

Parsha Ponders

Metzora / Shabbos HaGadol | April 11, 2018 | 7 Nissan 5779

*The proper mode of conduct*¹

וצוה הכהן ולקח למטהר שתי-צפרים חיות טהורות ועץ ארז ושני תולעת ואזב

The Kohen shall command [as follows]: he should take for the one seeking purification two live, kosher birds, a rod² from a cedar tree, a thread of crimson wool, and hyssop³

This week's *parsha*, much like last week's, deals mostly with the laws of *tzara'as*, most commonly translated as leprosy. While it may be a whitish skin condition, in reality it's a totally unrelated spiritual malady⁴ with physical symptoms. *Chazal* tell us⁵ that someone who contracts *tzara'as*, known as a *Metzora*⁶, usually committed a certain sin⁷. One example is that of haughtiness. As a result of his sin, he is infected with a disturbing skin condition, and has to have his status established by a Kohen. If the Kohen determines he is spiritually impure, then he is. The opposite is also true.

The Torah describes how a *Metzora* can purify himself once he is declared impure. First, the Kohen has to determine if their affliction has healed correctly. Once they're declared physically healed, they next have to become spiritually pure. That process involves an entire ritual that takes place in the Temple, and includes bringing certain offerings. Part of the offering includes a rod from a cedar tree, a thread of crimson wool, and hyssop. What is the significance of including these objects?

Rashi explains⁸ that since the cedar tree is taller and more beautiful than all other trees⁹, it symbolizes the haughtiness which caused his initial blemish. What's his cure? He should lower his arrogance and feel lowly, like a humble thread of crimson wool or the meek herb of hyssop. Why does he need two symbols of humility to inspire him to change¹⁰? Seemingly, one would have been sufficient.

The answer could be gleaned from the Rambam's approach to character traits. Every trait has its extremes, in either direction. For example, generosity. A person could be someone who never gives a thing to charity, or someone who gives away all of their money. The proper path a person should take with their traits is the middle road¹¹. What should a person do if they detect one of their traits is leaning to one extreme? They should try their best to act in the opposite extreme, with the intent to create an equilibrium. Hopefully, not long after acting this way they'll end up in the middle¹².

¹ Based on *Ta'amah D'Kra* by Rav Chaim Kanievsky *shlita* to *Leviticus* 14:4

² *Rashi ad. loc.*

³ *Leviticus loc. cit.*

⁴ See *Mishneh Torah Hilchos Tumas Tzara'as* 16:10

⁵ *Arachin* 16; *Vayikra Rabbah* 16:1

⁶ *מצורע*, a contraction of *שם רע*, someone who causes a bad name (*Arachin* 15b)

⁷ Besides haughtiness, the consensus is that *loshon hara* and murder cause *tzara'as (ibid)*. *Arachin* 16a adds oaths in vain, illicit relations, theft and stinginess to the list, whereas *Vayikra Rabbah loc. cit.* cites lying, thinking about sins, running to do sins, and giving false testimony (citing *Proverbs* 6:17-19 as the source)

⁸ *Leviticus loc. cit.*

⁹ *Minchas Yehudah ad. loc.*, cited by *Sifsei Chachamim*

¹⁰ Rav Kanievsky points out that hyssop is bigger than a thread of crimson wool (see *Niddah* 26a). He therefore also asks why hyssop wasn't mentioned in the verse first, making it a *זו אף זו לא* formulation

¹¹ *Mishneh Torah Hilchos De'os* 1:4

¹² *Ibid* 2:2

However, there appears to be a contradiction in the Rambam's words. First, when he describes different extremes a person may have, he gives humility and arrogance as examples¹³. To these he says the middle path is the best. Then, he says that an exception to his "middle of the road" rule is humility. A person shouldn't be in the middle, and instead should go to the extreme with humility, avoiding arrogance at all costs¹⁴. One solution presented¹⁵ is that the Rambam means that with humility there are four levels: 1) arrogance 2) neither arrogance, nor humility 3) humility 4) negative and unhealthy humility.

The extremes of levels one and four are to be avoided at all costs. Arrogance is never acceptable. Negative and unhealthy humility, for example, consists of only wearing tattered rags. This behavior can lead to depression and a desire to do nothing all day. However, choosing level two, acting with neither arrogance, nor with humility, can be risky. There's always the chance the person with time might occasionally lean towards the side of arrogance. Therefore, the Rambam cautions to strive towards the middle path, with a bend towards humility. Level three avoids arrogance at all costs, without being too much towards any extreme.

This mode of conduct is precisely conveyed in the verse we started with. A *Metzora* most likely has been acting with the extreme of arrogance, like a cedar tree. Hashem gave them *tzara'as* as a wakeup call to repent. The remedy is to lower oneself to become as lowly as a crimson thread of wool. However, this extreme is also undesirable. They therefore should raise themselves to the level of hyssop, which is slightly less plain and ordinary¹⁶. They'll end up in the middle path, leaning towards a healthy dose of humility.

Good Shabbos

¹³ *Ibid* 1:1

¹⁴ *Ibid* 2:3

¹⁵ *Lechem Mishnah ad. loc.* 1:4-5

¹⁶ See note 10