



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

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Sympathy Needs No Barometer

טַמָּא טַמָּא יְקָרָא

He calls out “Impure, impure” (Vayikra 13:45)

The individual inflicted with tzara’at calls out that he is impure. Rashi explains that he does so to inform others, so that they will stay away and avoid becoming impure themselves.

However, the Gemara suggests a more sensitive reason for this announcement. It teaches:

והתניא אילן שמשיר פירותיו סוקרו (וצובע אותו) בסיקרא וטוענו באבנים בשלמא טוענו באבנים כי היכי דליכחוש חיליה אלא סוקרו בסיקרא מאי רפואה קעביד כי היכי דליחזייה אינשי וליבעו עליה רחמי דתניא ויקרא יג, מה (וטמא טמא יקרא דצריך להודיע צערו לרבים ורבים יבקשו עליו רחמים).

“A tree that sheds its fruit prematurely is

painted and marked with stones. Loading it with stones weakens it physically—but why paint it red? So that people will see the tree and pray for its recovery. Similarly, the metzora calls out ‘Impure, impure.’ He must announce his suffering to the masses, so that they will pray for mercy on his behalf” (Shabbat 67a; Vayikra 13:45).

The Gemara draws a parallel: the red-painted tree is like the metzora. Both are marked so that others recognize their condition and respond with compassion and prayer.

At first glance, the comparison seems surprising. A metzora suffers tremendously: he is removed from all three camps, separated from family and work, and his life is turned upsidedown. The owner of a sick tree, by contrast, may have many orchards, and one unfruitful tree may barely impact him. How can Chazal equate these two situations—one human suffering, one agricultural—both requiring public recognition to elicit mercy?

Rav Chaim Friedlander (Sifte Chaim) offers a profound insight: **we are not to measure another’s suffering to determine whether it “deserves” our sympathy.** There is no barometer that gauges how much pain merits compassion. Every act of suffering, no matter how severe or how mild, is deserving of our care, attention, and prayer.

This principle is reflected in countless stories of the gedolim, who wept at the pain of others. The Chafetz Chaim, for example, is said to have cried when he heard of an ill person in another town whom he had never met. The intensity of the suffering was enough;

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he did not question whether it was “serious enough” to merit tears.

In recent years, many families have experienced loss, illness, or injury. We have witnessed firsthand the fragility of life and the weight of human suffering. The lesson from the metzora and the sick tree is clear: we are called to respond with empathy, to offer assistance, and to pray wholeheartedly for the recovery and healing of those in pain.

Perhaps the deepest teaching here is this: sympathy is not a privilege, but rather a responsibility.

Just as the red-painted tree signals the community to pray, and the metzora calls out to awaken compassion, so too every human in pain calls upon us—not with words, but with the reality of their suffering. We are charged to notice, to respond, and to act.

There is no threshold for empathy. No litmus test to determine who “deserves” our care. Every tear, every cry, every hidden wound matters. Every prayer we offer can help heal, every act of kindness can restore, and every moment we choose compassion can transform isolation into belonging.

May we merit to be people who see suffering and do not hesitate. Who respond, who pray, and who bring comfort—whether the pain is great or small. Just as Chazal teach, every life, every struggle, every “tree” in our midst deserves our heartfelt attention.

Let us open our hearts, extend our hands, and allow mercy to flow freely so that we can be living conduits of healing, hope, and love. ■

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