who comes in contact with a dead body becomes impure, but the impurity came to them from an external source.

Here however, in our portion of *Metzora*, we are dealing with impurity a person contracts from his or her own body. (The Talmud calls this *Tumah Yotzeh Mi'gufo*'; literally: *impurity that comes out of his own body* see, for example, *Pesachim* 67b dealing with a Ba'al Keri).

And the ultimate example of the person who has become impure from the inside out, is the Metzora. The Talmud (Tractate *Eirchin* 16a) lists the seven transgressions for which a person would be afflicted with Tzara'at, the greatest of which seems to have been slandering someone. This by definition is a transgression which comes close to changing who a person really is.

And maybe the reason the Torah actually labels such a person a Metzora as he is becoming purified is to remind us that such behavior which stems from something warped and imbalanced deep inside, does not simply leave when the person repents ; it leaves a residue which is much harder to leave behind.

*Rav Oshry ruled that the person in question, despite having been a Kapo, could, **under the circumstances**, indeed lead the Rosh Hashanah prayers; perhaps because being a Kapo was something he did, but he most certainly had the capacity to decide even after the fact, that it would not remain who he actually was. As do we all...*

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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