

# Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

## TAZRI'A-MITZORA

*"Beware of tzaraat... and follow the instructions of the Kohanim and the Leviim, according to the way that I have instructed them. Remember what G-d did to Miriam, on your journey out of Egypt" (D'varim 24:8-9).*

This is one of the two places in Mishneh Torah (the repeating of the Torah, a.k.a. Sefer D'varim) where direct reference is made to something taught previously. (The other is Shechita: Rashi to D'varim 12:21.)

Tzaraat is popularly, but not quite accurately translated as leprosy. As Hirsch explains, though today unknown to us, tzaraat was a physical condition imposed by G-d on the individual for serious spiritual and socially-immoral defects. Moshe reminded the Israelites of how to keep away from it and how to deal with it in just two simple sentences. Firstly, avoid it: do not gossip. Secondly, if struck by it, follow the Kohen's instructions in how to come to terms proactively with its realities. No more information there. The details of its varieties are dealt with at length elsewhere, namely in these parashiot - Tazri'a and M'tzora. These are within Sefer Vayikra, a.k.a. by Chazal as Torat Kohanim, the laws for the kohanim.

It is on these details of the symptoms and treatment of tzaraat which the Torah describes at great length that the Rashbam makes a powerful comment that contrasts starkly to the standard approach he urges people to use when coming to grips with learning Torah text. Over and over, particularly in Sefer B'reishit, he proclaims the importance of the P'SHUTO SHEL MIKRA, the plain meaning of the text. A constant theme of his commentary is his arguing with Rashi that the latter's commentary claims to support P'SHUTO SHEL MIKRA, but in many instances avoids it in favour of Talmudic or Midrashic exegesis. The Rashbam does not negate the importance of those approaches and agrees that they are all-important in the world of Jewish law and practice. However, he argues strongly for the validity of the P'SHUTO SHEL MIKRA and frequently takes issue with Rashi's comments that avoid giving the P'SHUTO SHEL MIKRA due consideration in its own right and on its own merits.

Except here. When learning the laws of tzaraat as explained by the Torah, the Rashbam writes emphatically that the simple meaning of the text is not a valid interpretation, but what counts are the traditions and explanations on tzaraat that Chazal received and Chazal explained. This is patently atypical of the Rashbam's

approach. It may well be that he is referring to the systematic presentation of tzaraat that form the content of Masechet Nega'im, whose general approach is that where the detailed development of symptoms of tzaraat are described in one particular type of tzaraat, they apply in all varieties of tzaraat, but it may also be suggested that the Rashbam is hinting at a deeper explanation.

It is something general about Torah learning and practice: they are not just a science, but an art as well. An art is not easily quantifiable or easily described: it is something that is acquired through developing the intuition and judgment that may only be reached by truly gifted and then after years of apprenticeship and experience. Thus giving serious and competent p'sak halacha in a particular novel situation is not something that comes from looking it up in the Mishna Berura, but it needs a seventh sense to evaluate context and the spirit as well as just the letter of our holy tradition. Such skills can only be developed from many years of serious engagement in Torah and SHIMUSH TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM: working together with premier and experienced poskim that have developed that seventh sense and over the years transmit it to those capable of following in those roles.

There are even areas where arts were

confined to specific families. The Mishna (Yoma 3:11) brings the Garmu family's having the exclusive privilege of producing the LECHEM HAPANIM, the show-bread in the Beit HaMikdash in the precise way that it would be acceptable for its holy purposes. Similarly, the Avtinas family were the sole owners of the honor of making the ketoret. Though the Mishna condemns them and other families with similar exclusive arts for not sharing with them with members of the wider community, the implication is that were extremely difficult arts that were far out of reach of the uninitiated.

Similarly here. Guidelines are given for identifying the symptoms of tzaraat via Masechet Nega'im, but understanding what they really mean in terms of diagnosis and decision is an art which was confined to the kohanim and then only after a long period of training and apprenticeship.

