

Torah From a *Mussar* Perspective
***Parshat Tazria-Metzora* – Leviticus 12:1–15:33**
Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis

This week brings a double-helping of Torah. Our portions, *Tazria* and *Metzora*, deal with laws concerning those afflicted with skin diseases, which through the ages many have understood as coming as a result of spiritual contamination. After dealing with skin diseases the Torah proceeds to address situations in which other abnormal phenomena appear such as in clothing, and even the walls of houses. These two portions are often viewed as being among the most puzzling in all of Torah. While studying *Tazria-Metzora* anew this year I came across a teaching from Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz¹ which offers an additional take through which to read these portions. It is in consonance with the voices of other commentators as they connect these portions with human speech and yet offers us a new lens.

In *Da'at Torah*, Rav Levovitz addresses these readings, contrasting them with last week's portion, *Parshat Sh'mini*. He opens with a reference to Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim*² where the Maimonides states:

I have a reason and cause for calling our language³ the holy language—do not think it is exaggeration or error on my part. It is perfectly correct. For the Hebrew language has no special name for the organs of procreation in females or males . . . Hebrew has no original expressions for these things and only describes them in figurative language and by way of hints, as if to indicate thereby that these things should not be mentioned [explicitly], and hence [perhaps] we should therefore have no names for them. [We might infer from this that] we ought to be silent about them. When we are compelled to mention them, we must manage to employ some suitable expressions, for that purpose . . .

Elsewhere, summarizing Rambam's teaching as regards the afflictions mentioned in our two portions, Rabbi Marc Angel teaches "Maimonides wrote that we do not really know what it means. It seems not to be a medical condition at all, but rather, a physical sign of a spiritual blemish."

Rav Yerucham Levovitz teaches that one who only learns [Rambam's teaching] at a surface level will miss the more important deeper meaning, and will likely fail to take what is important to heart.⁴ He compares what we were taught about ritual purity and impurity (*tum'ah*) in *Parshat*

¹ Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1875–1936), also known by his hundreds of students simply as The *Mashgiach*, was a famous *mashgiach ruchani* and *ba'al mussar* at the Mir Yeshiva in Belarus. He received his education in the of *yeshivot* Slabodka and Kelm and he was a disciple of Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, and Rav Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm.

² *Guide for the Perplexed* III:8

³ Hebrew

⁴ *Da'at Torah*, *Vayikra*, page 79.

Sh'mini, as it relates to animals which may be offered in *korbanot*/sacrifices, with the lessons of ritual purity and impurity as they relate to human beings in *Parshat Tazria*. He sees the lesson in our portions this week as even more critical for us as we seek to *make ourselves proper vessels* for *Avodat HaShem* – the service of God. Rav Levovitz states that if we examine Rambam's teaching "carefully and deeply" we must "learn Rambam's teaching as a *sha'ar kedushah* – a gate to holiness."⁵

He states that the afflictions referenced in our portions should be seen as *simanim*/signs. They signs meant to call attention to the fact that the person so afflicted is the bearer of "*gasut ruach*/a coarse or crude spirit." In a similar vein to that of other commentators, he states that they are a *siman*/sign that the individual has engaged in *lashon ha-rah*/evil or forbidden speech.⁶

Rav Levovitz continues by referring back to Rambam's teaching, stating,

Rambam reveals to us that [we can see in these afflictions] a *siman*/a sign pointing us towards *kedushah*. *Kedushah* is such a lofty matter, that even in matters of language [and speech] we must make a distinction between purity and impurity. Here [we see] a true [sense of] *lashon ha-kodesh*/Holy Language. *Lashon*/language has a *kedushah* of its own.⁷

Paraphrasing Rav Levovitz, I believe he is teaching us to pay attention to what is happening in and around us. With proper attention, we can see *simanim*/signs pointing us towards and reminding us to reach for higher and higher levels of *kedushah* in everything we experience – both the physical and the spiritual. He states that we must strive to set aside our own *ga'avah*/sense of pride and [learn from our] errors to see clearly that we can draw instruction from every part of life. Based on Rambam, Rav Levovitz is teaching that we should not simply stop at the level of literal language. We must push ourselves to see the spiritual and allegorical meanings that lie beyond the simple meanings of the words.

Towards the end of his teaching in *Da'at Torah*⁸ Rav Levovitz cites a teaching from Rabbi Yisrael Salanter in *Ohr Yisrael*, Letter 14:

It is known, and experience teaches us, that to be a servant of God, blessed be God's Name, even at a high level, without *Mussar* study – and to transform evil to good without *Mussar* is like trying to see without an eye or hear without an ear.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., page 80

⁸ Ibid, page 81

⁹ In Letter 14, Rabbi Salanter is commenting on *Parshat Re'eh* in the book of Deuteronomy. Let us remember that the word *re'eh* means "see."

As physical beings, we must learn on both physical and metaphysical levels. Rav Salanter also teaches us,

Anyone who has engaged at all in *Mussar* study has seen palpably that this spiritual cause stands as an obstacle; it stultifies their heart against the progression of reason (to the extent that they truly understand the state of their belief, as mentioned above. And certainly, the ways of the world and what it would take to reverse them also govern [behavior] in this matter.¹⁰

Year by year, as we read *Tazria/Metzora*, our tradition bids us read beyond what can seem to be base and even distasteful, to allow ourselves to reach for deeper meanings that we can draw into our hearts and souls as we reach for ever higher levels of *kedushah*.

FOR FOCUS

- What *simanim*/signs do you experience in your life which might be pointing you towards your soul curriculum as it relates to one or more *middot*? Which *middot*? Be specific.
- What can you draw from the teachings of Rambam and Rav Levovitz to help you focus or refocus your efforts at reaching towards greater *kedushah*/holiness in your life?

¹⁰ *Ohr Yisrael*,