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The Big Picture

One cold, Lower East Side winter mornings, Jew and non-Jew alike could be seen huddling in the warmth of the small foyer of the *beis midrash*. Long before card access, key codes, fingerprint and facial recognition gates, someone from the streets could often be seen loitering in the vestibule of Mesivta Tiferes Yerushalayim, right outside the “MTJ” *beis medrash*. It was sometimes difficult to perceive whether the building was a homeless shelter or the renowned yeshivah of the *gadol ha-dor*, Rav Moshe Feinstein.

One day, an apparently homeless person came in, found a seat, and proceeded to make himself comfortable while perusing the Daily News in the yeshivah hallway. The next day, one of the administrators devised a plan to keep the vagrants and *meshulachim* out of the premises and restore a proper ‘religious’ environment. All he needed was the approval of the rosh yeshivah. He approached Reb Moshe and explained how the yeshivah’s reputation and ability to raise funds was suffering from harboring all the unwanted ‘guests’ and loiterers. He then presented his intention for reconfiguring the *beis midrash* space.

Reb Moshe listened attentively, and in his serene voice, responded: “I understand

the reasoning, and the need to remove them. However, one thing has not yet been explained to me. Once we remove them, where will they go?”

The administrator immediately understood that the honored guests would not be leaving.

Our sedra, as well as the following parshah, Metzora, deal with laws of *tumah v’taharah*, ritual impurity and purity, including the process and procedure of identifying *nega'im*, lesions of *tzaraas*, a ‘spiritual disease’ that could afflict people’s bodies, clothing or homes. If a suspicious blotch appeared on the skin or surface of ones’ belongings, the *kohen* would examine it to determine if the affliction was *tzaraas*...

וְאִם־פְּרוּחַ תִּפְרוּחַ הִצְרַעַת בְּעוֹר וְכִסְתָּהּ הִצְרַעַת אֶת כָּל־עוֹר הַנִּגַּע מֵרֹאשׁוֹ וְעַד־רַגְלָיו לְכָל־מְרִיאָה עֵינֵי הַכֹּהֵן: וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן וְהִנִּיחַ כִּסְתָּהּ הִצְרַעַת אֶת־כָּל־בְּשָׂרוֹ וְטָהַר אֶת־הַנִּגַּע כְּלוּ הַפֶּה לְבֹן טָהוֹר הוּא... וְרָאָה הַכֹּהֵן אֶת־הַבְּשָׂר הַחַי וְטִמְאַוּ הַבְּשָׂר הַחַי טִמְאָה הוּא צִרְעַת הוּא:

If the eruption spreads out over the skin so that it covers all the skin of the affected person from head to foot, wherever the priest can see — if the priest sees that the eruption has covered the whole body — he shall pronounce as pure the affected person, who is pure from having turned all white. But as soon as un-discolored flesh appears in it, that person shall be impure; when the priest sees the un-discolored flesh, he shall pronounce the person impure. The un-discolored flesh is impure; it is leprosy. (*Vayikra*, 13:12-15)

Reb Meir Simchah, the “Meshech

Chochmah”, comments on the repetitive emphasis of the Kohen’s “seeing” — וראה. The kohen is charged to diagnose much more than the specific skin affliction; the Torah instructs וראה, “he shall see” the context, the bigger picture surrounding the issue presented to him. He must look at ‘who’ is presenting the issue, ‘when’ are they asking for a diagnosis, and ‘what’ will be the ramifications of his *p’sak*.

In the diagnosis there are halachic dispensations made for a bride and groom, for a person during Yom tov, and for the furniture and vessels inside a house that may or may not be rendered *tamei*. All of this, including the timing and backstory of the individuals involved must be seen by the עיני הכהן, the “eyes of the *kohen*”, the compassionate ‘big picture’, the deeper understanding of the person and the context of the affliction. As author Chuck Klosterman once quipped, “In and of itself, nothing really matters. What ‘matters’ is that nothing is ever *in and of itself*.”

Big people see the big picture.

The Torah describes another aspect of the purification process:

וּבֹא אֲשֶׁר-לוֹ הַבַּיִת וְהִגִּיד לַכֹּהֵן לֵאמֹר כָּנְעָה נִרְאָה לִי בְּבַיִת: וַצֹּוּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן וּפָנּוּ אֶת-הַבַּיִת בְּטָרֶם יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאוֹת אֶת-הַנֶּגַע וְלֹא יִטְמָא כָּל-אֲשֶׁר בְּבַיִת וְאַחַר כֵּן יָבֹא הַכֹּהֵן לְרִאוֹת אֶת-הַבַּיִת:

“The one to whom the house belongs shall come and tell the kohen, saying, ‘Something like a plague has appeared upon my house.’ The kohen shall order the house cleared before he comes to examine the plague, so that nothing in the house may become impure; after that the kohen shall enter to examine the house. (14:35-36)

More than simply a technical purification procedure, Meshech Chochmah explains the process is one of the inner work of *tikun ha-midos*. One of the seven root causes enumerated by

Chazal for *nega'im* is miserliness (*Kesubos*, 5b). The individual suffering from the *nega* here is described as “the one to whom the house *belongs*”; he is identified solely by his physical possessions. According to the Gemara (*Yomah*, 11b) a house might be afflicted with leprosy as a repercussion of the owner refusing to lend his vessels to others, falsely claiming that he does not have them. The stingy behavior results in their possessions being removed from their home for all to see when they are forced to empty them due to leprosy.

Rav Yitzchok Adlerstein further suggests a meaningful lesson based on the Meshech Chochmah’s approach. As the kohen completes the process of cleansing the leperous home, he gathers together a mixture of *erez* (cedar wood), *eizov* (hyssop), a strip of crimson wool and the live bird offering, and dips them in the blood and the fresh water, וְהָזָה אֶל-הַבַּיִת שְׁבַע פְּעָמִים, “...and he shall sprinkle the house seven times” (14:51). While the *pasuk* does not explicitly identify which part of the house should be sprinkled, Chazal specify that the sprinkling is directed toward the lintel of the door, as if declaring that, ‘The owner has learned from his mistakes and this door will now remain open to others; a spirit of giving and generosity is replacing the previous miserliness and smallness.’

May we ‘see’ each other with the eyes of the kohen, eyes of *chesed*, broad vision and deeper understanding. May we learn from our mistakes and afflictions, and open our doors and hallways to guests, and always rejoice in the unsustainable purity of our Godly souls. ■

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