

SANCTITY AND TORAH ARE MAN'S GOALS IN LIFE

(BY RABBI DAVID HANANIA PINTO SHLITA)

Parsha Tazria first discusses the impurity of childbirth, but then goes on to deal primarily with skin afflictions and lepers. Now it would seem that the passage concerning childbirth is out of place here, since most of this parsha (as well as Parsha Metzora, which follows it) deals with leprosy. The passage concerning the impurity of childbirth, however, is no longer than eight verses. Therefore why is it placed here?

Furthermore the Chozeh of Lublin, may his merit protect us all, raised a question concerning the verse, "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (Leviticus 12:3), for it seems to have no connection whatsoever to the impurity of childbirth. Therefore why is the mitzvah of circumcision mentioned alongside the impurity of a woman who gives birth to a boy?

We are aware of the words of the Sages, who said that leprosy comes as a result of the sin of Lashon Harah (Arachin 16b). This means that when a person gossips about his fellow or speaks ill of him, the Holy One, blessed be He, punishes him measure for measure with the plague of leprosy. Just as he spoke ill of another person and made him blanch when he shamed him, so too will his own skin change color on account of leprosy.

This is why the Torah commands that lepers must live alone, outside the camp (Leviticus 13:46). The Sages have explained, "Why is the leper different, such that the Torah said, 'He shall dwell alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp'? He separated a husband from his wife, a man from his neighbor. Therefore the Torah said, 'He shall dwell alone'" (Arachin 16b). Because he disrupted the unity of others, his punishment to remain alone and isolated, without the company of others.

From here we see that the plague of leprosy is a punishment for harming the unity of people, for nothing irritates Hashem as much as strife, and strife results from Lashon Harah and slander. On the other hand, there is nothing better to Hashem than peace and harmony, which is something we see in our parsha. The Torah commands a woman who has given birth to bring a sin-offering and burnt-offering, for during childbirth she suffering a great deal, and in her mind she made a vow that was detrimental to her husband. This means that a woman's sin lay in her thoughts, for her pain drove her to anger, and deep inside she asked why she was suffering so much. Now even if such thoughts and words come as a result of real pain, Jews must be extremely careful with their words. This is why, notwithstanding her pain, she has to bring an offering.

In this way the Torah alludes to just how serious Lashon Harah (even the "dust" of it) really is. Thus if a woman who gave birth must bring an offering to atone for the thoughts and words that, despite her best efforts, escaped her lips, how much more has a person grievously sinned if he consciously and deliberately gossips about his fellow and speaks ill of him! Besides the fact that he is punished with leprosy because he took pleasure in speaking Lashon Harah, he must remain alone and outside the camp. This answers the question concerning the connection between the mitzvah of circumcision and a woman who has given birth. A person in this world must circumcise the foreskin of his heart – not just the foreskin of his flesh – meaning that

he must excise the afflictions of his heart through complete nullification. He does this by devoting himself to Torah study and the performance of mitzvot. Thus by stating, "On the eighth day, the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (Leviticus 12:3), the Torah is saying that because a person sanctified himself and labored in Torah study and mitzvot performance during the 70 years of his life, he will merit to arrive at "the eighth day." This means that he will have reached his 80th year, having managed to eradicate his evil inclination. How can this be achieved? It is by the fire of the Torah, which is alluded to in the verse, "A woman who conceived," the letters of the word isha ("woman") being the same as the word aish ("fire") plus the letter hei (numerical value: 5), an allusion to the five books of the Torah. Thus by occupying himself with the fire of the Torah, a person will have offspring who will become Torah scholars. Perhaps he himself will have novel Torah interpretations day and night, and he will have a son in order for his ideas to be perpetuated and renewed, and that more words of Torah may be derived from them. In the final analysis, however, a person is liable to think that since he is circumcised – since he has entered the covenant of our father Abraham and is called a Jew – he therefore has nothing to worry about. This is why the Torah also warns a Jew about being circumcised in his heart. In fact circumcision helps a man become a Jew, meaning that by doing so he enters into the covenant that our father Abraham made with the Holy One, blessed be He.

On one hand we have the covenant of circumcision, and on the other hand the covenant of Shabbat, tefillin, and Torah. One cannot exist without the other, as it is written: "If not for My covenant, I would not have appointed days and nights, the decrees of heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 33:25). If we do not devote ourselves to the fire of Torah study and mitzvot performance, to circumcising our hearts, we will instead be occupied with frivolous pursuits and become infused with pride, a love for honor, and a desire for the pleasures of this world. We may even become speakers of Lashon Harah, which brings about a great deal of evil. We will commit intolerable sins and end up becoming leprous, and people will keep their distance. Even the Holy One, blessed be He, will keep His distance from us, for the leper "shall dwell alone. His dwelling shall be outside the camp." A person must therefore be careful not to become like a leper – whom people stay away from, lest they get contaminated with leprosy – and thus even Hashem will distance Himself from him. This is why a person must devote himself to the fire of Torah, to Mussar and Chassidut, cleaving to his teachers in order to achieve spiritual perfection. He must circumcise his heart in order to attain his portion in Gan Eden, which is the world of the eighth.

When a person conducts himself in this way, he will merit that the benediction, "Blessed be he who fulfills the words of this Torah" applies to him. This is because a person who puts an effort into fulfilling the Torah will elevate his heart in the service of Hashem and become increasingly greater. He will also father novel Torah explanations, merit arriving at the eighth day, the World to Come, and completely remove the foreskin of his heart. He will also have his portion in Hashem.

The Path To Follow TAZRIA METZORA

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HEVRAT PINTO
Under Aegis of
RABBI DAVID HANANIA
PINTO CHLITA

11, rue du plateau
75019 PARIS

Tel: +331 42 08 25 40

Fax +331 42 08 50 85

www.hevratpinto.org

Responsible of publication
Hanania Soussan

GUARD YOUR TONGUE!

Why Ruin the Reward of a Mitzvah?

One who finds himself in the company of people who are speaking Lashon Harah must rebuke and reprimand them for it. If he remains silent and does not say anything, he will also be tied to their transgression, and it will be considered as if he himself has sinned.

Mrs. Zachs and Mrs. Azrieli were busy one night setting up tables for a bazaar that was opening the next day, the profits of which were to go to a yeshiva. It was getting late that night, and they were both tired. While chatting with one another, Mrs. Zachs raised the subject of one of their friends. However Mrs. Azrieli stopped her and said, "We're taking part in an important mitzvah, so why should we ruin its reward by speaking Lashon Harah?" Mrs. Zachs accepted her reprimand with thanks: "You're right. I'm so tired that I simply wasn't thinking when I began to speak."

MUSSAR FROM THE PARSHA

Meriting Both Worlds

It is written, “When a woman conceives” (Leviticus 12:2).

The Midrash states, “This is alluded to in what is written: ‘You have formed for me behind and before’ [Psalms 139:5]. Rabbi Yochanan said, ‘If a man merits it, he inherits two worlds: This and the coming world’ ” (Vayikra Rabba 14:1).

Let us explain what the Sages said: “All the prophets prophesied only in respect of the Messianic era. Yet as for the World to Come, ‘No eye has seen, O G-d, except You what has been prepared for him who waits’ [Isaiah 64:3]” (Sanhedrin 99a). Why, in fact, has the Holy One, blessed be He, hidden this amazing world – the World to Come – and not shown us all the good that awaits us? To understand this, let us take a brief visit to a marketplace in the town of Leipzig. The market is humming, with buyers and sellers everywhere you look. However let us fix our gaze on three merchants: Reuben, Shimon, and Levi. They are all trying to sell their merchandise, as each attempts to draw the most number of prospective buyers to his stall.

Let us enter one of these stalls and examine the merchandise being sold there. Reuben’s merchandise is of average quality, neither inferior nor superior, whereas Shimon sells old and ruined material, fabrics that have been bleached by the sun. Of the two merchants, everyone would naturally prefer to purchase things from Reuben. However we shouldn’t be too hasty in deciding. Why not wait a little and see what’s happening with Levi? What is he selling? If we look, we will see that his merchandise is in fact amazing! He is selling superior quality goods, including delicately embroidered fabrics and pure Chinese silk. Simply put, he has the finest merchandise in the market.

If Levi’s stall were located next to Reuben’s, where average-quality merchandise is being sold, Levi’s superior wares would not stand out as much. However if Levi’s stall were next to Shimon’s, Levi’s merchandise would really call out for people to come and take a look. After all, why would they want to go to a stall where rags were being sold? They would much rather look at the best-looking merchandise in the market.

In that case Levi would not need to convince anyone to come over and take a look at what he was selling. Shimon’s merchandise – the rags that he is trying to sell – would be enough for people to run off and head to Levi’s stall.

If the present world were good and the World to Come just better, the Holy One, blessed be He, would give us a glimpse of the latter in order to convince us to choose the better of the two, meaning the World to Come. However since the present world is irreparably warped, it is like a stall in the marketplace where rags are being sold. Therefore the Holy One, blessed be He, has no need to show us the sheer beauty and splendor of the World to Come. We ourselves are the ones who should run from the present world!

Exactly where should we run? Towards the Torah, towards the World to Come, as we recite in the prayer: “[He] has...implanted within us eternal life.” In it we have a foretaste of the World to Come, though the true nature of the World to Come (which is the most beautiful of all worlds) is impossible to describe or imagine as long as we find ourselves in a stall with rags as merchandise, namely the present world.

A Pearl From the Rav

It is written, “If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot, and it shall become in the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy...” (Leviticus 13:2).

In his book *Pahad David*, Rabbi David Pinto Shlita writes: Plagues occur in order to tell a person to correct his ways. They also come for seven things, one of which is pride. How does a person end up becoming proud? When he does not study the Torah that was given on Atzeret, he is struck with *tzara’at* (“leprosy”), these two words being formed by the very same letters. A person must do this in order to rid himself of pride and rectify his sins by going to the priest. Even if he is greater in wisdom than the priest, he must still go and

submit to him when he realizes that he has been afflicted with leprosy. He must also dwell outside the camp, for he has demonstrated pride and caused the departure of the Shechinah. Thus he must remain outside, not within the camp of Israel where the Shechinah dwells. It is not without reason that the Torah deals with the purity of man after it deals with the purity of animals, for a person who has become proud has acted worse than an animal. This is why he must learn from them to conduct himself with humility, coming before the priest, the *tzaddik*, to be purified.

The Juxtaposition of Subjects

It is written, “When a woman conceives” (Leviticus 12:2).

The laws of impure animals, crawling creatures, and insects were given in the previous parsha in order to teach us that if people eat forbidden food, it will result in their children being born with character flaws and struck with blindness of heart.

– Ma’ayana Shel Torah (citing Iggeret HaRamban)

The Law Concerning Animals, the Laws Concerning Man

It is written, “When a woman conceives” (Leviticus 12:2).

Rashi cites Rabbi Simlai as saying: “Even as man’s creation was after that of cattle, beasts and birds, even so the law concerning him comes after that concerning cattle, beasts and birds” (Vayikra Rabba 14:1).

By means of the Sanctuary, the Children of Israel merited the presence of the Shechinah and an elevated degree of spirituality. They were therefore liable to become complacent and think that they were even greater than the angels. Hence the Torah gave the law concerning animals and birds before the law concerning man. This was meant to teach us that even if the *tzaddikim* among men are indeed greater than angels, there are still lepers and those who have become impure as a result of their sins, and therefore they are worse than animals. In fact their impurity is even greater than the impurity of animals, since animals do not become impure while alive, whereas man can render himself impure even during his lifetime. Furthermore, the carcass of an animal renders a person impure only if he touches or carries it. However a human corpse renders a person impure just by being under the same roof. This is because man is endowed with free will, and by his free will he brings impurity upon himself through sin.

– Torat Moshe

Unnatural

It is written, “If a person will have on the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot” (Leviticus 13:2).

The skin afflictions that the Torah lists as rendering a person impure have no connection with the types of leprosy known to medical science. In fact these are special afflictions, unnatural ailments that Heaven has sent to man as a punishment and atonement for his sins.

– Sforno

Not a Random Occurrence

The clearest proof that these afflictions are not natural ailments that occur randomly is the fact that when the leper is placed in isolation for a week or two, his affliction improves or heals completely. However all naturally occurring afflictions are liable to get worse or become infected when a person is enclosed in a room without fresh air or light. Because these afflictions are supernatural signs from Heaven, ones meant to wake people up from their spiritual stupor and repent of their sins, even their treatment differs from the norm.

– Akeidah

Why No Such Afflictions in Our Days?

The reason that we do not see such afflictions today is because they are supernatural ailments. In fact they come as a result of a person’s sins, something that the sanctified part within him cannot tolerate. It therefore pushes the impurity to the outside in the form of an affliction that renders a person impure. This only happened in earlier times, when the holiness of a Jew was extremely powerful

(even if he sinned), capable of expelling even a small degree of impurity. Because holiness is not as powerful in our time, we do not see such afflictions today.

– Alsheich

A Redeemer Will Come to Zion

It is written, “It has all turned white; he is clean” (Leviticus 13:13).

It is written, “The son of David will not come until the whole world is converted to the belief of heretics. Rabba said, ‘What verse [proves this]?’ ‘It has all turned white; he is clean’ ” (Sanhedrin 97a).

When the world turns to evil, it is clear that the days of Mashiach are near, for the main cause of this phenomenon will be the fact that Heaven is trying to bring Jews to repentance. This is why a ruler as despotic as Haman will rise over them, a man whose cruel decrees will bring them to repentance.

When the world will have given itself over to heresy – when there will no longer be any shame before G-d or man, and the distress of the Jewish people will have reached its peak – this will lead to purity. Then the hearts of Jews will become purified and the world of evil will be uprooted, and in its place will be Mashiach the son of David.

– From the Chatam Sofer

Overview of the Parsha

Parsha Tazria extends the subject of Israel's purity vis-à-vis the holiness of Hashem. The parsha does this in regard to bodily impurity contracted by a woman giving birth, and by the afflictions that affect people and garments. The parsha begins with the laws regarding a woman who has given birth, and who must complete her purification at the Sanctuary. It continues with the laws dealing with skin ailments, leprosy, and types of afflictions that impact the skin and various parts of the body. It also tells us what a person with such afflictions must do. From the ailments that affect man's body, the parsha finishes by dealing with afflictions that render garments impure.

IN LIGHT OF THE HAFTORAH

A Physical Relief, a Spiritual Awakening

It is written, “Naaman said, ‘At least let there be given to your servant a mule-team's load of earth, for your servant will never again offer a burnt-offering or any sacrifice to other gods, but only to the L-RD’ ” (II Kings 5:17).

The Sages of the Talmud stated that Naaman was a ger toshav (Gittin 57b), which is extraordinary because he was able to achieve a deep understanding of the Creator. As he said, “Behold, now I know that there is no G-d in the whole world except in Israel” (II Kings 5:15). As for Naaman's servants, the text does not state that they followed in his footsteps. Indeed, all of them remained completely non-Jewish; only Naaman had a spiritual awakening. Before this happened, the prophet Elisha had instructed Naaman to go and immerse himself in a river. Upon hearing this command, Naaman became angry and refused to comply. It was only when his servants realized that he should obey the prophet's instructions that they were able to convince him.

We need to understand why Naaman's servants realized the truth before he did, yet in the end it was Naaman alone who believed that there is no G-d but in Israel.

It would seem that Naaman was initially upset by the way that the prophet Elisha dealt with him, not even bothering to come out and greet him. Then when Naaman heard that the prophet had ordered him to immerse in a river, it was something that he could not accept. He became enraged and decided to return to his own land. Naaman's servants had felt no affront to their honor, however, which is why they saw the situation with unbiased eyes. Once Naaman was healed and his views had changed, his servants saw the way to redemption. However they did not feel it in their flesh, which is why it had no effect on them. Naaman, who experienced the pain of leprosy and endured physical suffering, had a true appreciation for Hashem's kindness when he was healed, which is why he became a ger toshav.

REASONS FOR THE MITZVOT

He is Like the Beasts

Commenting on the verse, “When a woman conceives” (Leviticus 12:2), Rashi cites the Midrash in stating: “Even as man's creation was after that of cattle, beasts and birds, even so the law concerning him comes after that concerning cattle, beasts and birds.”

The Gemara states, “A beast has no power over man until he appears to it as an animal, for it is said, ‘But man does not repose in honor; he is like the beasts that perish’ [Psalms 49:13]” (Shabbat 151b). Two military forces, Moab and Midian, were facing one another. As usually happens in such situations, military commander from each side sent out spies during the night to see what was happening around the camp.

The commander of each side told his men, “Be very careful not to kill anyone unless you know for certain that he is an enemy soldier. If you're unsure about someone, be very careful! Don't rush things!” A column of men from the Midianite camp went out and encountered men from Moab. They immediately took them prisoner and were getting ready to kill them.

At that point one of the prisoners began to shout and plead, “My friends! I beg you, don't harm me! Have pity on me, for I'm a Midianite just like yourselves! The Moabites took me prisoner and dressed me like one of them, and I've been forced to serve with them ever since!”

The leader of the Midianite camp, however, did not accept his explanation. He said to the prisoner, “What does it matter if you're a Midianite? You're now a member of the Moabite army, and if you were to have found one of my soldiers you would have certainly killed him! Why should I show you mercy? You have the same status as your friends!”

When a wild animal encounters a tzaddik, a man who controls his desires and cravings, his pure soul reigns over the animal. It then yields and obeys him.

However when a man is a slave to his desires and is unable to control them, he is like a wild animal himself. Then it is the animal that will control him. Here a person's explanations will be useless, for he may say: “I'm a man, and I was created to have control over you.” However the animal will respond, “You've already rid yourself of the image of G-d that was in you, and now you resemble an animal!”

Man was created to serve his Creator. Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, made him master of all Creation in order for the entire world to help him with his task. This is why the account of man's creation is given after that of animals, teaching us that he was created last so he could enter a world where everything was already prepared for him. It would then be easier for him to perform Hashem's mitzvot. We see this with tzaddikim such as the Ohr HaChaim, for when a king threw him into a lion's den, the lions did not even dare approach him. Instead they humbly stood around the tzaddik. This occurs only when a man is not corrupt in his ways. Otherwise he is told, “Even a fly was created before you,” for then even it can master him.

A TRUE STORY

Plague for Plague

It is written, “It is the plague [negah] of leprosy” (Leviticus 13:3).

The saintly Rabbi Moshe of Pshevorsk Zatzal was famous in the Chassidic world as a great tzaddik, a man who possessed Ruach Hakodesh. He was especially known as a scribe who did all his writing in holiness and purity, with all the proper intentions. A rabbi once purchased a Torah scroll from him, and afterwards he had it proofread. He promised to pay anyone 20 rubles for each error that was found. One of the proofreaders was an evil man, and he decided that he would find an “error” at all costs. What did he do? He committed a wicked deed by deforming the word negah with his own hands. He then hurried to the rabbi and told him what he had found. The rabbi in turn went to see Rabbi Moshe of Pshevorsk, explaining that he had sold him a Torah scroll with an error in the word negah. Rabbi Moshe replied, “Your proofreader is a liar and an evil man, for I even remember what I was thinking at the very moment I was writing this word. Because of what he did, a plague will come upon him.” As it turned out, the proofreader was punished with leprosy.

YOUR EYES SHALL BEHOLD YOUR TEACHER

Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel

The Ohev Israel of Apt

Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel was the son of Rabbi Shemuel. He came from a prestigious family and was related to famous figures in Israel, among whom were Rabbi Heschel of Krakow, the Maharam of Lublin, and the Maharam of Padua. This lineage was obvious during his entire life.

At first Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua served as the Rav of the small town of Kolbasov. From there he went to Apt, and from there to the town of Yassi. While still in Kolbasov, two men paid him a visit one day and encouraged him to become more familiar with Chassidut. Because of them, he set out to meet the saintly Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk Zatzal. Later on he learned that these two men were none other than Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov.

When Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua took over the leadership of the community, thousands of chassidim gathered around him and avidly drank in his words. Included among the rabbis and rebbes who gathered in his shadow was the saintly Rabbi Issachar Ber of Radoszyce. Everyone called him the Ohev Israel (“one who loves Israel”), a name that fit him perfectly because he truly loved every Jew with all his heart and soul. His Torah commentaries were printed in a holy book entitled Ohev Israel. Before his death, he stated that upon arriving in the world above, he would not rest until Mashiach had come. However it is said that when he arrived in the next world, he abandoned his plan because he realized that it would be better for the Jewish people. In his love for the residents of Apt, he told them that he would always be known by the name of their city, and in fact he has always been called “the Ohev Israel of Apt.” On Nissan 5, 5585 he departed for the celestial yeshiva. May his merit protect us all.

THE DEEDS OF THE GREAT

Wine & Vinegar

Rav Huna, the Rosh Yeshiva of Sura in Babylon, had 400 jugs of wine that all turned sour at the same time. All his good wine had turned into vinegar, which was an enormous loss, even for a wealthy man.

Rav Huna was very upset, for he didn’t know how he had sinned to bring this upon himself. His friends, the Sages, heard the news and visited him in order to share in his distress and help him find a solution to his problem.

They said to him, “We have learned that when misfortunes fall upon a man, he must review his deeds to see what needs to be corrected. The Holy One, blessed be He, does not punish anyone unjustly. Therefore since something as strange as this has happened to you, you have to examine your deeds and find out what needs to be corrected.” Rabbi Huna replied with astonishment, “Have any of you suspected me of not doing this already? I have not found any sin in myself that could have warranted such a disaster!”

The Sages replied, “Can the Holy One, blessed be He, Who is the true Judge, be suspected of not having acted according to your deeds?” Rabbi Huna asked, “Alright, if any one of you knows that I have done something wrong, let him tell me, for I cannot see it!”

The Sages replied, “We have heard that you do not give your tenant his lawful share of vine twigs when he works in your vineyard.”

He replied: “Does he leave me any? He steals them all!”

The Sages said, “Nevertheless, he must still be given his share.”

Rav Huna accepted this reprimand and took it upon himself to correct his deeds. Some said that his vinegar changed back into wine, while others said that it remained unchanged, but that the price of vinegar increased so greatly that it sold for the same price as wine.

– Adapted from Berachot 5b

EISHET CHAYIL

The Meticulous Performance of Mitzvot

Every Friday morning Mrs. Aliza Greenblatt, a tzaddeket, would arrive at a slaughterhouse in Jerusalem with a chicken in her hand for Shabbat. She asked the shochet to check his knife in her presence. She also asked him to give his knife to another shochet so that he, too, could verify that it was Halachically fit for use. At home she plucked the bird herself, cut it into pieces, and asked her husband Rabbi Avraham Baruch to verify that it could be eaten. She salted and soaked it herself, entrusting the task of preparing it to no one else. In fact she was very meticulous with all her food, preparing meals in her kitchen at the highest level of hid-dur. She did this during her entire life, and even after the death of her husband she continued to practice all kinds of stringencies in kashrut. When she was invited to her children’s home for Shabbat, she made sure to bring along her own pot with the chicken she had kashered herself. Her conduct had a profound impression on all her family members and acquaintances, and from her they learned a chapter in the meticulous performance of mitzvot.

– Introduction to Revavot Ephraim