

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## PARSHAS METZORA

### The Purification of the Metzora

זאת תהיה תורת המצרע ביום טהרתו

*This shall be the law of the Metzora on the day of his purification.<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION: READY TO LISTEN

Beginning with Chazal themselves, the commentators discuss the various exhortational messages that are conveyed by the items used in the purification of the *metzora*, as outlined in the ensuing verses: The hyssop that he should be less haughty, the birds that he should chatter less etc. There is room here for a simple question. The *metzora* undergoes the purification process *after* his *tzoraas* has cleared up. If that is the case, then apparently he has already heeded these messages for introspection and self-improvement, for if not, then why would the *tzoraas* go away? In other words, why do we aid him in his recovery at the stage when he appears to have already recovered? Would these messages not have been better timed when he was on the way *out* of the city to his quarantine, where he could reflect upon them and hopefully bring about a reversal of his condition?

Seemingly, the lesson is that a person who is so chronically invested in the sins that lead to *tzoraas* – to the extent that he persists in committing them even to the point that he must be sent out of the city in disgrace – such a person is fundamentally closed off from moral discourse. Any messages of an exhortational nature that are administered at that stage will simply fall on deaf ears. The purpose of the quarantine experience is to break through the shell that makes him unreachable. It is to shake him up *on a constitutional and systemic level*, to bring to the point where the very core of his being is forced to confront the fact that there is something very wrong with the way he is living. Once that existential trauma has taken place and his basic system has been shaken up, the *tzoraas* has performed its job and it can recede. At that point, the person can then begin to receive actual moral messages that he is finally open to hearing as he undergoes his purification.

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 14:2.

יצוה הכהן ולקח למטה... ועץ ארז ושני תולעת ואזב

*The Kohen shall command, and he shall take for the person being purified... cedar wood, crimson thread and hyssop.<sup>2</sup>*

What is the significance of the inclusion of these three items in the purification process of the *metzora*? Moreover, to the extent that the lofty cedar tree and the lowly hyssop bush and worm-dyed thread have clearly opposite associations, why are they all brought together?

It is well-known that one of the primary reasons for speaking *lashon hara* stems from the fact that one feels he is better than others, and therefore highlights their flaws and shortcomings, accordingly. However, a person who is fully and truly confident in his superiority does not generally feel the need to constantly prove it. One who is wealthy does not obsess over how poor other people are. Why is this situation different? The answer is that although a person would naturally like to believe that he is perfect, part of him knows that this is not true. Therefore, in order to fuel the perfection-narrative he has created, he needs to feed it by focusing on the imperfections of others, thereby proving to himself that he really is better than them.

There is a startling idea found in the classic mussar work *Chovos Halevavos*,<sup>3</sup> who writes that if a person speaks *lashon hara* about others, he receives some of their sins. Although the *Chovos Halevavos* does not specify how much one needs to speak about them in order to incur this punishment, or exactly how many sins are transferred, the concept itself is most perplexing. How is this an appropriate punishment for speaking *lashon hara*? R' Zev Freund<sup>4</sup> explains that since the motivation for speaking *lashon hara* is to establish oneself as a tzaddik through highlighting the sins he sees in others, it turns out that, through their sins, they become partners with him in his tzaddik status, so that it is only fair that he bear some of their sins for them!

The incredible idea that emerges from this is that the path toward ceasing to focus on the flaws of others is to accept the flaws within one's own self. With no pressure to sustain a persona of perfection, the need to identify and fixate on others' shortcomings will dissolve. To this end, the recovering *metzora* is told to bring cedar wood – reflecting his high points and strengths – together with hyssop and crimson thread from a worm – representing his low points, weaknesses and failings. Through this, he recognizes that, like everyone else, he contains something of both. Not only will accepting this truth release him from devoting all his attention to others' flaws, it will also allow him to turn his attention to his own negative traits, and to begin setting about correcting and improving them.

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2 Vayikra 14:4.

3 *Sha'ar Hakniyah* chap. 7. The sefer *Kosnos Ohr* of R' Meir Eisenshtadt (Parshas *Metzora*) cites a similar idea in the name of the *Sefer Chassidim*.

4 *Shabbos u'Moadim*, Parshas *Metzora*.