



YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

WEEKLY PARASHA

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean

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The Torah spends a great deal of time addressing the phenomenon of *tzara'at*, types of spots on the skin that can render a person ritually impure. A person with such a spot skin needs to have it inspected by a Kohen to determine if it is indeed *tzara'at*. The Kohen will determine if certain criteria are met and, if so, will declare the person impure.

In contrast to the active role that the Kohen plays, the person himself is described in fully passive terms. A close reading of the verses shows that this person has been reduced to an object of scrutiny by the Kohen. Consider: "A person, when there is on his skin a spot... shall be brought to Aharon the Kohen or one of his sons the Kohanim." (Vayikra 13:2). The person here is not a subject, a person who has a condition, rather he is the object upon which the spot appeared. The person is also not choosing to go to the Kohen, and not even going to the Kohen himself. He is rather *being brought*, by some unnamed others, to the Kohen. He - or perhaps just his skin, or just the spot - is a thing to be brought to the Kohen for the Kohen's scrutiny.

This objectification continues in the next verse: *v'ra'ahu HaKohen vi'ti'mei oto* - "and the Kohen will see the spot" - the spot! not the person! - "and impurify him." (verse 3). What or who is being seen and declared impure? The person or the spot? The grammar is unclear: the two actions - seeing and declaring impure - can both be referring to the spot or both to the person, or - as the above translation would have it, one to the spot and one to the person. All of the above possibilities exist in various English translations. The message, however, is the same: at this stage the person and his spot are more or less interchangeable - he is his condition, and that is how he is being seen by the Kohen.

This implicit framing runs throughout the *parasha*. The person is never coming on his own, but is always being brought to the Kohen (see verse 13:9, 18), and the Kohen is always looking at the spot, not at the person. The only time the person appears active - ever so briefly - is in verse 13:16, "If the healthy flesh once again turns to white, then *he shall come* to the Kohen... and the Kohen will purify the spot, he is pure." When there is a chance of recovery - of no longer

being a patient, as it were - the person becomes an actor and approaches the Kohen on his own.

What the Torah is describing here is not a punishment, but a sad, yet perhaps necessary, consequence of the doctor-patient relationship. For a doctor to be fully objective and to carefully weigh the evidence in front of her, she has to bracket the humanity of the person sitting in front of her. She has to objectify the patient, focus on the symptoms as they present themselves, in order to render the best medical judgment. This need for objectification is explained nicely in the following article (from kittywampus.wordpress.com):

Modern, scientific medicine has historically objectified people as patients. Indeed, the "modern" and "scientific" elements of it rely on objectification. Modern medicine is founded upon objectification: People become case studies. Their complicated life stories are aggregated into statistics. They're assigned to control or experimental groups, and their individuality melts away.

Medical research as we understand it would be unthinkable without objectification. The techniques I just mentioned are necessary to doing science *right*, following professional standards. The alternative - drifting in a sea of anecdotal - would yield few useful results.

That's the positive side. However, objectification is no fun at the receiving end. How many people as soon as they go to a hospital, are made to suffer small indignities, and can have small pieces of their identity stripped away? How many people all of a sudden stop being "Mr. So-and-So," or "Mrs. So-and-So," or "Dr. So-and-So," and become Jon, Ellen, and Fred while all the doctors retain their professional identities and titles? And this objectification can lead to even greater abuses:

... [P]regnant women in early-twentieth-century Germany were... paraded naked in front of a

whole auditorium full of observers while in labor. American obstetrics was no better: Women were strapped down while in labor and knocked out, whether they wanted it or not.

And so the person with *tzara'at* is objectified. He loses his personhood, becomes an object, is subject to procedures and requirements that are placed on him, and only regains his humanity when he starts to become pure.

His return to personhood is brought out strikingly when one contrasts the end of *Tazria* to the beginning of *Metzora*. *Tazria* ends on this note: "This is the law of the spot of *tzara'at*..." (13:59) - it is the laws of spots. *Metzora* opens thusly: "This is the law of the *metzora* on the day that he becomes pure..." (14:2). No longer are we dealing with the spot, the disease, but rather with the *metzora*, the person. Now, it is true, that he is still at the beginning of becoming better, so "... and he shall be brought to the Kohen." (ibid.). But once the Kohen determines that he has healed, this person becomes a full actor, "And the Kohen shall command to take for the one purifying himself..." (verse 5). He is not being purified, he is purifying himself. And finally, "And the one purifying himself shall launder his clothes, and shall shave his hair, and shall bathe in water, and shall be pure, and then he shall come into the camp..." (verse 8). He is reentering society and is no longer "sick," and has now become once again a person and an actor.

The Torah is describing the somewhat inevitable objectification that occurs in a patient-doctor relationship. But can this situation be rectified? Can we retain the objectification necessary for good medicine and good science, but not lose the humanity of the person in the process? In contemporary medicine, there have been some improvements in this area:

Over the past 40 years, under pressure from consumer advocates, feminists, and medical ethicists, medical researchers and practicing doctors have become a lot more sensitive to problems of objectifying patients. Patients with cancer are no longer kept ignorant of their diagnosis and prognosis. These days, expectant mothers are often encouraged to write birth plans... One index of objectification is condescension... [a]nd personally, I've seen a major decline in patronizing attitudes among medical practitioners.

A similar restoring of personhood of the *metzora* can be found in Hazal. Hazal state, for example, that because of the mitzvah "Guard yourself regarding the spot of *tzara'at*"

(Devarim 24:8) that a person is not allowed to cut off a spot that might be *tzara'at* and is required to show it to a Kohen (Makkot 22a). This transforms the person into an agent! The person is no longer being brought to the Kohen, he is bringing himself. Similarly, the Rabbis famously interpret the verse, "On the day it will be shown to the Kohen" (Vayikra 13:14) as follows: "There are days that he (the Kohen) may see and days he may not see. From here they said: A groom who has a spot is given the seven days of the wedding feast [before he has to show it to the Kohen]... And similarly, during a Festival, he is given the seven days of the festival" (Moed Katan 7b). This person is no longer just an object. He is a person, with an entire life that exists outside of the clinical context, and the Kohen has to be sensitive to these realities, to the person in front of him, before he can decide how or whether to proceed. Just like, one may add, when doctors see the full person in front of them, and not just the condition, they listen better, inquire more, contextualize more and are more able to render the correct diagnoses.

We can learn a lot from this necessary balancing act. There are times we must be objective, to give our honest assessment of the facts that are placed in front of us, even if the facts relate to the state of another person, or another person's work. But at the same time, we can never forget the humanity of the person, that we are dealing with an actor and an agent and that we must engage that person as such, even when in our most professional and objective mode. This is particularly crucial if a person is ill. For not only does the path to recovery allow a person to regain his or her humanity, but it is the regaining and retaining of that humanity that allows for recovery to begin.

Shabbat Shalom!

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