

# The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

TAZRI'A 5784

With the Parshiyot of Tazri'a and M'tzora, we are introduced into the strange religious phenomenon of the M'TZORA, the Jew afflicted with Biblical skin afflictions of various types - TZARA'AT. The topic, however, is prefaced by the laws pertaining to childbirth and the mitzva of circumcision on the eighth day. In attempting to understand and appreciate the deeper significance of these subjects, Rabbi S.R. Hirsch, unpacking the insight of S'forno (Vayikra 12:8), offers a remarkable exposition. We present, in summary, his masterful exegesis to remind us of his perceptive grasp of the Jew's unique awareness of his individual and collective responsibility and mission. And we also do so especially now, as we recently celebrated the festival of Pesach and after having marked the (eighteen-month) period since the monstrous barbarities of October 7th.

In brief, in the aftermath of giving birth, the woman becomes religiously impure - T'MEI'A. Likewise, the appearance of ZARA'AT, when confirmed by the kohen, precipitates a similar state of spiritual uncleanness which requires that the M'TZORA remain in solitude beyond

the camp. In both cases, the offering of various sacrifices and immersion in the mikveh, purify the woman and M'TZORA from their respective previous states of ritual contamination. To understand the deeper layers of these religious rites, Rav Hirsch develops the following thesis based upon extensive rabbinic sources.

In pregnancy and birth, the female experiences her physicality in a most intense way. These biological natural events, shared by both human and animal, force a woman to confront the finite boundaries of her existence and - creature-like - accept the limits of her free choice. Generalizing, Rav Hirsch contends that TUM'A is the state we incur by experiencing the constraints embedded in our human condition. Of course, the ultimate expression of this TUM'A is death itself, coming face-to-face with our own mortality. In this reality-check of our animality, these experiences can make us doubt the point and purpose of our life and throw us into a passive state of mind or worse - deep depression and despair.

And then, after Rav Hirsch states that, "The name 'Mother' reminds [the woman, at one and the same time of] the most sublime procedure of her earthly calling... [and yet] of the purely physical unfree process of [her] human origin", he continues: "And [then]... she, by an offering,

undertakes [by a courageous act of free will] to give herself up to the whole spiritual height of her calling of Woman and Mother which is now restarting... [allowing] herself to re-enter the Sanctuary of holy, happy faithfulness to duty." (See Rav Hirsch, 12:2). In other words, by means of the sacrifices and immersion in MAYIM CHAYIM - the life-suffused waters of the mikveh, the new mother transcends her mortality, and through the birth of her child can live-on past her mortal years. No wonder, the eighth day of BRIT MILA is mentioned, the number eight signifying a dimension of existence beyond the natural order.

Transitioning to the afflicted M'TZORA, we find a similar Hirschian idea, this time framed not in terms of the individual, but rather as an ethos of community. The Talmud (Archin 15a-16b) has an extensive discussion about the sins that precipitate Biblical skin afflictions - ranging from LASHON HARA (negative demeaning speech) to murder, with robbery, perjury, miserliness and other delinquencies in between. The common feature of all these wrongs is their social character. Committing any of them has serious consequences for the moral - and certainly physical - wellbeing of the community. The social fabric frays and eventually can tear apart by such social crimes. Indeed, what begins

with lashon hara - when evil speech alienates and sows animosities, can end up with society fracturing into total disunity, hatred and physical violence.

A Jew, guilty of such sins, was stricken with TZARA'AT and, in addition to his ritually impurity, was sent into isolation, outside the camp (13:46). Someone, as Rashi states (ad loc.), "whose malicious talk caused a parting between man and his wife and between man and his fellow, he, too, shall be set apart." Such a person, self-centered and unscrupulous to the core, requires the cold-water splash of total banishment and ostracization to shake him up and remind him of his fundamental responsibility to the collective - to the TZIBUR. Interestingly, as Rav Soloveitchik observes, it is the kohen - and even, at times, the prophet - who visits with the afflicted one. It is he, the official agent of the community, who, as friend and counselor, assures the man, "You are needed; you will get well; you will return to society." And so, the M'TZORA is compassionately ushered back into his people and nation. He learns, through his isolation, to transcend his small-minded selfishness and cultivate a community consciousness that will once again enable him to rejoin his partners in the great cooperative endeavor.

What both the birthing mother and the M'TZORA share is their initial descent into ritual impurity - the woman, by her biological/animal commonality, and the M'TZORA, by his misconducts. And, clearly, they also share the laudable dynamic of their heroic spiritual rehabilitation by believing, with absolute clarity, that they have the strength of character and soul to transcend who they were and emerge greater and more ennobled by virtue of that very ascent!

The holiday of Pesach - the hope of the Spring - has always heralded the promise of renewal and new beginnings. It is a time when inspiring visions of vindication and redemption, retribution for what we've suffered and salvation from our enemies must uplift our spirits and induce dreams of peace and happiness. And surely, in these difficult and stressful times, we desperately yearn for the realization of that promise, vision and dream. But it is we who will have to learn the lessons of the new mother and repentant M'TZORA - both the before and after of their ordeal - to properly accomplish that goal and merit the help of HaShem to make it happen!

The Parshiyot of Tazri'a and M'tzora could not have occurred at a better time! 🙌