



RABBI JUDAH

MISCHEL

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Dedicated L'IluY Nishmas HaChaver
Shlomo Michael ben Meir z'l

Mirror Image

In 1848, Eastern Europe was ravaged by a deadly cholera epidemic. Tens of thousands died that year, and the city of Vilna was hit particularly hard. Jews gathered to daven, gave extra tzedakah, and added Torah and mitzvos in order to generate *rachamei shamayim*, Heavenly mercy. It was a true *eis tzarah*, an exceptionally difficult time, and the Rabbanim of the city urged people to engage in *teshuvah*. Among them was the young, dynamic Rav Yisrael Salanter, zt'l, who was later to become the famed founder of the Mussar movement. He encouraged his constituents to conduct a *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, soul searching and improvement of their character traits.

The sincere and religiously sensitive Jews of Vilna engaged in much reflection, introspection and self-improvement. There were some among them, however, who instead of focusing on examining their own spiritual lack turned their attention toward examining the faults and shortcomings of their neighbors and friends. Some even attributed the cause of the suffering to be

a result of various *aveiros* they observed in their neighbors.

One day, as the epidemic continued to rage, a well meaning Jew approached Reb Yisrael with urgency to discuss a certain family in their *kehillah*. "I've noticed that their commitment to *tzniyus* has waned somewhat in recent months; there are members of the household who are not up to standard. Who knows if it is not their sin which is causing this terrible plague. Dear Rabbi, something must be done!"

Reb Yisrael became serious. "As you know, a person who searches for and points out faults in other people is considered a *baal lashon ha-ra*," he began. "In the ancient past, someone who spoke *lashon hara* was afflicted with *tzara'as*, leprosy, and as a consequence, the *baal lashon ha-ra* would be sent away from the encampment and remain outside the city until their condition cleared up.

"Indeed," continued Reb Yisrael... "something must be done! Since you seem to think that you are an expert at discovering sins, I suggest you 'go out of the camp': get out of Vilna and isolate yourself for some time. Alone, you won't be able to see anyone else's shortcomings in *avodas Hashem*, and you won't see another's sins. But you will certainly be able to uncover your own."

Our *sedra* addresses this procedure, describing an individual who is afflicted with *tzara'as* and pronounced as such by the Kohen:

אִישׁ-צָרַע הוּא טָמֵא הוּא... כָּל-יְמֵי אֲשֶׁר הִנָּגַע בּוֹ יִטָּמָא
טָמֵא הוּא בְּכָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשָׁבוֹ:

“He is a man afflicted with *tzara'as*; he is unclean... All the days the lesion is upon him, he shall remain unclean. He is unclean; he shall dwell isolated; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.” (13:44-46)

Rashi provides a premise why those who have spoken *lashon ha-ra* and have been stricken with *tzara'as* must remain isolated:

הואיל והוא הבדיל בלשון הרע בין איש לאשתו ובין איש לרעהו, אף הוא יבדל:

“Since, with his slander, he caused a separation, a rift between spouses, partners, friends, he too, must be separated from society.” When we judge others negatively and speak derogatorily of others, although we are perhaps telling the truth, we have eroded the moral fibers

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that create and bind a relationship, family and community. The repercussions are as much rehabilitative as they are punitive. Being put in a proverbial ‘time-out’ by the Kohen is not simply a punishment; we are sent *out*, so that we will focus *inward*.

The Ba'al Shem Tov haKadosh teaches (on *Bereishis*, 126) that our relationships and interactions with others, and even our feelings toward others, serve as a *shpiegel*, a mirror, in which we can see ourselves more clearly. The beauty we see in the world is a reflection of who we really are; the blemishes we see in others are only a reflection of our own inner defects. We are likely to be oblivious to our own defects, but we can somehow detect shortcomings in other people with great ease.

This insight ‘reflects’ a teaching of the Gemara (Kidushin 70a) regarding lineage:

וכל הפוסל פסול ואינו מדבר בשבחא.. במומו פוסל

“Anyone who disqualifies others by stating that their lineage is flawed, that is a sign that he himself is of flawed lineage. The flaw he accuses them of having is in fact the one that he has.” When we perceive flaws or observe negative traits and behaviors in others it is an indication that

we have these shortcomings in ourselves, and we have seen them ‘out there’ for the sole purpose of alerting us to turn ‘inward’ in teshuvah.

כָּל הַנִּגְעִים אֲדָם רֹאֶה, חוּץ מִנִּגְעֵי עַצְמוֹ

“All *negaim* may be examined by a person, except his own.”

(Mishnah Nega'im, 2:5)

Offering an expansive interpretation of this mishnah, the Ba'al Shem Tov says, *Chutz me-atzmo* (“except his own”) means that what one sees *chutz*, ‘outside’ or in others, is *me-atzmo*, ‘from oneself’. The mishnah then reads: ‘All blemishes that a person sees out there are blemishes projected from within oneself.’

The gaze of one person to another is like glancing in the mirror — if our face is dirty, we will see a dirty face in the mirror. So it is when we look at each other; the extent to which we are pure and refined internally, we will look more generously upon the other and see their positive attributes ... and our own.

May we all be blessed to see the pure soul of a Jew in the mirror of each other's faces. ■

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