

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Tazria)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From Rav Binny

I recall, after my cousin Benjy Hillman was killed in the Second Lebanon War, hearing of one particular Shabbat when Benjy, a Company Commander in the Elite Egoz anti-terror unit, was due to go home on leave.

It's difficult to describe, to anyone who has not experienced it, just how valuable a weekend pass is in the army. After weeks spent in the dreary life of olive grey and green, sleeping on cots, or in jeeps or even in sleeping bags on the dirt, eating army food which can sometimes consist of cold army rations grabbed in the darkness, and often going without showers and proper toilets for days at a time, the prospect of a weekend at home with mom's cooking and a soft bed with real pillows is as close to heaven as a person can get in this world.

But that particular Shabbat (Weekend) Benjy found out some of the men under his command who were 'chayalim bodedim' (lone soldiers who have no home here either because they have volunteered to serve despite the fact that they grew up overseas where their families still remain or because they come from broken homes...) were staying on base for Shabbat because they had no-where to go. So he came home for a few hours and went back to base for Shabbat giving up his weekend pass to be with his men so that they would know that in his unit no soldier is ever alone....

In all the years I was in the army both in regular service and later in the reserves, I never heard of such a thing. I never heard of, nor have I ever met, a commander who ever thought of, let alone did such a thing.... Many people talk about the fact that we are all meant to be one, but occasionally one is privileged to meet someone who actually lives it; such a man was Benjy Hillman.

This week's portion Tazria, begins a discussion we will have over the next weeks over a debilitating phenomenon known as **Tzaraat**. Some have likened this to leprosy, though that is not entirely accurate; leprosy is a disease; **tza'ra'at** was a consequence which in Jewish tradition occurred specifically when a person transgressed the prohibitions of slander and gossip.

And yet, this week's portion begins with such a beautiful sentence:

"Isha Ki Tzaria Ve'yalda..."

"When a woman conceives and gives birth..."

Why would a portion with such a beautiful beginning lead us into the world of **tza'ra'at**?

Just recently we were blessed to become grandparents for the first time when with Hashem's loving-kindness our eldest daughter gave birth to a healthy baby boy who was named Amitai on Purim morning. It is hard to imagine a more joy filled moment than welcoming a new life into the world, and the experience of holding my first grandchild in my arms for the first time is a moment beyond words. So what can this possibly have to do with the subsequent discussions on **Tzara'at**?

The Talmud (*Nedarim* 64b) tells us that one of the four types of people considered as dead is the *Metzora* (the leper who has ***tza'ra'at***). One might have thought the reason for this is the gravity of his condition, but there are many who suffer more serious illnesses and yet are not considered as dead. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz in his *Sichos Mussar* suggests that the reason a *metzora* (leper) is considered as if dead, is because he is completely isolated from the community. Banished from the encampment, he must remain completely alone for seven days and may only rejoin the community once he has been pronounced clean by a *Kohein* (priest).

Our tradition teaches (see Maimonides *Hilchot Deot* chap. 7) that the affliction of ***tza'ra'at*** is the consequence received for speaking slanderously of one's fellow human being, whether viciously or just as seemingly harmless gossip. The person who slanders his fellow human being undermines our ability to live together as one community. As such, he needs to take time away from the community on his own, to ponder how destructive undermining the unity of a community really is.

Rav Shmuelevitz points out that this idea is consistent with other instances where a person is considered as dead. As an example, the Talmud teaches us that a blind person is also considered as dead. Yet, a deaf person, despite being recognized as significantly handicapped, is not considered as dead. Why is being blind so significant? Sight is the faculty that allows us to pursue healthy relationships more than any other. When Moshe was a young man, the Torah tells us (Exodus 2:11) he went out and **saw** the suffering of his brethren. It was seeing his brothers that allowed him to understand their suffering. And when Yaakov is on his death bed, (*Bereishit* 48:6) his eyes became weak, and Yosef brings his sons close to him so that he can hug and kiss them before blessing them. Indeed, the Seforno suggests that Yosef understood Yaakov needed to re-establish his attachment to his grandchildren before blessing them, something which was more difficult given that he was blind.

Thus, the blind man too, is considered as dead because he is so isolated, without the ability to see. (It goes without saying how important it is to make extra efforts to ensure a blind person feels included in the community...)

So ***tza'ra'at***, like blindness, is all about being isolated from the community. Why then does our portion begin with birth? Perhaps because it is all about the potential to introduce a new child into the community. There are few events that bring people together, with as much joy, as the birth of a child. Seeing a newborn baby, in all its innocence, full of potential, completely dependent on all around for sustenance, it is almost impossible not to smile. Indeed, a newborn child has no flaws, no mistakes or transgressions, has never wronged or harmed anyone or anything, and brings people together with a sincere desire simply to give and help, which is what community is all about.

The choice, as to whether we choose to create and build our communities, or destroy them, is entirely up to us....

Shabbat Shalom,

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