



## עיני הכהן

### The Eyes of the Priest

#### ■ The Hour of Defilement

The Torah repeats several times that lesions of leprosy, *tzaraat*, defile a person or a house **only after** the Cohen has seen them and pronounced them impure. That is to say, when one sees a *nega* (lesion) on his body or in his house, he or it does not become officially “leprous” and impure until the priest sees it and pronounces it so. The impurity then takes effect from that moment on, and not retroactively.

Given that leprosy is a physical phenomenon, the above law is quite strange. Would we ever say that one is not ill until a doctor pronounces him so?!

The source for this seemingly peculiar law of *tzaraat* is this verse:

וּבְיוֹם הַרְאֹתָ בּוֹ בֶּשֶׂר חַי יִטְמָא.

*On the day that live flesh is seen upon it,  
he becomes impure.* (Vayikra 13,14)

It means that the lesion can defile only from the day that the priest pronounces it impure. The Sages of the Talmud (Moed Katan 7b) further derived from these words “*on the day*” that there are days that one who finds a *nega* on his body need not go to the priest, and may thus remain pure. For instance, a bridegroom who finds a *nega* is permitted to wait until after the seven days of his wedding festivities, and only then risk being rendered impure. Similarly, anyone who finds a *nega* during a festival may wait until after the holiday has passed.

Another example of how the impurity of *tzaraat* can be pushed off is when one finds a potentially-impure *nega* in his house:

וְצִוָּה הַכֹּהֵן וּפְנֹו אֶת הַבַּיִת בְּטָרֵם יָבֵא הַכֹּהֵן לִרְאוֹת אֶת הַנֶּגַע,  
 וְלֹא יִטְמָא כָּל אֲשֶׁר בַּבַּיִת, וְאַחַר כֵּן יָבֵא הַכֹּהֵן לִרְאוֹת אֶת הַבַּיִת.

*At the priest's command, the house is emptied before he comes to see the lesion, so that everything in the house shall not be defiled; and afterwards the priest will come to see the house.* (14,36)

The Torah advises us that we can postpone the onset of impurity in a house simply by postponing the priest's visit until after the utensils are removed from within. The priest can then arrive and declare the house impure if necessary – but the utensils have been saved from impurity and, in the case of pottery, from having to be smashed.

A third example comes from the Mishna (Nega'im 2,3), which states that in a dark house, additional light need **not** be added in order for the priest to observe the *nega* and pronounce it leprous. This means that a dark basement with moldy walls can never be declared impure.

All of the above indicates that the impurity of lesions of *tzaraat*, and the time it takes effect, is totally dependent on the Cohen seeing them; until then, it is as if the lesions do not exist. This requires explanation. Can we make the *nega* disappear simply by ignoring it? If we turn off the lights and don't see stains on the floor, can we declare the house clean?!

Other forms of impurity do not work this way at all, but rather take effect immediately. For instance, a basket holding a reptile becomes impure the instant the reptile dies. What logic governs the special impurity of leprous *nega'im* that makes it dependent on an outside factor: a priest's observation and declaration?

### ■ Relative Impurity

The very fact that we call a priest, and not a doctor, to treat a *nega* shows that the problem is of a spiritual nature, not physical. A doctor's function is to treat physical or psychological sickness, while the priest deals with spiritual and character weakness.

The leprous *nega* is an external sign of an inner sin – and the Torah thus warns:

הַשֹּׁמֵר בְּנֶגַע הַצָּרְעָתָה לְשֹׁמֵר מְאֹד וְלַעֲשׂוֹת כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר יֹרֶוּ אֶתְכֶם הַכֹּהֲנִים...  
*Take great care regarding the leprous signs, to carefully keep and perform all that the priests command you...* (D'varim 24,8)

The Torah is most insistent that one may not cut off or remove the *nega* without showing it to the priest – for this would mean eliminating the symptom without treating the sickness. Just like one should not take pain-killers without trying to treat the source of the pain, we may not remove the external indications without dealing with the inner moral and spiritual problems that they symbolize.

On the other hand, these spiritual issues are not officially recognized until the “patient” meets the Cohen. What does this meeting accomplish?

Let us note that our view of that which we experience is quite relative, as are all our sensations. A driver going 100 kilometers per hour will feel himself going very fast as he watches the roadside trees whiz by him. But when we sit on our living room couch, we don’t sense that we are moving at all – even though the Earth is actually traveling 109,000 kilometers an hour, well over 1,000 times faster than the car! This is because there are no stationary objects around us by which we can measure, or feel, our own speed.

Another example: When we dip a finger into hot water, and then immediately place it into lukewarm water, the water will feel cold. But when we then dip a finger from our *other* hand first into cold water, and then into lukewarm water – the water will feel warm. If we do both actions at the same time, one finger will feel warm and the other one will be cold – both in the same water!

The ramifications for our case are that the person with a *nega* does not objectively feel his spiritual shortcomings until the Priest stands before him with his eyes of purity (as we will explain below) and identifies them for him. The encounter with the pure eyes of Hashem’s emissary emphasizes for the afflicted person his own spiritual “ugliness.” It is likely that he will now receive an extension of seven days in isolated confinement, if the Priest so decides, during which he can think about his deeds and repent of his misconduct. It is this very meeting between the Cohen and the sinner that provides the impetus for the necessary *teshuvah* (repentance). This explains why the *nega* does not become impure before this occurs.

### ■ **Arrogance and Haughtiness**

What are the sins that lead to leprosy and *nega'im*? The Gemara (Arachin 16a) lists seven such sins:

R. Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of R. Yonatan: *Nega'im* come because of seven things: 1. Slander 2. Murder 3. False oaths 4. Incest 5. Haughtiness 6. Theft 7. Stinginess.

One sin in this list is actually the primary cause of all the others. To find it, we must search the entire Bible for clear sources linking that sin with the punishment of *nega'im* – and such a source is found in Chronicles II. It tells how Uziyahu, the King of Judea, insisted on bringing incense in the Holy Temple, despite the opposition of the High Priest and 80 priests standing before him:

וּכְחֻזְקָתוֹ גָּבַהּ לְבוֹ עַד לְהִשְׁחִית, וַיִּמְעַל בַּה' אֱלֹהֵיו  
וַיָּבֵא אֶל הַיֵּכָל ה' לְהַקְטִיר עַל מִזְבֵּחַ הַקְטֹרֶת.

*And as he became strong, he became haughty to the point of corruption, and he trespassed against the Lord his G-d, and he came into the Temple of G-d to burn incense on the altar of incense.*

וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ... צֵא מִן הַמִּקְדָּשׁ כִּי מְעַלְתָּ... וַיִּזְעַף עֲזִיָּהוּ...  
וְהִצְרִיעַת זָרְחָה בְּמִצְחוֹ לִפְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּבַיִת ה'...

*Azariah the Priest and the 80 priests said to him, "It is not for you to burn incense to Hashem, but for the priests... Leave the Sanctuary, for you have trespassed." And Uziyah became furious... and the leprosy shone upon his forehead before the priests in the House of G-d.*

... וַיִּבְהַלּוּהוּ מִשָּׁם וְגַם הוּא נִדְחַף לְצֵאת כִּי נִגְעוּ ה'  
וַיְהִי עֲזִיָּהוּ הַמֶּלֶךְ מְצֻרַע עַד יוֹם מוֹתוֹ...

*...They rushed him out of there, and he too hastened to leave, for G-d had smitten him; Uziyah the King was thus stricken with leprosy until the day of his death.* (Divrei HaYamim II 26,16-21)

It is evident from this incident that although *lashon hara* brings about leprosy, the sin of “haughty arrogance” is actually its primary cause. Similarly, the other sources brought by the Gemara linking the above seven sins with leprosy indicate that the root of them all is “pride.” For instance: In Parashat Behaalot’cha, we read what Miriam the Prophetess and Aharon the High Priest said to each other about their brother Moshe:

וַתְּדַבֵּר מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמִשְׁחָה עַל אֲדוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכַּשִּׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח.  
וַיֹּאמְרוּ, הֲרַק אֵךְ בְּמִשְׁחָה דָּבָר ה'?! הֲלֹא גַם בָּנוּ דִּבְרָ!

*Miriam and Aharon spoke about Moshe, regarding the Cushite woman he had married. They said: "Did G-d speak only to Moshe? He spoke to us as well!"* (Bamidbar 12,1-2)

The reference to the *Cushite woman* is not exactly clear, but it is apparent that they were speaking *lashon hara*, for G-d said to them: “*Why did you not fear to speak [this way] about my servant, about Moshe?*” (verse 8)

It is similarly obvious that they would never have spoken this way had they not felt that their prophecy was equal to that of Moshe. Their words “*G-d spoke to us as well!*” are surely an expression of surplus pride. And as if to emphasize that this sin was the result of their feelings of overconfidence, the Torah immediately contrasts their behavior with Moshe’s humility:

וְהָאִישׁ מֹשֶׁה עָנָיו מְאֹד מִכָּל הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר עַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה.

*The man Moshe was very humble,  
more than any man on the face of the earth.* (verse 3)

G-d then responds to Aharon and Miriam by pointing out their mistaken, self-righteous thought that they were prophets on the same level as Moshe:

... אִם יִהְיֶה נְבִיאֵיכֶם, ה', בְּמִרְאָה אֲלֵיו אֶתְוֹדַע בְּחִלּוֹם אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ.

לֹא כֵן עֲבַדִּי מֹשֶׁה... פֶּה אֶל פֶּה אֲדַבֵּר בּוֹ וּמִרְאָה וְלֹא בְחִידֹת...

*“If there be prophets among you, I, G-d, will make Myself known to him in a vision, I will speak to him in a dream. Not so My servant Moshe... Mouth to mouth I speak to him, in a vision and not in riddles.”* (verses 6-8)

And the next thing we see is that Miriam is stricken with leprosy:

וְהָעֶנָן סָר מֵעַל הָאֹהֶל וְהָיָה מְרִים מִצִּרְעֵת כְּשֶׁלֶג...

*The cloud departed from over the Tent, and behold,  
Miriam was leprous, white as snow...* (verse 10)

In short, the *lashon hara* that brought about the leprosy was itself was the result of over-confidence and pride.

Yet another example of leprosy in the Torah is the sign that Hashem gave Moshe at the site of the Burning Bush. G-d was assigning him the mission to redeem Israel, but Moshe’s response indicated a small measure of self-righteousness: “*They will not believe me*” (Sh’mot 4,1) – as if to say that he himself is a great believer, but the People of Israel are not. The Torah does not specify outright that this was Moshe’s sin, but the Talmud (Shabbat 97a) teaches allegorically that Hashem answered him in this vein: “The Children of Israel are believers, sons of believers – but you yourself will end up not believing [when commanded to speak to the rock].” The near-immediate result was a “sign” to show Bnei Yisrael: His arm was afflicted with leprosy.

The leper's punishment is appropriate to his sin of "pride:"

... בְּדָד יֵשֵׁב מִחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה מוֹשְׁבוֹ.

*He shall dwell in isolation; his dwelling shall  
be outside the camp.* (Vayikra 13,46)

His arrogance must be humbled. He will be restricted to a place where he will have no one to brag to, nor anyone to try to one-up.

### ■ The Purity of the Priest

The ugliness of the sin of arrogant pride is uncovered and revealed before the pure eyes of the priest. What truly makes the Cohen so special? The clearest description of the ideal Cohen is found in the words of the Prophet Malachi:

תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת הָיְתָה בְּפִיהוּ, וְעוֹלָה לֹא נִמְצָא בְּשִׁפְתָיו,  
בְּשִׁלּוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הִלֵּךְ אֶתִּי, וְרַבִּים הָשִׁיב מֵעוֹן.

*True teaching was in his mouth, and injustice was not found  
on his lips; in peace and equity he walked with Me,  
and he brought back many from sin.*

כִּי שִׁפְתֵי כֹהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ דַעַת וְתוֹרָה יִבְקֶשׁוּ מִפִּיהוּ, כִּי מִלֶּאֱדָה' צָבָאוֹת הוּא.

*A priest's lips shall preserve knowledge,  
and teaching will be sought from his mouth,  
for he is an angel of the Lord of Hosts.* (Malachi 2,6-7)

The last phrase says it all. The priest knows that he is an angel, or emissary, of G-d Himself, and that all of his talents, skills and authority were granted him only so that he could fulfill this mission. This is true humility - the opposite of the arrogance of which we have been speaking.

Such humility leads to "true teaching in his mouth," as well as his "walking in peace" and his ability to "return many people from their sinful ways." It is from this position of humbleness and modesty that the lofty Priestly Blessing rises up with munificence and whole-heartedness to bless the Children of Israel. It is before these holy priestly eyes that the ugliness of a man's sin shows up in high contrast – and the moment the priest declares "impurity," the defilement takes effect, isolation starts, and *teshuvah* must begin.

## ■ The Dark House

We quoted the Mishna above that states that if the priest cannot see the alleged *nega* in a house because there is not enough light, additional light need not be added. That is to say, even if a *nega* is suspected, there can be no impurity as long as there is no light. Why would Hashem place a *nega* of leprosy in such a house, if it will never be recognized as such?

The answer is: Precisely in order that this dark house should remain dark. As the Talmud teaches, “One must always remain obscure and live;”<sup>1</sup> it is good to remain in the shadows. When a person assumes a position of prominence, he finds himself under the scrutiny of many pairs of eyes, carefully checking his every move. As a result, many faults that would otherwise have gone undetected can be expected to show up.

An example of this is King Sha’ul. Before being chosen as King of Israel, he was “*hidden among the baggage*” (Shmuel I 10,22), i.e., unassuming and barely noticeable. This was a very admirable trait at first, but once he became king, it actually worked against him. During his war against Amalek, when he failed to kill Amalek’s king or cattle, his inability to stand up to the people was revealed – as he himself admitted: “*For I was afraid of the nation, and I adhered to their call.*” (15,24)

The Prophet Shmuel sharply rebuked him precisely on this point: “*Even if you are small in your own eyes, you are the head of the Tribes of Israel!*” (verse 17)

## ■ Environmental Background

The sharp blatancy of sin when it appears on the backdrop of purity and holiness was precisely the point made by the Tsidonite woman against her “tenant,” Eliyahu HaNavi:

חלה בן האשה בעלת הבית, ויהי חליו חזק מאד עד אשר לא נותרה בו  
נשמה. ותאמר אל אליהו, מה לי ולך איש הא-להים.  
באת אלי להזכיר את עונני ולהמית את בני!

...*The home-owner’s son took ill - so strongly ill that his soul did not remain. She said to Eliyahu: “What have I to do with you, man of G-d? Have you come to me to bring up my sin and kill my son?”* (Kings 1 17,17-18)

1. the words of R. Elazar in Tr. Sanhedrin, p. 92a, seven lines from the bottom.

The woman is complaining that Eliyahu's very presence in her home makes the stain of her sins all too blatant, thus bringing on the punishment of her son's death. This principle also explains the following difficult Mishna:

**On Rosh HaShanah, all pass before G-d as members of a flock, as is written** (Psalms 33,15), *"He Who creates their hearts together, and understands all their deeds."* (Rosh HaShanah 16a)

On the day of the New Year, every individual is judged on his own, just as sheep in a flock leave the pen one by one. But the verse brought by the Mishna as proof seems to imply the opposite – that G-d creates all people, and understands and judges their thoughts and deeds all together as one!

To intensify the question, R. Yochanan is quoted in the Gemara as saying that all people undergo one simultaneous review – *kulam niskarim b'skirah achat!* So which is it: Are we judged individually, or all together?

The answer is that everyone is judged twice. A man is judged once by himself for his own deeds and misdeeds, and a second time on the backdrop of his surroundings. One who lives amidst wicked people is not judged the same way as one who lives with righteous neighbors. These circumstances are justly taken into account in order to clarify the reasons that may have led him to act the way he did, for better or for worse.

When one lives amidst holiness and righteousness but does not learn from his neighbors, his sin takes on extra severity. And if one lives among wicked people yet manages to remain free of their influence, his good deeds are even more valuable than "regular" mitzvot.

### ■ Living Alongside a Tzaddik

The above, implying that being in the company of the righteous raises the standards to which we are held, appears to contradict this Talmudic teaching (B'rachot 42a):

**Abaye said: We can also say that blessing comes to him who welcomes Torah scholars, as is written, "G-d blessed me [Lavan] because of you [Yaakov]"** (B'reshit 30,27) **and "G-d blessed the Egyptian's house for Yosef."** (39,5)

These verses show that when G-d blesses a Torah scholar or righteous person, he also blesses those who host and help him. This is what happened to Yaakov's uncle Lavan the Aramean who took Yaakov into his household,

to Potiphar when he took in Yosef, and to the Tsidonite woman when she brought Eliyahu into her home:

כִּי כֹה אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּדֵ הַקֶּמַח לֹא תִכָּלֶה וְצִפְחַת הַשֶּׁמֶן לֹא  
תִחָסֵר עַד יוֹם תֵּת ה' גֶּשֶׁם עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה.

*For so said G-d: [Your] jug of flour will not run out,  
and the small jar of oil will never run dry,  
until G-d gives rain on the face of the earth.* (Kings I 17,14)

Why, then, was she also punished with the near-death of her son? The answer is that regarding Lavan and Potiphar, G-d granted a one-time blessing – but here, with Eliyahu, Hashem granted an ongoing miracle. To maintain the high level of this ongoing miracle, extra special righteousness is required – which the Tsidonite woman did not have.

Let us return to the Cohen and his interaction with other Jews. The ideal encounter between the Israelite and the Priest is that between a “giver” and a “receiver.” The Priest **receives** *terumah* (priestly tithes), and **grants** blessing to the home-owner and teaches Torah to him and his household. When this does not happen, however, the way is paved for another type of Cohen-Israelite encounter: the difficult and torturous situation in which the Cohen meets a leper afflicted with sins. As the Sages teach:

G-d said: “I instructed you to give gifts to the priest from your produce, but you did not do so... [So now] I will give you reason to need the priest” – namely, a *nega*. (Vayikra Rabba 15,6)

The natural order of things is as described in the Book of Yechezkel:

...וְרֵאשִׁית עֲרִסוֹתֵיכֶם תִּתְּנוּ לַכֹּהֵן לְהַנִּיחַ בְּרִכָּה אֶל בֵּיתוֹ.  
*The first of your dough you shall give the Cohen,  
in order to place blessing upon your home.* (44,30)

– and then there will be no need for the Cohen to come to your home to check leprous *nega'im*.

