A Daily Bread

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Date: 10 Elul 5785 (September 3, 2025)
Torah Portion: Ki Tetze
Topic: Blind to a Fault

It is written (Deut. 24:9), "Remember what YHWH your Elohim did to Miryam on the way when you came out of Mitzrayim." A *halachic* question is raised: Regarding an individual who has a *tzaraas* affliction and the *Kohen* was his relative, what is the law? Is the relative permitted to see it and render it pure or impure? The Midrash answers: A person may examine all *tzaraas* afflictions, except for his own afflictions. It means that a *kohen* may not rule on an affliction on his own body, because the Scripture indicates that the *kohen* must be able to see the afflicted person (Lev. 13:5). It implies that a *kohen* other than himself must examine the affliction and render it pure or impure, because as an interested party, there is a concern that he might rule leniently without sufficient basis.

This statement is also applied to the blemishes of character. In this sense, it is to be translated quite literally, "A person 'sees' everyone else's faults, except for his own." A person is quick to discern the other fellow's faults, no matter how minor. But he is likely to be blind to his own shortcomings, even when they are obvious to everyone else.

The Midrash asks what sin do *tzaraas* afflictions come upon a person. A man asks his friend to lend him an axe so that he could chop a tree. But the friend says that he did not have it, out of stinginess and not wishing others to benefit from his possessions. As a punishment, a *tzaraas* affliction immediately comes upon his house at first. The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 17 §4) states that when Hashem punishes a person with *tzaraas*, He afflicts his house first (Lev. 14:37); and later, if he does not repent, Hashem smites him more directly, afflicting his clothing and then his body.

When the man's house is afflicted with *tzaraas*, the *kohen* tells everyone to clear the house (ibid., v. 39). When the man who denied of having an axe, clears everything out of the house. When the bystanders would see the axe in question, they would say, "Have you seen the stinginess of this individual? For the axe was in his possession."

Another explanation for what sin is punished with *tzaraas*: The affliction comes because of *lashon hara* (slander). Now, there are many sins that are punished with *tzaraas*. However, one who was afflicted because of one of those sins may expiate his sin by enduring the lesser degree of impurity caused by *tzaraas*, known as *segirah* (confinement), while one who was afflicted because of the sin of *lashon hara* is atoned until he endures the more severe form, known as *hachlatah* (confirmation). Among other things, the two differ in the purification process required when the person has been healed. A confined *metzora* need only immerse himself in the *mikveh* (immersion), while a confirmed *metzora* must undergo the lengthy process described in Vayikra (Lev.) Chapter 14. The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 16 §1ff) expounds the word, *metzora*, first used in the passage describing the purification of the confirmed *metzora*, as alluding to one who speaks *lashon hara*.

What hope is there for a person to improve? How can he fix what does not appear to him to be broken? The answer to this is also found in the passage dealing with *tzaraas* afflictions, "he shall be brought to the Kohen" (Lev. 13:9). He must present himself before others and subject himself to their examination as others with *tzaraas* afflictions.

The Baal Shem Tov said, "All blemishes that a person sees outside of himself are really his own blemishes." This is the sentiment expressed by the Sages when they taught, "Whoever declares others to be unfit, in essence, declares them unfit with his own blemish." People project their own shortcomings onto others. Accordingly, if one sincerely wants to known his own shortcomings, he needs to look no further than the faults he sees in others. The lens of his criticism may just prove to be the mirror in which he will find his own imperfections reflected without distortion.

Shalom