

Parashat Metzora

To Love Like a Kohen

One of the more challenging sections of Torah law concerns the special skin condition known as *tzara'at*. The one afflicted with this malady, the *metzora*, is sent out of the camp into quarantine. While this appears insensitive to the plight of the afflicted, with his characteristic brilliance the Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik showed how the protocols governing the *metzora* were intended to compassionately restore the *metzora's* mental and physical health.

Compassion for the Sick

The unfortunate reality in antiquity (and even today in some places) was that an individual who suddenly exhibited symptoms of illness was isolated. People would be afraid to associate, or even greet, the infirm out of fear of catching the illness.¹ The Rav claimed that the afflicted “was often killed or, at the very least, driven out of town. From time to time he was offered a meager supply of food, thrown to him like food thrown to a dog. He was treated harshly for the sin of having contracted the disease.”²

The first step of Jewish treatment, on the other hand, displayed concern for the afflicted. The Kohen left the camp with the *metzora* as an expression of solidarity and friendship.

The leper was thus instantly removed from the mob psychoses. The Kohen diagnosed and pronounced the *tumah* (ritual impurity) as *tzara'at*, but the leper was not subsequently cut off from society. He was in communication with the Kohen as one of the heads of the community. In fact, the *metzora* could request being seen by the Kohen *gadol* himself—a man who was not permitted to attend the funeral of his own closest relatives. Yet, if summoned, the *kohen gadol* had to go to the leper.³

Even in quarantine, the *metzora's* dignity was maintained—or restored, as the case might have been—by the humane and merciful laws of the Torah.⁴

The Rav's description of the Kohen visiting the *metzora* brings to mind a modern-day religious leader visiting lepers. Rabbi Aryeh Levin, known as “the Tzaddik of Jerusalem,” had an extraordinary love for every single Jew. Among the countless acts of kindness that filled his days was his frequent visiting of the sick, including lepers in a lepers' hospital in the Talbieh neighborhood of Yerushalayim, whose patients were mostly Arabs. He began visiting those afflicted with Hansen's disease after finding a woman weeping bitterly at the Western Wall. When he inquired about her intense crying, she responded that her child had

¹ After our present experience with the COVID-19 pandemic, we can easily imagine what the isolation and social shunning felt like.

² *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 3:95.

³ *Ibid.* The Rav refers to the *metzora* using the conventional translation of “leper,” but *tzara'at* was not identical with Hansen's disease.

⁴ See further David, *Darosh Darash Yosef*, 238–239.

no cure and was locked up in the lepers' hospital. He immediately decided to visit the young child. When he arrived, all of the patients streamed tears of joy, as they had seen nary an outside visitor, an unfamiliar face, in years. His pious wife Chana cooked regularly for them, and he would take the prepared food on Friday, prior to Shabbat, to the hospital.⁵

From the Kohen with Love

Why is the Kohen the one who diagnoses *tzara'at*, when normally the Kohen goes to great lengths to avoid contracting ritual impurity? The Rav revealed that we are under a misimpression as to the Kohen's role in Jewish society, perhaps owing to the fact that the bulk of the priestly law in the Torah surrounds the Temple. We generally associate the Kohen with the special service in the Temple, but in actuality any given Kohen would only serve once every twenty-four weeks, according to the cycle of *mishmarot* (watches). The defining role of the *Kohen* was as a spiritual leader and teacher of Torah.⁶ And if the Kohen does not love the people, the Rav emphasized, then he cannot bless them nor can he teach them. The disciple listens to his teacher not as a result of coercion, but out of a relationship rooted in love and reverence.⁷

The Rav taught that "a single spirit underlies each of his roles: a strong sense of love, friendship, and concern for every person."⁸ He marshalled sources showing that the Kohen's obligation to have only compassion and love for his fellow Jew finds expression in *birkat kohanim*, the priestly benediction, which is still pronounced today.

- (1) *Ongoing obligation*: The obligation is not exhausted with recitation of the formal text once a day. Rashi noted that when the verse commands the Kohanim to "say to them" the blessing, it uses the infinitive absolute form (אָמַר) instead of the imperative form (אָמַרְךָ), which can indicate continuous action.⁹ In other words, the Kohen is continuously engaged in bestowing blessing to the people. The heart of the Kohen overflows with tenderness for others and a desire to help them.¹⁰
- (2) *With love*: For *birkat kohanim* to be valid, it must be performed out of love. Before the Kohen pronounces the blessing, he himself must make a blessing over the mitzvah, in which he declares: "Blessed are You... who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us to bless His people Israel *with love*." The *Zohar* states that a Kohen who feels enmity toward any member of the congregation may not participate in *birkat kohanim*, and there is a danger if he does so.¹¹ The *Chafetz Chayim* ruled in his *Mishnah Berurah* that a Kohen unable

⁵ Raz, *Tzaddik in Our Time*, 130–131.

⁶ Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 293.

⁷ *Chumash Mesoras Harav*, 4:47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3:97.

⁹ Rashi on Numbers 6:23, s.v. אָמַר.

¹⁰ Schachter, *Divrei ha-Rav*, 298. The Rav thought this accounts for the restriction of *birkat kohanim* to holidays among Ashkenazim outside Israel. Only on Yom Tov can the Kohen's heart overflow with love and kindness. The rest of the time the Kohen is so burdened that he cannot fulfill this aspect of the obligation.

¹¹ *Zohar*, III:147b.

to purge such emotions must leave the synagogue before the chazzan reaches the blessing of *retzeh* in his repetition of the Amidah.¹²

- (3) *Outspread fingers*: In the same vein, the Rav cited the Rambam who instructs that the Kohen holds his fingers closed until he begins the benediction, at which points he spreads them.¹³ During *birkat kohanim*, one must be openhanded to serve as a conduit for the divine blessing. The opposite is to be closefisted, which the Torah proscribes when it comes to giving to the destitute (Deuteronomy 15:7).¹⁴

Rabbi Aryeh Levin once asked why the congregation thanks the Kohanim when they descend from the platform after *birkat kohanim*. It is indeed strange—are they not commanded by the Torah to pronounce the blessing? He answered that they have the mitzvah to do so, but to get to the degree of love necessary requires much work and deep devotion. For that they deserve our thanks.¹⁵

Exploring the Rav's Insight

“We have become specialists in criticism,” said the Rav. “We search out the blemishes of others. However, we have overlooked one significant point: the priest who declares a person unclean must go outside the camp to the afflicted individual in order to purify him.”¹⁶

The message of *Parashat Metzora* is that we are all, in an extended sense, Kohanim. The Kohen's main duty is to teach and care for others, and so it should be for all of us. To be a member of the *mamlechet kohanim*, the kingdom of Kohanim, requires that every Jew emulate the Kohen.¹⁷ As the Mishnah formulates it: “Be among the disciples of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people, and drawing them closer to Torah.”¹⁸ Note how “loving” appears twice in this maxim. Love is the key.

¹² *Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chayim, 128:37.*

¹³ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah u-Nesi'at Kapayim, 14:3.*

¹⁴ *Chumash Mesoras Harav, 4:47.*

¹⁵ *Raz, Tzaddik for Eternity, 427–428.*

¹⁶ *Soloveitchik, Fate and Destiny, 40.*

¹⁷ See further *Parashat Emor*, “Impervious to Impurity.”

¹⁸ *Pirkei Avot, 1:12.*