

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Metzora)

**The Klausenberger Rebbe is quoted as suggesting: ‘When you are in a place of darkness, you do not chase away the darkness with a broom. You light a candle.’**

**May this Torah serve as one more candle to help illuminate the darkness.**

*Any serious student of history will recognize that there are moments, all too rare, when a door stands open, waiting for a person, a people, or even the entire world to walk through, and change life as we know it, forever. Such a moment came and went in 1967, when the paratroopers, on the wings of eagles, stormed the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem.*

*There was a magic in the air that day, an indescribable feeling. It was as if anything was possible, and dreams could really come true. After two thousand years of dreaming and crying, longing, and waiting, a people who had never let go of a dream, were finally coming home.*

*A friend of mine, who was one of the paratroopers who liberated the Old City on that magical day, told me an incredible story.*

*Most of the paratroopers had broken into the Old City through the Lion’s Gate, but an elite company had come in from the south, storming the Zion Gate and gaining a foothold in the Jewish Quarter. Lechimah Be’Shetach Banui, (urban warfare), is one of the most difficult types of combat. In addition to the normal pressures of fighting an enemy who is entrenched in his positions, one has the additional tension of worrying about many civilians in the area, as well as the challenge of ensuring, as different units converge on any given objective, that units do not end up accidentally firing at each other. As such, much of the time is spent waiting between taking one position and moving on to the next, to be sure that friendly forces are all aware of each other and not in conflicting positions.*

*During one such period, with Jordanian mortar shells and sniper’s bullets still taking their toll, Yossi’s unit was taking cover along one of the narrow alleyways of the Old City. Safe for the moment, they were leaning against the wall taking stock of the day, still in awe at the fact that they were actually inside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. With the words of the prophets ringing in their ears, and the dream, never lost, of two thousand years, beating in their hearts, there was a sense that anything could happen; redemption was at hand.*

*At that moment, the sounds of footsteps echoed down the cobblestones of the alleyway behind them, and the soldiers, ever on guard, turned to cover their rear, only to watch in amazement at the sight that greeted their eyes.*

*A little old man, with a long white beard and black coat and hat, oblivious to the sounds and sights of war all around, with a huge smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes, was hurrying down the street heading for the Kotel, the Western Wall. The paratroopers rose and simply followed this man towards the Kotel. Though most of them described themselves as completely irreligious, (if such a thing could*

*ever be true of an Israeli soldier in uniform,...) they were all absolutely convinced that this was the Messiah, come at last to lead the Jewish people home.*

*In fact, it transpired that this was the sainted Rabbi Aryeh Levine (The Tzaddik of Jerusalem), who, upon hearing that the Old City was in Jewish hands, could not wait any longer and simply walked into the middle of a war zone to get to the Kotel....*

*This story speaks volumes of what the sense was amongst the Jewish people on that day...*

*One wonders whether the Messiah and the redemption he is meant to bring still have not come because we are still waiting for him, or because he is still waiting for us....*

*Indeed, there is a fascinating story (which need not be taken literally, but rather seeks to convey a message) concerning the coming of the Messiah that has always puzzled me, in a manner which relates to this week's double portion, Tazriah-Metzorah.*

*The Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) relates that one day, Rabbi Yehoshuah Ben Levi was walking and 'ran into' Eliahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet. After exchanging greetings, Rabbi Yehoshuah begs to ask Elijah one question: "Eimatai Ka'Ati Mar?" 'When will the Master (the Messiah) come?' A logical question, to be sure, as the prophets tell that one day, Eliahu HaNavi will be the predecessor of the Messiah, heralding his coming and ushering in a new age of redemption.*

*And the story continues that Elijah responds by saying 'ask him yourself!' To which Rabbi Yehoshuah asks: 'But where can I find him?'*

*And Elijah explains: 'If you will go to the entrance to the market-place, you will see that all the lepers sit at the entrance to the market, with their bandages removed so that the warmth of the sun can heal their wounds. However, says Eliahu HaNavi, pay attention and you will notice that there is one beggar who only allows himself to remove one bandage at a time, so as to be ready to move at a moment's notice, in the event that he is called. This, says, Eliahu HaNavi, is the Messiah.*

*So Rabbi Yehoshuah goes to the market place, and indeed finds such a person sitting amongst the lepers. And of course, he asks him the question, "Eimatai Ka'Ati Mar?" 'When will the Master (the Messiah) come?'*

*To which the leper responds with one simple, yet powerful word: "HaYom". "Today".*

*Can you imagine? Rabbi Yehoshuah, in that moment, has the answer to the question the entire world is asking: when will peace finally come? When will we at last sit together, all of us, as brothers? When will the guns and the bombs, the horror and the hatred, finally stop?*

*Now the Talmud doesn't describe what Rabbi Yehoshua's reaction is to this incredible news, but if you were one of the greatest Rabbis in Jewish history, and you actually ran into Elijah the Prophet, and he actually described to you where you could find the Messiah, and you actually found him, and then this person who you now know to be the Messiah actually tells you he is coming **today**, well, what would **you** do?*

*You would immediately get on the phone and call all the news agencies and start spreading the news! And then you would take out an ad in The New York Times, telling everyone to immediately book*

*tickets on EL AL, (and definitely not send in your Tax form!) ... And of course, you would end up being terribly disappointed, because eighteen hundred years later, we are still waiting....*

*But the story doesn't end there: The next day, Rabbi Yehoshuah Ben Levi again 'ran into' Elijah the Prophet. And this time, Eliahu asks Rabbi Yehoshuah: "Nu, did you find him?"*

*And Rabbi Yehoshuah responds: "Ken, Ve'Kah Shiker Li". 'Yes, I found him, but he lied to me. He told me he was coming 'today', but 'today' came and went, and the Messiah never came.'*

*One can hear the pain and despair, echoing from Rabbi Yehoshua's words; the same pain of the lonely Jew, caught in the throes of the harsh reality of the blood libels, pogroms, and the inquisition.*

*And one can almost see the sad smile on Eliahu Hanavi's face, the tears in his eyes, as he explains: 'No, he didn't say "HaYom"' 'today', rather he was referring to the verse which says: "HaYom, Im Bekolo Tishma'u", 'Today, if you will but listen to His voice...*

*When will the Messiah come? The decision is not his; it is ours. Hashem is just waiting for us to listen.*

*Such a powerful story, with such powerful imagery. Redemption and world peace will come through the vestige of a leper, sitting as a beggar in the marketplace. What a beautiful message about how we have to learn to see our fellow human beings.*

*But I have always been bothered by one detail: Why did the Talmud need to portray the Messiah as a leper? Why not just have him be a beggar? What secret message relating to redemption is hidden in the concept of leprosy?*

This week's double portion introduces the concept of a "negah", an 'affliction', which affects people and property, taking the form of something similar to leprosy on a human being's person.

Interestingly, the Torah tells us, when a person (or his property) was afflicted by such a "negah", one didn't go to the doctor. Rather, one called the Kohen (Priest). And if indeed the symptoms showed that this was 'Tza'ra'at' (similar to leprosy), a person stayed in his home for seven days, until it cleared up.

In fact, Jewish tradition teaches that this affliction was the consequence of a very specific mistake: the transgression of *Lashon HaRah*, or slander. No other transgression receives as much attention as the terrible blunder of evil gossip and slander. There are over forty commandments one can violate with a single sentence, and the great Chafetz Chaim, considered the undisputed leader of an entire generation of Jewry, devoted his life to combating the spread of this behavior, believing it to be the single greatest cause for the Jewish people still being in exile.

A person who erred in this particular area was responsible for the breakdown of the Jewish community, causing strife and division to take hold, where love and harmony were meant to be. As such, he needed to separate himself from the community, spending time alone, in introspection, with no one to talk to, in an effort to overcome this terrible habit...

And of course, if the painfully divisive phenomenon of slander is single-handedly responsible for the strife and disunity we find our community afflicted with, then it is appropriate that the Messiah allegorically is afflicted with this same *Tza'ra'at*, representing the idea that it is precisely this social malady, which is the root of the exile we find ourselves in.

So, one wonders, why do we no longer suffer from this affliction today? Why are there no Jews regularly experiencing this ‘*Negah Tza’ra’at*’? It certainly isn’t due to our success in overcoming this unfortunate transgression.... One imagines what the back of some synagogues would look and smell like if everyone engaging in idle or slanderous conversation was immediately smitten with an affliction resembling leprosy!

In fact, the Torah, deep in the midst of the descriptions of different forms of *Tza’ra’at*, does make an interesting point.

*Ki Tavo’u’ El Eretz Ke’Na’an Asher Ani Noten Lachem Achuzah, Ve’natati Negah Tza’ra’at Be’Beit Eretz Achuzatchem.”*

*“When you will come into the land of Canaan, which I will give to you as an inheritance, I will give an affliction of Tzara’at in the homes of the land you have acquired.” (Leviticus 14:34)*

In other words, the affliction of *Tzara’at* (or at least as it affects a person’s home...) will only take place in the land of Israel. Why? One would expect that if anything, such an affliction, coming as it does in response to slander and evil talk, would be *more* prevalent in the exile. After all, for two thousand years we have lost the gift of prophecy, and the prophets, who acted as the moral conscience of the nation along with it. We no longer have a functioning priesthood, whose mission was to spread peace by example amongst the people, nor do we have a Temple, the Beit HaMikdash, where three times a year the entire Jewish people could come together and put aside their differences, in a familial celebration of unity. So why are we not experiencing this *negah* even more regularly than before?

The **Ramban**, nearly a thousand years ago, suggested an idea that we would do well to consider, even and perhaps especially, today.

Our perception of an affliction like *Tzara’at*, is that it is almost a curse; a terrible punishment for improper, perhaps even evil behavior. But the truth is, suggests the Ramban, *Tzara’at* was really a blessing. It was, after all, a sign that something was terribly wrong. “*Siman Ki Hashem Sar Me’Alav*”, ‘*a sign that Hashem had become distant from a person.*’

*A few years ago, someone very close to my heart, we’ll call him Doctor Sam, was walking up a hill in Jerusalem on his way home, when he experienced a tightening in his chest accompanied by some discomfort. Although he owns a car, Sam regularly took the bus to work in the hospital where he worked, preferring the exercise of walking up and down the Jerusalem hills from the bus stop as a form of daily exercise.*

*Despite being in his sixties, Sam was in excellent shape, with almost no extra fat on his body, the result of years of healthy living. Sensing something was not quite right, and being a doctor attuned to such things, he checked himself in to the hospital for some tests, something most people would probably have put off for years. This foresight most probably saved his life. He was diagnosed to be in need of a quadruple bypass, which he underwent almost immediately.*

*His recovery, due to the excellent physical shape he was in, was equally fast, and the experience, despite all the pain, proved to be a gift, not only in terms of the obvious, but also as it caused him to become even more conscious of a healthy diet, as well as the need for a regimen of exercise which has become almost a ritual for him ever since.*

Imagine what a gift it would be if every time we did something wrong, we received a direct message from heaven that we had strayed from the straight and narrow path. We would immediately attend to correcting the, in this case, ethical dysfunction, and would be so much the better for it. What a wonderful world it would be if every time someone slandered another human being, his or her tongue hurt!

Of course, if one were lying in hospital in agony from a dozen different maladies, one probably wouldn't even notice the slight pain in the tongue....

And this, suggests the Ramban, is why there is no point to *Tzara'at* outside Israel. We are so far from the spiritual sensitivity and ethical level we once had as a people, we would not even appreciate the message. Only when we are home, with a Temple and priesthood, and prophets along with a righteous King who represents the pinnacle of ethical excellence, does such a system make sense. Indeed, adds the Ramban, the Jewish people can never achieve their goal to be a light unto the nations, and create a system of ethics the world can learn from, unless we have our own identity as a Nation, something which can only happen (as with all peoples) in our own land. A nation is not a Nation unless it has its own land.

After two thousand years of living in exile, scattered amongst the nations and so deeply affected by our environment, we are not on the level of spiritual sensitivity that would render such a system valuable.

How far we have fallen from the days when a single sentence disparaging another human being, would result in a week of introspection and soul searching, in an attempt to once again attain the level of ethical behavior that would make such an action incomprehensible.

Indeed, this may well be why the allegory of the Talmud has the Messiah suffering from this same *Tzara'at*, even in the exile. The definition of the Messiah in Judaism is very different from the mythical figure who can walk on water, as depicted by the church.

The Jewish Messiah is quite simply a person who is such a living, walking ethic, that he becomes the impetus for the entire world finally striving for an achieving that same level of ethical excellence.

Indeed, this is the hidden dream of the Torah's description of *Tzara'at*: that we should all, as a people and as a world, become so ethically sensitive, so aware of where we need to better ourselves, that we succeed in achieving the peace we so long for, simply by becoming vehicles for peace on our own, each and every one of us.

Indeed, while the transgression of slander is so severe because of its tendency to separate us from each other and create disharmony, the definition of a Tzaddik, a righteous person, which is what the Jewish Messiah is meant to be, is exactly the opposite.

A Tzaddik is someone who cares so much for every other human being, that their pain *is* his pain. Hence, he suffers from Tza'ra'at, because the Jewish people is living in Tzara'at; they just don't know that.

One might suggest that this is the challenge of our day. What to some was an absolute miracle, the birth of the State of Israel, against all the odds, out of the shadows of the chimneys of Auschwitz, to

others is just a war story. We have become so deafened by the terrible noise of two thousand years of screaming; we have almost lost the ability to hear when Hashem, G-d, is calling our name.

For these past years, we have been afflicted with a terrible affliction, a *Negah* of sorts. Perhaps there is a message in all this. Not that we are meant or even able to comprehend much less understand these events in this world. But at the very least, do we hear the alarm bells? Are we sensitive to the tears flowing in the streets of Jerusalem? Or have we become so desensitized to it all that the daily accounting of more and more families who will have to learn to live with an empty chair at the Shabbat table, have become just numbers on the daily news scroll ....

In the long two thousand years of our journey through the exile, there has never been a Jewish community with so much influence and affluence, in a country with so much power and influence in the world. This is the time when Jews everywhere need to stand up and be counted.

We are living in incredible and yet challenging times. Are we ready this time, to sense the winds of change that are buffeting us, and spread our sails to catch the breeze?

May Hashem bless us with the strength and the wisdom to meet the challenges that clearly lie ahead, and may we rediscover the sensitivity necessary so that one Jew's pain anywhere, is all Jews' pain, everywhere.

Shabbat Shalom,

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