

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

PARSHAS TAZRIA

Reading the Messages of Tzoraas

וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אַחֲרֵי הַכִּבֵּס אֶת הַנֶּגַע וְהָיָה לֹא הַפֶּךָ הַנֶּגַע אֶת עֵינָיו... טָמֵא הוּא

The Kohen shall see after the affliction has been washed, the affliction has not changed its color... it is impure.¹

The laws of *tzoraas*, in all of its forms and iterations, are both detailed and involved. Our verse, which comes at the end of the Torah's description of these laws, is explained by the commentators as also addressing the primary cause of the *tzoraas* affliction itself – speaking *lashon hara* (slander).

FIRST INTERPRETATION: SLANDER – IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Although it is not incorrect to categorize *lashon hara* as a problem, it is more accurate to understand it as the symptom of a problem. After all, a person's words merely express what they feel, and what they feel is in turn based on what they see. If a person looks at others and can only see the negative in them – either due to egocentricity or meanness of spirit – that is naturally what he will talk about. As such, the very laudable pursuit of guarding one's tongue from negative speech does not start with the tongue – it starts with the eyes and ends with the tongue. If a person attains the correct way in which to view people, his mouth will take care of itself. If, however, he makes no effort to shift his vision, his prospects for avoiding negative speech are extremely limited.

This idea is expressed most poignantly in the episode of the spies who, as we know, were punished for spreading slander about the land of Israel. The duration of their punishment was forty years of wandering in the wilderness, as the verse explains: "In accordance with the number of days that you spied the land, forty days, each day – a year."² Now, inasmuch as their crime was one of slander upon returning *from* the land, why was the duration of their punishment in the wilderness determined by the amount of days they spent *in* the land? Presumably, we should try and find out how long they spent speaking *lashon hara* about the land and model the punishment on *that* duration! Let the punishment fit the crime!

R' Shlomo Kluger explains that here we see that the real place where the sin was committed was in the land of Israel, through whose length and breadth they walked and saw only negative things. The slander

¹ Vayikra 13:35.

² See Bamidbar 14:34.

they spread upon their return was purely a result of this negative vision. Hence, when their punishment was set, it was based on those forty days where the root crime took place.

This is the idea being intimated by our verse. Although the pshat translation of the phrase “לא הפך הנגע את עינו” is “the affliction has not changed its color,” the word “עין” literally means an eye. The verse is informing us that the fundamental goal of the *tzoraas* affliction is to “reverse the eye” of the person from negative to positive vision. As long as that has not happened, the *tzoraas* affliction is impure, for the root of the problem has gone entirely unaddressed.

SECOND INTERPRETATION: REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

There is a further message from these words. The ancient Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah*³ states that the words “נגע – affliction” and “ענג – enjoyment,” which both share the same letters, reflect opposite ends of human experience. The idea being communicated is that, contrary to the notion that avoiding *lashon hara* will lead a person to miss out on enjoying life, the exact opposite is true. The mindset which drives a person to *lashon hara* is one beset with insecurity and anxiety, constantly feeling the need to put people down – while certain that others are doing the same to him! A person who speaks in a positive way avoids all of this negativity and is thus able to fully enjoy life.

In this regard, the Midrash⁴ famously tells of a travelling salesman who came to the town of Tzipori and announced, “Who wants the elixir of life?” When the townspeople gathered around to see his wares, he produced a book of Tehillim which asks this very question, “מי האיש ההפך חיים – Who is the man who desires life?” and responds, “נצר לשונך מרע – guard your tongue from evil.”⁵ What was the salesman’s message in this episode, aside from creating a fetching production around this well-known verse? Moreover, the Midrash concludes by saying that Rav Yannai, who was present at that time, remarked: “All my life I have read this verse and did not know its simple meaning until that peddler came along and taught it to me.” What did he mean by this? How else did he understand the verse prior to this encounter?

Rav Yannai initially understood that the promise of “life” for the one who guards his tongue refers to ultimate life in the World to Come for those who do not slander. However, when the salesman arrived and announced “Who wants the elixir of life?” it was clearly understood that he was referring to life in this world. As such, when he proceeded to cite the verse from Tehillim, he was teaching all those present that guarding ones tongue is the elixir of enjoyable life in *this* world!⁶

As we mentioned, the words “ענג” and “נגע” share the same letters, with the difference being whether the letter “ע” appears at the beginning of the word or at the end. In this light, R’ Yitzchok of Koritz explains an additional allusion in the words of our verse “לא הפך הנגע את עינו.” The goal of *tzoraas* is not just to chastise the sinner for his sins, but to encourage him to return to a path where he can actually enjoy life. Or, to put it another way, the desired result is to take the word “נגע” and to reverse (להפוך) its “עין” from the end of the word to its beginning, granting the person the “ענג” of a life free of the ongoing compulsion to speak *lashon hara*, as well as the constant fear of it being spoken about him.

3 Chap. 40.

4 Vayikra Rabbah 16:2.

5 Tehillim 34:13-14.

6 R’ Reuven Katz, cited in *Yalkut Lekach Tov*, Parshas Metzora.